



Genesis 50:15-21

But God...

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 50:15-21

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Once upon a time, long, long ago, there lived a father, Jacob, with his 12 sons. They lived the good life in a land called Canaan.

Jacob loved his sons but was especially fond of his son Joseph. So dad fashioned for him a coat of many colors. This turns out to be a big time parental blunder. The brothers are jealous and hate him for his privileged status. They even entertain the thought of killing him. Instead, they devise a plan to sell him into slavery and tell dad how he was mauled by wild animals. The news breaks dad's heart.

But we're told that the Lord is with Joseph. He's has the God-given ability to interpret dreams. The mighty Pharaoh of Egypt has a recurring nightmare about seven lean cows that eat seven fat cows. Through an amazing set of circumstances that God is orchestrating, Joseph is summoned from prison to interpret Pharaoh's dream. There will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh is so enamored with Joseph that he appoints him Prime Minister in charge of famine relief.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Jacob hears about the grain supply in Egypt and sends his sons on a mission to buy grain. Well, what do you know? The brothers who sell Joseph into slavery are now standing before him, clueless about his identity.

This is where the story gets interesting. Joseph sends his brothers on a few excursions, tests you might say, to see if they have learned from their mistakes. They pass with flying colors. Finally, Joseph can't stand the drama. He reveals his identity and extends to them the amazing gift of forgiveness. "Don't be distressed or angry for selling me into slavery, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you"

(Genesis 45:5). Yes, indeed, the Lord is with Joseph. This is forgiveness at its finest.

We come, at long last, to the conclusion of this protracted, messy saga. Father Jacob, the family patriarch, has died. His 12 sons, their families and leading

Egyptian officials accompany his body to Canaan for proper burial. After the funeral, the brothers wonder, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” (50:15). They have always wondered what will happen after Jacob dies. Now they are about to find out.

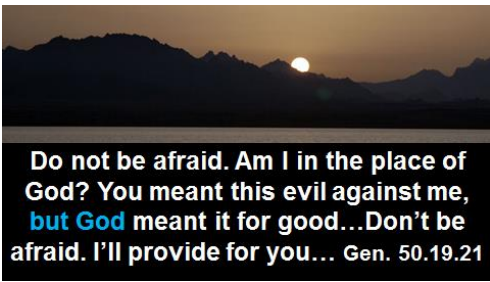


Note to self: feelings of betrayal and hurt in families aren't easily overcome. Forgiveness is possible in families, but it doesn't happen overnight.

Since the brothers fear Joseph could be holding a grudge, they decide to launch a preemptive strike. They send Joseph the message: “Your father left these instructions before he died. This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and wrongs they committed in treating you so poorly” (50:16-17). Notice, they call Jacob “your father” rather than “our father.” They appeal to his sense of duty as a son rather than any obligation he might have as their brother.

Another note to self: if you want to communicate sensitive messages to people, don't use social media, like Facebook or email. Talk to people face to face.

When the brothers and Joseph meet in person, they fall at his feet and offer to become his servants. Do you catch the irony? Didn't Joseph dream way-back when that his brothers would one day bow down to Him? (37:2-20).



Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You meant this evil against me, but God meant it for good...Don't be afraid. I'll provide for you... Gen. 50:19,21

What Joseph says next is none short of historic: “Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You meant this evil against me, but God meant it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children” (50:19-21).

What a classic one-liner: “You meant this evil against me but God meant it for good.” It’s one of the most memorable verses in the Old Testament. God takes the worst that happens—selling Joseph into slavery—and turns it into the best thing that ever could have happened—the saving of many lives.

Everything hinges on the phrase “*but God.*” These two words appear hundreds of times together in Scripture. Life is messy, *but God* redeems. Joseph’s situation seems hopeless *but God* intervenes. They meant it for evil *but God* meant it for good.

The book of Genesis begins with creation. Each day or epoch is punctuated with the words, “And God saw that it was good” (1:4, 9, 12, 18, 21, 25). When God fashions man as male and female, and looks back over everything He has made, “It was very good” (1:31). God’s intentions in creation from start to finish are good—very good.

