

**SERMON TITLE:** “It Was Not You Who Sent Me Here, But God”

**TEXT:** Genesis 45:5-8

**PREACHED AT:** Neighbourhood Church

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**DATE:** February 1, 2008/Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

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Well, we’re nearing the end of our sermon series on Genesis. I don’t know if this comes as a relief or a disappointment to you, but I hope that as we’ve walked through this series, as we’ve touched down in various stories along the long and winding road that is narrated in this amazing book, that you will have learned something about God, about yourself, and about what you are to do and be as a child of God.

Whenever our focus is on the *narratives* of Scripture (as opposed to, say, more concrete teaching and doctrine found in the prophets, in Paul’s letters or the Gospels), our task is to learn something from the story—to find ourselves within it, however that looks.

When you’re looking at a story with characters who do things and go places and interact with each other, as opposed to a passage of direct teaching, it can be a bit trickier to “apply” it to our lives. But I also think that the *stories* of the Bible—and the stories of Genesis in particular—open up important themes, questions, principles, and lessons for us in unique and powerful ways.

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Last week James talked about the idea of certain characters in the Bible being what literary theorists call “Everyman.” They represent all of us in their highs and their lows. They represent generic features of what it means to be a human being.

In Jacob’s case we saw that this ran the gamut from deceiving his brother for personal gain, wrestling with God, cowering in fear from his brother’s retribution, but also hungering and thirsting for the blessing of his God. Throughout Genesis we see Jacob representing *all* of us—in his faith, and lack of faith, in his courage and lack of courage, in his resourcefulness and in his deception, and on and on it goes. And what we learn throughout is that God works with and through the “Everyman.” God’s story moves forward.

Well, today we’re going to look at another “Everyman.” We’re going to fast-forward a bit; Jacob is an old man by now with many sons, the youngest of which is Joseph. Now Joseph is, I suspect, a familiar figure to us, even if we don’t have much of a church background.

His story is a well-known one—perhaps even one of the most well-known in Scripture—in large part, probably, because it is a story full of intrigue and power, sex, deceit, betrayal, suspense, irony, and, ultimately, redemption. It would make an excellent Hollywood movie!

Another reason it resonates with us is because the family we've been following at least since Abraham is so much like our own families, which is to say, characterized by a certain level of dysfunction! We often tend to whitewash characters, families, and stories in the Bible—as if they are there in the text only for our emulation.

Well if anything should be clear by this time in our tour through Genesis, it is that the characters of Genesis are ordinary human beings with more than their share of shortcomings, weaknesses, and struggles. This is particularly evident in the story of Jacob and his sons, and the story of Joseph.

The story of Joseph is a long one and we're not going to focus on the whole thing this morning. We're going to zero in on the end of it, but in order to do *that* we need to, in very broad strokes, go through the story that leads us up to this point (if you want the detailed version, you can read Genesis 37-50—it's well worth it!).

- Jacob—who you're remember from previous sermons in this series—had twelve sons
- Joseph was one of these children—the youngest and Jacob's favourite, according to Genesis 37:3 (“Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons...”)
- Joseph has an ego problem (probably because he knew he was the favourite—we see this all the time) and delights in filling his brothers in on his dreams where they all worship him
- Joseph also gets the famous multi-coloured “dreamcoat” from his dad—another sign of his unique status (in his father's and his own mind!)
- These things don't exactly endear him to his brothers; in fact, they begin to hate him, and when he comes to bring them supplies in the field near Shechem one day, they decide to kill him
- Reuben and Judah, two of Joseph's brothers, talk the rest out of killing him; Reuben's solution is to throw him in a hole in the ground (perhaps to give him some time to think about his dreams) with the intent of coming to rescue him later; Judah thinks the better option is to make some money off him by selling him to some Midianite merchants on their way to Egypt (ironically, Judah seems to think this is somehow more ethical than killing him [Gen 37:27]—did I mention this was a *dysfunctional* family?!)
- So Joseph ends up in Egypt and the familiar story begins to unfold
- He is sold into the household of a man named Potiphar, who over time begins to trust Joseph as a valued employee
- This all changes when Joseph refuses the sexual advances of his boss's wife and ends up in jail when she convinces her husband he tried to rape her
- He gets *out* of jail by showing himself to be a reliable interpreter of dreams (first the king's cupbearer, then his baker have their futures foretold, with radically different conclusions)
- He gets in Pharaoh's good books by interpreting a few *more* dreams (Pharaoh's, this time), and thereby preparing Egypt to deal with a famine—in

