



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 24, 2019
GENESIS 45:3-11, 15; PSALM 37:1-12, 41-42; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-38, 42-50; LUKE 6:27-38

THEY MEANT IT FOR EVIL; GOD USED IT FOR GOOD

Genesis 45: 3-11, 15 [Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there--since there are five more years of famine to come--so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.'" And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.]

You may not know the name Don LaFontaine, but I bet you know his voice. Before his death in 2008, LaFontaine did the voice-over for more than 5000 movie trailers. Using his trademarked gravelly husk of a voice, he was charged with conveying the film's plot and intrigue in two minutes or less. The goal was to entice folks to see the movie.

You may remember a few of his more famous ones:

Die Hard: He's an easy man to like, and a hard man to kill.

Speed: Get ready for rush hour.

2001: A Space Odyssey: "A shrieking monolith deliberately buried by an alien intelligence"

His signature catch phrase was “in a world where...” He said in the very short time of a trailer, the audience must be invited into the story, and he found the quickest way to do that was “in a world where...”

So, for example, the trailer for the 1990 epic Goodfellas began with:

In a world that’s powered by violence... (we know that story, right?)

Or Alien: In a world where the sun burns cold and the wind blows colder...

I don’t even know what that means, but it got my attention.

The excerpt of the story we heard from the book of Genesis isn’t meant to be a trailer, and it may on the surface seem odd to lift this piece of the story out of its context. For my part, I think this is one of the greatest stories in all the Bible, and is well worth the read of the last 15 chapters of Genesis to lap up its rich beauty and remarkable truth about the human condition.

If I were a voice actor, I could envision a trailer for the story of Joseph might go something like this:

In a world where brother turns on brother, and pharaohs dream unsettling dreams, unexpected things happen. Jealousy, sexual intrigue, even a world-wide famine cannot extinguish the human spirit of compassion

and forgiveness. A story as old as time, yet so true for us today.

The story serves as a hinge between the ancient myths of the origins of Israel, and the epic tale of the Exodus. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob forges covenants with each man, for a purpose, but with the next generation—the twelve sons of Jacob become progenitors for the twelve tribes of Israel, and the covenant becomes a communal one, even down to us sitting here today.

You may know parts of the story: Jacob plays favorites among his children, and Joseph arrogantly lords his favorite position over his brothers. He’s a dreamer, and he is unabashed in sharing his interpretation of others’ dreams. This gift gets him in trouble, but also saves his life. Charisma often cuts both ways...

He is so relentlessly disrespectful to his brothers, that they sell him into slavery just to be rid of him. They tell his father a wild animal ate him. Jacob is devastated, and only decades later, as an old man approaching death, will he learn the truth that his son is alive.

And not just alive, Joseph manages to move from a life of slavery to become the most powerful man in all of Egypt, caring for Pharaoh’s assets, because he has this uncanny capacity to interpret dreams.

A famine sets in, and Joseph uses his power for good, including sharing food with his starving brothers who do not recognize him.

Now this is where a lot of storylines miss the mark, and plot a course to vengeance. Think of how many films, how many books, tell the story of revenge and end there. It provides for momentary satisfaction as we see it unfold—the bad guy gets what’s coming (we cheer), the victim gets retribution (we rejoice), and the world’s warp is righted just a little.

Only the feeling doesn’t last. Vengeance may release the tension for a moment, but the brief satisfaction erodes into an unresolved darkness. This is why families of victims who attend the execution of the killer almost always are left with a punch in the gut.

Vengeance is the easier storyline, and a common one, but our scriptures invite us to consider the deeper story, the tougher road, and how we might make it our own here and now.

Joseph left his brothers as an arrogant, petulant young man, but when they meet him years later, he is changed. Yes, he’s culturally Egyptian now, so they don’t recognize him, but that is not what this story is really about.

This is a story of psychological growth, emotional growth, spiritual growth. Joseph grows to become a humble man who weeps upon his brothers, who rightly fear for their

lives, but he waves the thought of that off, choosing instead to acknowledge God as the one whose purpose is fulfilled in all this.

Humility is the virtue that can only come when one confronts an egocentric existence and yearns for something more, and knows it cannot come only from within oneself.

His brothers meant it for evil; but Joseph is able to say that God used it for good. From his pit of desolation, he gains wisdom that will serve him and many others through him.

Instead of rage, Joseph has compassion. Instead of vengeance, he seeks reconciliation. Instead of lording it over them, he simply forgives them. For Joseph was lost, but now is found, having found his true self.

He interprets the meaning of it all—that God sent him into Egypt before them, to preserve life. To preserve their lives. What magnanimity!

The invitation is there for you and me.

The late Jungian analyst and priest Jon Sanford once wrote: “Evil remains evil until man’s [sic] consciousness grows because of it. Then God can use it for good.”ⁱ

This is why we still tell the mythic story of Joseph 3000 years later.

This is why we still tell the story of Edwin Pratt’s murder fifty years later.

This is why we will host Mirabai Starr next month for a writing workshop in which we are invited to trace our stories across the dark night into transformation.

This is why we will make our Lenten journey together again soon, and ask each of you to plan your own funeral in the coming weeks—not in some morbid drama of despair, but because I am convinced that tending to the reality of death is an integral part of that spiritual growth, we all long for in our lives. It leads to wisdom.

¹Sanford, Jon. *The Man Who Wrestled with God: Light from the Old Testament on the Psychology of Individuation*; 1974.

We still tell the story of Christ, crucified and risen, because it offers us wisdom by which we make our way in this broken, hurting world. The patterns are there for us to see, encouraging us to walk aside from the easier path of vengeance, to find a different way, lighted by the extraordinary gifts of forgiveness and forbearance that present in a life of wisdom.

Then God can use us for good.



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