Genesis has now come full circle. God’s purposes in creation are good. Even when everything blows up in Jacob’s family, God turns it into something good.

Paul writes, “All things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). Paul must have borrowed a

page from Joseph's story. God specializes in taking bad things and transforming them into something redemptive.



The quintessential example of this bad into good principle is the cross. God takes the worst that happens—Jesus' death on a cross—and turns it into the best thing that ever happened—the salvation of all who believe in him.

This past week I reread the sermons I preached on Joseph. I've summarized the key learnings in a handout available in the lobby after worship. Here's the biggest takeaway: evil doesn't have the last word here. God is mercifully sovereign. God can take the worst evil and can transform it into something redemptive.

ISIS will not have the last word. God has the last word!

So, what difference does this Joseph story make in my life? As we leave this story, let's widen the aperture to explore how this story speaks to our church.

This Joseph story has really captivated me. I've been reminded each week how relevant this ancient book is to our contemporary situation. We don't ask you to read your Bible primarily for information. It's really not all that important if you can identify Beersheba on a map or rattle off the names of Jacob's 12 sons. We read the Bible because it is formational. The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to form Christ in us. We read the Bible to metabolize Jesus' teachings into concrete acts of love and service.

It's imperative as a church that we become more biblical in our Christian worldviews and ethics. Our Judeo-Christian ethic in Scripture is being replaced today with a grab-bag,

anything-goes assortment of random beliefs and secular sound bites.

Second, we must become more generous as people of God and followers of Christ. When thanksgiving wells up in Jacob, he builds an altar to offer sacrifices (Genesis 46:1). He offers something of value to express gratitude.

The only things at our disposal are time and money. So, how do we spend our money and what do we do with our time?

God offers the world something absolutely unique in Jesus Christ that is found in no other. We intend to share Christ's message with Northern Virginia and the wider world. If you share this mission with us and want to see the cause of Christ prosper through this church, I'm asking you for a gift of your money and your time.

I don't talk about money much in my sermons. You can count on two fingers the number of times I've talked about money in sermons over the past year. What we do with our money is not unimportant in Scripture. Jesus talks more about money than most anything. That's because Jesus recognizes money to be a chief rival to God.



If our giving continues at its current pace, we will be \$200,000 behind budget by the end of the year. To be fair, about it, we're always behind this time every year, but this year the shortfall is even more acute. I'm asking you to do two things: to generously give your money to this church between now and the end of the year. Second, to take a pledge card from the pews and estimate an amount of money you intend to give to VPC in 2016. Elders are available in

the lobby at the Connect Table to answer questions or address your concerns.

I'm also asking for your time. We're hosting a Connection Fair today in the hall. We've been talking lately about Worship+2. We're asking you to become regular in worship as well as to identify one place to grow and one place to serve at VPC. We need more volunteers. We have real ministry jobs that need to be done. Don't be fooled into thinking we have all the bases covered. We need your help!

Third, we must become more welcoming. People in Northern Virginia must have the mistaken impression that God is a cosmic killjoy intent on making sure nobody is having a good time. I know, because I hear the chatter around punch bowls. Given the way people react when they find out what I do for living, you would think my job is comparable to a moral policeman. I'm reminded of something C.S. Lewis said in his book *Mere Christianity*. He tells the story of a schoolboy who was asked what he thought God was like. He replied that, as far as he could tell, God was the sort of person who is always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying himself and then trying to put a stop to it.



Nothing could be further from the truth. Maybe we're doing a poor job representing Jesus. What did he say? "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

I want you to invite your family and friends to VPC this December. Who are people in your sphere of influence who need Christ? You could invite them to our Church Street Stroll later in the month. You could ask them to join you at our annual Christmas concert. You could welcome them to

worship during the next four Sundays of Advent. We'll be preaching on hope, peace, joy, love. Is there anybody you know not interested in these four ambitions? We promise to make these sermons guest-friendly. We'll do our best to make your family and friends feel welcome here.

I want you to join me in becoming more biblical, more generous and more welcoming.