- fact he ends up as second in command to the whole land of Egypt, behind only Pharaoh
- And this leads to a reunion with his brothers, who come down to Egypt from Canaan because there is no grain in Canaan and there is grain in Egypt (because of Joseph's planning, because of his interpretation of Pharaoh's dream...)
  - Joseph does not let his brothers know who he is, and toys with them for a while. He treats them fairly harshly, accusing them of being spies, demanding that they bring his youngest brother down (some scholars see this as a kind of test Joseph is putting his brothers through—recreating a situation where they have control over the life or death of one of their brothers)
  - The brothers go back to Canaan, and then return to Egypt when their supplies run out
  - Joseph continues the charade for a little while longer, but eventually breaks down and reveals his identity in the emotional climax to the story; his brothers are shocked, and probably quite frightened to discover that their brother is not only alive but in a position of great power over them
  - And all of this leads to our passage this morning:

Genesis 45:5-8a:

*5 And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. 6 For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. 7 But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.*

*8 "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.*

Joseph knows that his brothers actions were immoral, he knows that he has suffered greatly because of how they had treated him. Yet he is able to present his situation, from the bleak and hopeless times to the good and prosperous times, as the means by which God accomplished his purposes. Taking the long view, he was able to see that however incomprehensible it may seem at any one point, the larger story of God always moves forward.

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So this is our story for this morning. What can we learn? Where are we meant to see ourselves in here? How is Joseph's story representative of your story and mine?

I think there is one level of application of the Joseph story that comes quite naturally for most of us. This is the idea that no matter how awful things seem to be going for us, God is in control, behind the scenes, working for our good.

When we are in the pit, when we are in strange and unfamiliar places, when people mistreat us unjustly, when everything seems to be going against us—when even our

own *family* has betrayed us and left us for dead—there is still hope because of God’s faithfulness.

This is a good and necessary lesson from Joseph’s story. We all need to know that God doesn’t forget us, no matter what “foreign lands” we find ourselves in, no matter how dire our circumstances get.

But this not the only lesson we need to pay attention to. The other lesson comes into view when we look at the story not from the familiar perspective of Joseph, the main character, but through the eyes of his brothers. When we do this, perhaps an even more amazing lesson becomes apparent.

**For we realize that God can and does use our carelessness, our apathy, even our evil and destructive intentions and puts them into service to accomplish his good ends for blessing us, those we love, and the whole world.**

It is not only Joseph who benefits from his brothers sin, is it? Joseph’s brothers—the *very same brothers* who callously and cruelly sold him to a band of foreigners on the side of a dusty road in Canaan—are now blessed at least in part because of their betrayal of Joseph. Look at what Joseph says:

*God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.*

Is Joseph simply re-describing his brothers’ actions into more favourable terms? After all it sounds better to say “God sent me ahead of you” than it does to say “You threw me aside like a piece of meat.” Is this just an exercise in reframing an unpleasant fact? Is Joseph just a “glass-half-full” kind of guy who tries to see the silver lining in every cloud?

Does Joseph *really* believe that this was all part of God’s covenant plan to give to Abraham and his offspring a land, and to make them a great nation? Apparently, he does.

There are big questions lurking behind this truth, questions of the nature of providence and human freedom. If it was *God* who brought Joseph down to Egypt for the purpose of saving lives, then how are we to think of the actions of Joseph’s brothers? Were they *wrong* to be doing what was apparently part of God’s plan? Could they have done any differently? How does God accomplish his purposes through the choices of free human beings? We are in deep waters here.

