

SERMON

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

460 East Main Street

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More Providence Than I Believe In

Genesis 45:1-15

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When I was in school at Bethel College, one of my favorite professors was Dr. Ramsay. One of his best classes was on the Old Testament, in which he often gave us this advice: “If you want to know what a particular passage of scripture is saying to you, be sure to listen for the repeated words and phrases. They’re a clue to figuring out the meaning of a passage.”

Using that interpretive device, it was pretty easy to figure out what the author of Genesis 45 is trying to get across. “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

“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; God has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”

Did you hear the repeated words and phrases? “God sent me here. It was not you who sent me here. God sent me here.”

This much is clear: Joseph believed that God had sent him to Egypt.

Well I hear that and can only come to one conclusion: Joseph obviously landed on his head when his brothers threw him into the pit.

He’s forgotten what we know: it was his brothers’ betrayal that got him here. Upset by their younger brother’s dreams, they threw him in a pit to die, and then, in the first reported case of “hating the dream but loving the dreamer,” they repent to a seemingly lesser crime, that of selling him into slavery. It was a calculated, evil response to Joseph’s dreaming. “Come, let us kill this dreamer; then we shall see what will become of his dreams.”

So here’s my question:

How is it that I look back at this scene and see cruel brothers, and Joseph looks back at the same scene and sees gracious God?

How is it that I read the lines of the story and see nothing but cold, calculating human cruelty directed against a fellow human, while Joseph can look at those same lines and say, “God is at work in this?”

We’ve touched upon one of the foundational doctrines of Christianity, that of divine providence. Shirley Guthrie writes that the doctrine of providence “says that the loving, just, and powerful God who first made heaven and earth continues to uphold, protect, rule over, take care of—provide for—God’s good creation and each one of us” (Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 166).

It's a way of saying that the God who created all that is continues to love creation and is at work in the world in ways beyond our knowing or understanding. One of my favorite passages of scripture comes from Romans 8. It sums up the doctrine of providence: "Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Now, most of the time, this idea of God's providence in the world takes backstage. When things are good, it's not so difficult to affirm that God's hand is in it.

But when this nice, tranquil doctrine of God's care for creation bumps into the real suffering and pain that humanity endures, that's when the trouble begins.

And I'll admit to you that I've had my share of trouble with this doctrine of God's providence.

As the newest pastor here, I am committed to never trying to appear as if I've got all the questions about God and faith nailed down. I don't. Cindy Rigby, who teaches at Austin Seminary, says it like this: "If you have understood, what you have understood is not God."

So I won't even attempt to fool you with theological jargon or trite statements affirming unwavering belief in the providence of God. I fall much closer to the truth of something I read in some forgotten book years ago: "I've experienced more providence in my life than I believe in."

Do you know what that's like? Have you experienced more providence in your life than you thought you believed in?

Just before I began a new call in 1994, I had endured one of the saddest times of my life. Something I had desperately wanted to happen, didn't happen. All of my plans were up in the air. Brookhaven called. I became pastor.

As part of that ministry in that place, I visited a church member in the hospital one Friday night, and while I stood in the hallway waiting for the nurse to finish tending to her before entering the room, another nurse kept coming by, and on one trip, just happened to drop a pen so that I would surely notice her, and then I entered Remley's room, and this nurse—named Alayne—came in shortly after and that church member announced that she thought it would be great if we got together. And years later we did, and, later still, Rachel and then Sarah and Aaron came along. Out of the pain of my plans going awry came a wonderful call, a happy marriage, and children who fill me with such joy that I can barely contain it.

Looking back at that day when my plans blew up—plunging me into despair—and through the years since, I see a lot more of God's providence than I really think I believe in.

But there are some other things that I'm still trying to figure out. It was twenty-eight years ago this past June that my sister died, leaving behind her five-year-old son. She was having a simple surgical procedure when something went wrong. She was in a coma when I arrived at the hospital in Odessa, Texas, and we were all struggling to understand. And I guess we still are.

I've spent 28 years trying to understand my sister's suffering and death in light of God's providence. Sometimes it's easy to see the hand of God working for good in the ordinary events of human life. But at other times, God seems absent at best, culpable at worst. And that's where it gets tricky.

It's often impossible to see the hand of God in something while you're in the midst of it. It's usually as you look back—as you view life in the past tense—that things begin to make sense.

I've tried to imagine all the things that Joseph might have yelled up from the pit where his brothers had thrown him. I'm sure he said something like: "Somebody get me out of here."

Or, even, "I'll get you for this." But no matter how hard I've tried, I can't imagine Joseph saying: "You didn't throw me in here, dear brothers; it was God. God put me here."

Nor can I imagine Joseph running naked from Potiphar's house, with Potiphar's wife clutching his clothes, yelling back to her: "You didn't get me in this trouble, dear seducer; it was God."

Nor can I imagine him locked away in prison daring to say to his captors: "God's put me here for a reason."

No, it was only as Joseph stood face to face with his brothers who were there asking for food, that Joseph could look back and make this shocking affirmation: "What you meant for evil, God meant for good. You didn't send me here, but God, who sent me to preserve life." I'm not certain that Joseph believed in providence even half as much as he had experienced it.

This story, then, isn't a story that gives us Joseph's three-point plan for finding the silver lining behind every dark cloud. That's much too trivial. It's not here so that we can find the words to say to those in the midst of pain: "Don't worry, God's going to work it all out."

Those sorts of easy answers trivialize life and God far too much. In this story, rich in detail, we stare into the face of the mysterious providence of God, which we sometimes see but often miss—the providential care of God at work in the world to make things right.

In a sermon on the doctrine of providence, Paul Tillich once wrote: The providence of God "is certainly not some vague promise, that, with the help of God, everything will come to a good end; there are many things that come to a bad end. And it is not the maintenance of hope in every situation; there are situations in which there can be no hope. Nor is it the anticipation of a period of history, in which divine Providence will be less paradoxical than it is in ours.

But the content of the faith in Providence is this: when death rains from heaven as it does now, when cruelty wields power over nations and individuals as it does now, when hunger and persecution drive millions from place to place as they do now, and when prisons and slums all over the world distort the humanity of the bodies and souls of men as they do now—we can boast in that time, and just in that time, that even all of this cannot separate us from the love of God" (Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, "The Meaning of Providence," pages 106-107).

Looking back at Joseph's story, I saw cruel brothers. Joseph saw the hand of a gracious God who was able to turn even the ugliness of his brothers' actions into a beautiful gift of salvation.

The band U2 sings a song called *Grace* which contains these lines: "Grace—she carries the world on her hips—no champagne flute for her lips—no twirls or skips—between her fingertips she carries a pearl in perfect condition. What once was hurt—what once was friction—what left a mark—no longer stains. Because grace makes beauty out of ugly things."

That, in the end, is what the providence of God is about. That God—because of God's love for the world—will make even ugly things beautiful, that the world might be redeemed.