

Genesis 45:1–15 (The Message)

Joseph couldn't hold himself in any longer, keeping up a front before all his attendants. He cried out, "Leave! Clear out—everyone leave!" So there was no one with Joseph when he identified himself to his brothers. But his sobbing was so violent that the Egyptians couldn't help but hear him. The news was soon reported to Pharaoh's palace.

Joseph spoke to his brothers: "I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?" But his brothers couldn't say a word. They were speechless—they couldn't believe what they were hearing and seeing.

"Come closer to me," Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. "I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don't feel badly, don't blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the land now for two years; the famine will continue for five more years—neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me on ahead to pave the way and make sure there was a remnant in the land, to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance. So you see, it wasn't you who sent me here but God. He set me in place as a father to Pharaoh, put me in charge of his personal affairs, and made me ruler of all Egypt.

"Hurry back to my father. Tell him, 'Your son Joseph says: I'm master of all of Egypt. Come as fast as you can and join me here. I'll give you a place to live in Goshen where you'll be close to me—you, your children, your grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and anything else you can think of. I'll take care of you there completely. There are still five more years of famine ahead; I'll make sure all your needs are taken care of, you and everyone connected with you—you won't want for a thing.'

"Look at me. You can see for yourselves, and my brother Ben-jamin can see for himself, that it's me, my own mouth, telling you all this. Tell my father all about the high position I hold in Egypt, tell him everything you've seen here, but don't take all day—hurry up and get my father down here."

Then Joseph threw himself on his brother Ben-jamin's neck and wept, and Ben-jamin wept on his neck. He then kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Only then were his brothers able to talk with him.

Providence

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: August 24, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Genesis 45:1–15

We've heard The Message translation this morning. It's really a paraphrase more than a translation. A more contemporary rendering, it conveys the emotion of the drama. And there is drama, indeed. Joseph, you will remember, was despised by his brothers. He was their father's favorite, and his brothers were irked by the little brat.

So, they threw him in an empty well. When a caravan came by, they sold him, and he was carried off into Egypt. Meanwhile, Joseph's brothers took his famous coat, drenched it in animal blood, presented it to their father back home, and old Jacob was left to surmise that poor Joseph had been killed and eaten by a wild beast. Poor Jacob was inconsolable and moaned that he would mourn his son until the day he died.

The story then moved to Egypt, where Joseph, despite some setbacks, finally advanced until he was second in command only to Pharaoh. One of the things that got Joseph promoted so greatly was his ability to interpret dreams. One time Pharaoh dreamed about seven fat cows coming out of the Nile, and then seven gaunt cows came out and swallowed them up. Then he dreamed of seven plump ears of grain growing on a stalk, and then seven thin and blighted ears. Pharaoh was troubled, and Joseph was called to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. Joseph told Pharaoh that the dreams predicted seven years of great plenty in the land, but they would then be followed by seven years of devastating famine. Joseph told Pharaoh that he should set aside one-fifth of the produce in each of the good years. That way there would be more than enough stored up for the famine. Pharaoh had been so impressed with Joseph and relieved that Egypt would now be saved that Pharaoh put Joseph in charge.

Things unfolded just as Joseph had predicted. After seven years of plenty the years of famine began. Indeed, the famine was in every country in the region. But in Egypt, the storehouses were opened and the people could buy grain. Indeed, there was enough to sell to neighboring countries.

At this point, Jacob and Joseph's brothers come back into the story. Jacob hears there is grain in Egypt and sends his sons to buy some. Of course, unbeknownst to them, the person in Egypt with whom they must deal is Joseph. It's been many years, and Joseph's brothers do not recognize him. But Joseph recognizes them. He learns from them that his father, old Jacob, is still alive.

Joseph toys with his brothers for a while. He calls them spies. He sends them back home while holds one of them as a hostage. He even hides money in their bags so they will look like thieves, not once but twice. Throughout all this, there are various conversations and meals together between Joseph and his brothers. All the while, Joseph is having an increasingly hard time controlling his joy and affection for his brothers, even as he keeps tricking them. Sometimes he has to leave the room to weep he is so overcome.

Finally, we arrive at this morning's scene. Joseph cannot contain himself any longer. He sends his attendants out of the room. He attempts to reveal himself to his brothers, but at first he

is sobbing so much he can't even talk. Finally, he makes himself understood. He says, "I am Joseph." And then he asks, "Is my father really still alive?"

Joseph's brothers are so dumbfounded they cannot speak a word. Joseph calls them close. He explains everything to them, and the family is back together again.

At one point Joseph says to his brothers, "I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don't feel badly, don't blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the land now for two years; the famine will continue for five more years—neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me on ahead to pave the way and make sure there was a remnant in the land, to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance. So you see, it wasn't you who sent me here but God. He set me in place as a father to Pharaoh, put me in charge of his personal affairs, and made me ruler of all Egypt."

While everything ends up rather nicely in this story, this statement bothers me a lot. "Don't be sorry about all that nasty stuff you guys did to me," says Joseph. "It was God's doing. It was part of God's plan. It was all for the good. Just think, if you hadn't thrown me in the well and sold me into slavery, Egypt and Canaan would have starved to death. Why, if you guys didn't hate me so much and treat me so badly, there wouldn't be any chosen people left, no great nation as numerous as the stars, and no one to occupy the Promised Land. Why, if you guys hadn't been such boneheads, God's whole project would have been wrecked."