Well, I’m not going to solve the mystery this morning (alas!). In many ways, this abstract question takes the focus off what we really do need to learn. However we resolve the big question of human freedom and divine providence, what we see in this story of Joseph and his brothers is that in the world we live in, the world where

we make good and bad decisions and where good and bad things happen to us, *God's story moves forward.*

And it moves forward, at least in part, through our actions, the good ones, and the bad ones. Through it all, God saves lives. Even when our intentions are evil, God's are always good.

God can use even our bad decisions, even our sin, to lead us to places of blessing, reconciliation, and wholeness. Even when we mess things up unbelievably, even we actively work *against* God's intentions for good for all people, God remains committed to what he has promised.

Even when we are scheming and cowardly like Reuben, even when we are calculating and heartless like Judah, even when we lie, and manipulate the truth, and are envious, even when we are too confused, proud, disobedient, and stubborn to even know what we want or how to get it, *God wants what is best for us.* And he will use even our sin to bless us. He remains committed to saving us despite ourselves.

So does this mean that we can just do whatever we want because God will make it all turn out in the end? Paul addresses this very question in the book of Romans (6:1-4):

*What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

Ever since the fall, in Genesis 3, God's goal has been *new life*. To say that God *can* use our sin for good does not mean he *needs* or *wants* us to sin. Far from it! What God wants is for us to partner with him in the "saving of many lives." God wants us to work with him as his story moves on.

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Later on in the story, after Jacob is dead and Joseph's brothers begin to worry that Joseph will turn on them now that their father is gone, Joseph takes one final opportunity to assure his brothers know that he has forgiven them.

Genesis 50:19-20

*19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

Joseph implicitly acknowledges what we've discussed this morning—that there is a deep mystery in how God uses free human beings to accomplish his will. We are *not*

God and we do not understand how our free wills work for the accomplishing of God's plan.

But we *do* know that God wants what is good—for us, for our families, for our towns and nations, and for our world. We know that God is in the business of “saving many lives.”

Our story this morning shows us a God who has the ability to bring blessing out of and through anything, a God for whom even human sin and evil are no obstacle. It also remind us that we are not free to simply do whatever we want because we know God can bring good out of it. We are called to work together with God to bring about what is good. These are the lessons that Joseph's story is meant to teach us this morning.

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If ever there was a dysfunctional family, it was the one Joseph was a part of. Favouritism, sibling conflict, mistrust, envy, deceit, lust—it's all there. And *this family* is the carrier of blessing to the nations? *This family* is one of the means by which God will reconcile all things to himself? *This family*?

When we arrive here, at the end of Genesis, we see that it is, indeed, *this family*, despite all the wrong turns, all the ups and downs, and the plain old sin, that will play a central role in moving God's story forward. A huge nation will grow from this family in Egypt. This family will leave Egypt, they will head to the Promised Land, they will have kings and prophets and poets, they will be exiled, and they will return to their land. And they will make many more mistakes along the way.

But eventually, out of this family, will come the Redeemer of the entire human race.

And if God can use even *this family* then he can use our families—he can use you and I—as well.

No matter where we see ourselves in Joseph's story, we are presented with a challenge:

If you find yourself in a pit this morning, if you find yourself betrayed and disheartened, if you find yourself without hope or courage, if you feel trapped, confused, and without direction, God's challenge to you is:

*Take heart. I am in control. I have not forgotten you. You matter. You are a part of my plan, even when you can't see it. The story I am telling in you, through you, and with you is not yet complete.*

Similarly, if you are on the *other* side of the equation—if you have mistreated those closest to you, if you have been selfish and proud, if you find it difficult to care about God or others, if you can't believe that God even *has* a plan, much less that you could play a role in it—God has a challenge for you as well:

*I am determined to bless you. I want good things for you even when you don't want them for yourself, and when you act in ways contrary to my desires. I can use even your disobedience for blessing. I want you to repent, to turn around and work with me rather than against me. You are a part of my plan, even when you can't see it. My story will go forward.*

God's story *does* go forward. With us, through us, in spite of us, and for us.

Thanks be to God.