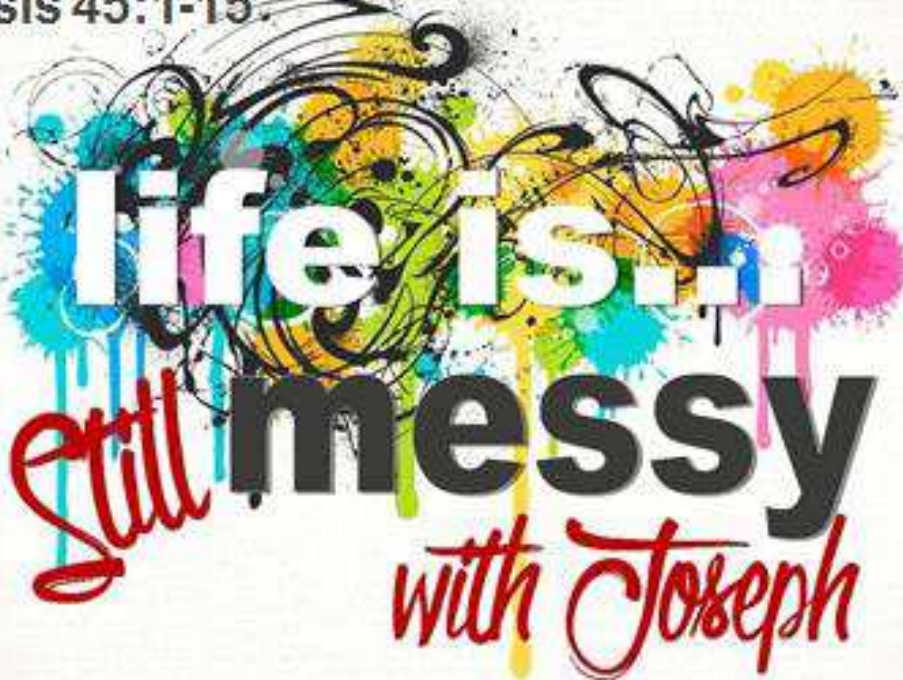


Genesis 45:1-15.



When God Intervenes

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Peter G. James
Genesis 45:1-15

November 8, 2015

The year is 2008; Christmas day. Chris and I are hosting our son Andrew and his wife, Becky, for Christmas dinner. Afterwards, we exchange gifts. As the evening winds down, Andrew and Becky present us with Christmas cards. My card reads, “Merry Christmas, Grandpa” and includes a sonogram picture.

I should have put two and two together. Not this time! I stared at the card, wondering what it all meant. I had never associated myself with the label “grandpa” before, so I assumed the card was meant for my father. When I asked Becky about it this week, she recalled that I appeared as though I had been stunned with a Taser.

Chris made the connection almost immediately. She shrieked with delight, “We’re going to be grandparents!” I, on the other hand, remained motionless and speechless. It took me the longest time to catch on. The whole thing is caught on video. It’s not my shining moment.

Perhaps some of you can relate to being too stunned to speak. Maybe you can recall a time when you were blindsided by something? Have you ever been shocked by a surprise announcement that rocked your world?

I had a flashback yesterday to a memorable scene in the original Star Wars movie. Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker are locked in an epic light saber duel. Darth Vader says to Luke, as he is bearing down on him, “Obi-wan never told you what happened to your father.”

“He told me enough,” Luke said with disdain, “He told me you killed him.”



“No, I am your father,” Darth Vader says back to him. Even the producers kept this announcement a surprise from their actors until the scene was shot.

If you’ve been following along this Joseph story with us, we’ve come to the moment we’ve all been waiting for. Joseph decides it’s time to disclose his identity to his brothers who sold him into slavery 22 years ago. Imagine their surprise in learning this Egyptian taskmaster is actually their long-lost brother.

What is curious is that Joseph isn’t the one to initiate this disclosure. Brother Judah does the honors. He’s the one who sets this familial reconciliation in motion.

Let me take you back to Glenda’s sermon from last Sunday on Genesis 44. The brothers had successfully passed the test when they brought their

youngest brother, Benjamin, back to Egypt. This Egyptian taskmaster, whom we know to be Joseph, sent his brothers home with a supply of grain to ward off further famine.

Joseph arranged to have his silver cup concealed in Benjamin's saddlebag. When his soldiers searched their homeward bound caravan, they found the chalice with Benjamin's belongings. They accused Benjamin of stealing and hauled them back to Egypt.

Judah, fearing the worst for Benjamin, steps forward to plead his brother's case. He explains what Benjamin means to his father and volunteers to pay Benjamin's penalty. This voluntary gesture of self-sacrifice moves Joseph to tears. Judah, you remember, is the brother who earlier masterminded the plot to sell Joseph into slavery.

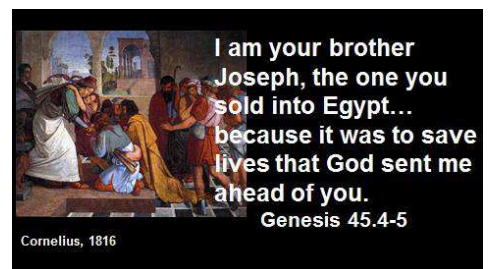
Joseph has been able to hold his emotions in check, but when he hears Judah's passionate appeal, he loses it. He orders everyone out of his chambers except for the 11 Hebrew brothers. The two Hebrew words Joseph speaks explode in their ears, [translated] "I am Joseph" (45:3).