Really? Is that our theology? Everything works according to God's plan? Everything turns out for the best? Or at least everything works out the way God designs it?

It's an understandable theology, to be sure. I certainly want to believe that in the end things will end well. I certainly want to believe that someone or something bigger than I has a grip on things. And it's certainly a theology we find in places in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament writers were committed to the full sovereignty of God. That meant that they needed to have an explanation for when things went wrong, like the Babylonian Exile. God promised David's kingdom would last into eternity; the Nebuchadnezzar smashed it to the ground. Conversely, they needed an explanation for cases like Joseph and his brothers, when evil seemed to lead to good.

Interwoven in the ancient Biblical narrative are these two complementary strategies. Everything was indeed in God's hands. So, sometimes God would use people like the Babylonians to punish the people when they got off track. The promises would still be kept, but there would be detours, principally because of the people's wickedness. Or sometimes, as in the story of Joseph and his brothers, people would do horrible things, but they were part of God's plan and actually caused good ends.

It's a satisfying theology in that it that there are no loose ends. What may appear as chaos is, one way or another, the working out of God's plan.

But in the end, is it really satisfying? First of all, it's still a little random. In one case people are punished for their evil; in another they are told their evil saved the day. And let's be honest, neither one feels just right. This is not just a modern criticism, either. Job rejected the idea that his suffering happened because of bad things he did, and at the end of the story God says that he was right.

And perhaps many of us also resist, or are even revolted, by the way that some people still today evoke God's control or providence to explain even the most horrific events.

Last week the journalist James Foley was beheaded by an ISIS terrorist. Who among us would want to say that Foley was punished by God for his evil? Who among us would want to

say that the terrorist's action was actually God's hand in making things work out for the best for Foley and his family in some way we cannot yet see?

On August 9th, white police officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, MO. While the facts of the case have not yet been adjudicated, who among is ready to say either that Michael Brown was being punished by God for his evil or that it was alright because it was part of God's plan for the better?

On the 31st of July in Brockton, 12-year-old Nazair Nunes-Escobar was trying out the roller blade skates he had just gotten for his birthday, when he was struck by a truck and killed. Who among us wants to say that the child was being punished for his evil deeds, or that God caused the truck to run him over because God had a plan?

We step onto a very slippery slope when we chalk everything up to providence, do we not? Do we not risk too easy and simplistic answers to the complex questions and situations with which life presents us? Do we not risk blaming the innocent or conversely saying that great horrors are God's plan? And yet, as people of faith, do we not hold firm to the notion that God is involved in our lives, and in existence itself? It is a conundrum.

Joseph stood face to face with his brothers, after all those years. There was a history between them. It was complex and hurtful, to be sure. Jacob seems to have shown preference for Joseph, which often creates envy in families. Joseph seems to have been a spoiled brat. Joseph's brothers seem to have been too quick to take offense, and certainly did not handle the family dysfunction with maturity. In short, they were a good American family.

All of these things, and the happenstances of life, contributed to painful and troubling events. And life went on. Despite everything, Joseph did well in Egypt. His family in Canaan seems to have kept on going, though the grief, pain and guilt also seems to have followed them. And then, in the midst of a famine, comes a chance reunion. In the end, the family is saved from starvation, there is a moving reconciliation. Maybe all's well that ends well in this story. But it didn't have to end the way it did. It could have ended much worse. And even the way it ended, there remained all those years of pain and grief.

If I could write the scene in the story when the brothers reunite, I would want to include those threads. In my version, Joseph would still be overjoyed to see his brothers. He would weep that this impossible reunion had come to pass. But then I would tell a longer version of his words.

After all the formalities, I would have Joseph say something like, "What a wonderful day this is. I never thought I would see my brothers, much less see my father, again. It's been so long, and so much has happened. In many ways it's been really hard. I've missed you all so much. I want you to know that I forgive you for what you did to me. And I hope you can forgive the way I acted, too. This has been so painful. Life is so complicated. I wish we could do things over. I guess God doesn't give us that opportunity. But God has been with us; I'm sure of that. Even when we make a mess of things God is with us. Even when the worst things happen in life God is with us. God can help us make the best out of a bad situation, whether we cause it or whether it just happens. Sometimes, with God's help, we can make lemonade out of lemons. We're a lucky bunch, I guess. Having the family back together after all those lemons feels a lot like lemonade. But even before everything turned out this way, I know I was strengthened by God. I found the strength to endure and even thrive, and I sure couldn't have done that by myself.

"You know what, brothers? I've come to believe that there are two miracles that are always with us—God's presence even in the deepest depths of trouble and the power of love and

forgiveness. Even with these, life won't work out perfectly, but with them we can make life the best we can. God's presence, love and forgiveness. Without them would we ever have found one another again? I fear to think, brothers, where we would be without them." And to you my friends, brothers and sisters, I fear to think where we would be without them. . God's presence, love and forgiveness. Amen.