His brothers are dumbstruck. They didn't see this one coming. It's the last thing they would expect from this Egyptian lord.

Joseph asks whether his father is still alive. The brothers have told him so previously, but now Joseph wants to ascertain whether they've been telling the truth.

The brothers are terrified at what will happen next. Will Joseph seek revenge?

Joseph invites them to come closer, and elaborates on his surprise disclosure. "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt. Don't be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for sending me here because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (45:4-5).



Joseph repeats three times in short order that God sent him to Egypt: "God sent me ahead of you" (45:5), "God sent me ahead of you" (45:6) and "God sent me here" (45:8). Even though the brothers are responsible, God is also sovereign in these circumstances.

Joseph orders them to carry the message back to their aged father that he is alive and now ruler over Egypt. Time is of the essence. There are still five more years of famine and their father is getting along in years. The

scene ends as it began, with Joseph weeping. He embraces his brothers and talks with them. Wouldn't you love to know what they say to each other after 22 years of separation?

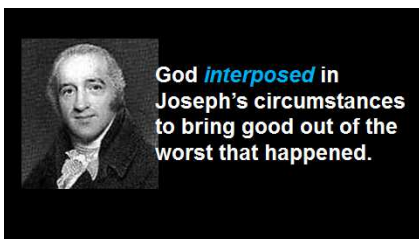
Reconciliation in the Ben Jacob family now begins. Mind you, it doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to rebuild what has been broken. We still have two more sermons before this series concludes on how this family will be put back together.

I marvel at this story's ability to preserve both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. So often we play one off against the other. We either argue that God is sovereign and in control of every situation, or we side with the freedom we are given to make responsible (or irresponsible) moral choices.

Did Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery? Or did God orchestrate these events to bring Joseph into Egypt? Actually, both things are true. Joseph's brothers are responsible for selling Joseph into slavery. But God also superintended the process to lead Joseph to Egypt.

God doesn't control people like puppets on a string. We are given freedom to make choices for which we alone are responsible. Yet, neither is God boxed-in by bad choices. No matter what happens, God is eminently qualified to bring good from evil.

Genesis 45 preserves both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Take verse 5. Joseph tells his brothers at the outset of this verse, "You sold [me] into Egypt." No doubt about it—he holds them responsible for what happened. Yet, he goes on to say, "Do not be distressed and angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." God takes the worst that can happen and transforms it into something positive.



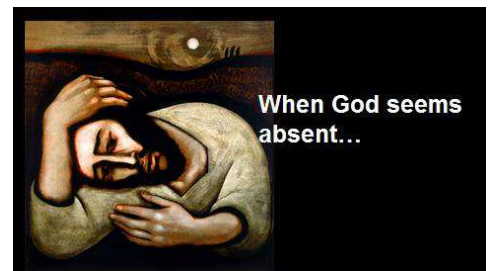
I stumbled upon a 177-year-old sermon this week from Genesis 45. Charles Simeon, a famous preacher, wrestles with the vexing question of how God is able to bring good out of evil in this Joseph story. He uses an unfamiliar word in his sermon to address this question. He says, "God *interposed* in Joseph's circumstances to bring good out of the worst that happened." I had to look up "interposed" in the dictionary. It means to place oneself between one thing and another. God intervenes in this story to bring good out of the worst that happens.

Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, but God interposes to make it possible for Joseph to become a servant in Potiphar's house. When Potiphar's wife falsely accuses him of rape and has him thrown into prison, God interposes by giving Joseph supernatural ability to interpret dreams. It is this dream interpretation that enables Joseph to become second in command to the mighty Egyptian Pharaoh.

For much of this story, God seems silent. We're not told in so many words what God is doing, if anything. Yet, as this story unfolds, we learn that God has been working, even when Joseph is sold into slavery and cast into prison.

Sometimes God works in the center of the story in the Bible. Yet, just as often, God works in the periphery and away from the limelight. God does some of his best work off stage and behind the scenes.

It may seem as though God is absent from your life at the moment. You have prayed, even begged for God's help, but no answer seems forthcoming. Yet, things aren't always what they seem. Just because we can't see God working doesn't mean God isn't working. Could it be that God is working behind the scenes in your life to redeem and save?



We have utilized this Life is Messy theme for years now in our preaching. We created this logo for a sermon series on Jacob in 2012. We used it again with David in 2014 and now with Joseph in 2015. People in the Bible live messy lives. Don't you see yourself in the Bible?

Life is messy. Family dynamics are messy. Office politics are messy. Interpersonal relationships are messy also. Messy interpersonal relationships affect every segment of society, family, community, even church. Hang around this or any other church for any length of time and you'll soon discover that interpersonal relationships can become really messy.

Laurel and Hardy were a popular comedy act in the classic era of Hollywood back in the 1930s. Ollie Hardy had a signature line whenever he and Stan Laurel got into a difficult situation, "Well Stanley, here's another fine mess you've gotten me into." Joseph could have said that to his brothers. But what overshadows the story for Joseph is God's benevolently sovereign ability to bring good out of the worst that happens.

Be of good cheer, my friends. God prevails. No human activity can ultimately stymie God's good purposes for people. The book of Proverbs

says it best, “Many are the plans in a person’s heart but it is the Lord’s purposes that prevail” (19:21).

