



“Becoming Theologians of Our Own Lives”

Sermon Preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

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Scripture - Genesis 45: 1-15

Trying to re-cap the story of Joseph is like trying to explain the TV show “Desperate Housewives” to a friend who’s never seen it. Today’s passage delivers the season finale, and it makes more sense if you’ve tuned in regularly. An awful lot of drama and intrigue precedes our scene today. So let’s rewind.

Joseph’s father Jacob had 12 sons by four women. Leah, the wife Jacob was tricked into marrying bore him six sons, and her sister Rachel, Jacob’s true love, gave birth to Joseph and later Benjamin with whom she died in childbirth. Rachel and Leah’s maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah also bore Jacob two sons each. Already, you see, we have a perfect recipe for dysfunction and disaster! Favoring his sons by Rachel, Jacob presented Joseph with an extraordinary gift - a coat of many colors which Joseph predictably flaunted. Sibling rivalry doesn’t even begin to describe the anger and resentment at work in this family. The other sons hated Joseph for being their father’s favorite.

When Jacob sent Joseph one day to check on his brothers who were tending the flocks, they seized him, stripped him of his cloak and threw him in a pit. Intending to kill Joseph, they instead sold him to a passing caravan of merchants for some quick cash. The brothers then dripped goat’s blood on Joseph’s coat, showing their grieved father that a wild animal must have gotten their poor brother.

Meanwhile, Potiphar, an Egyptian officer bought Joseph and made him a house servant. But alas, Potiphar’s wife lusted after the handsome lad and tried to seduce him. But Joseph was righteous and resisted her saying, “Look, I have been given great responsibility and trust by your husband. How could I then do this great wickedness and sin against God?” Mrs. Potiphar kept pursuing Joseph until one day, when he pulled away from her, his robe was left in her hand. She used it to frame Joseph, and convinced the other servants and her husband that Joseph had slept with her. Joseph was thrown in prison.

Now Joseph was a dreamer – from childhood he had vivid dreams and over the years he began to deduce their meaning. When news of his ability to interpret dreams had spread, Joseph

was called to court to decipher Pharaoh's dreams. And Joseph did, explaining that Egypt would experience seven years of fruitful harvest followed by seven years of famine; therefore, it was imperative to begin storing grain in preparation for the lean years. Impressed, Pharaoh made Joseph his overseer of all Egypt, so grain was stored over the good years and carefully meted out when the drought came.

Meanwhile, in nearby Canaan Jacob and sons were facing starvation and caught wind of grain in Egypt. So Jacob sent his sons to buy grain and whom do they meet but their brother Joseph, only they do not recognize this Egyptian as their brother. You would think we are ready for today's season finale, but for three more chapters of Genesis Joseph keeps his identity secret, and toys with his brothers, asking about their family and telling them that they may have grain if they return with the missing brother (who is Benjamin, Joseph's full blood brother).

Which now brings us to today's passage. As we tune in this week, we wonder: Will Joseph berate his brothers for what they did to him? Will he throw them in prison and let them rot for several years like he did? Will he order them to the gallows to be hanged? Then, to our consternation, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers with tearful emotion. They are petrified with fear to learn that the upstart they almost killed - the one they sold over 20 years ago - is now governor of Egypt, overseeing the food supply! But Joseph repeatedly reassures them that God had sent him to Egypt to preserve life. Later Joseph says, "Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good."

In this remarkable scene, the season finale, Joseph becomes a theologian of his own life. He reinterprets his life story, finding in the whole bitter mess a glimpse of God's hand at work.ⁱ Somehow Joseph never lost a sense of God's presence in his life – God delivered him from the pit into which his brothers threw him, from an immoral seductress, and from a rat infested jail cell. Though torn from his father and country, sold into slavery, thrown into prison unjustly, Joseph ends up experiencing a princely life in Egypt. It's quite a reversal story, but the real turn occurs when Joseph embraces his brothers. Indeed, Joseph forgave his brothers out of a sense of God's providence. Joseph ultimately perceived a divine plan in the personal wrongs he had suffered.ⁱⁱ Having continually experienced God as his Life - Preserver, Joseph discerned how God was using him to preserve life – not just the lives of the Egyptians, but also the lives of his own people, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

What about us? Do we see God at work in the drama of our lives and our world? People often seem quick to credit God with cancer, hurricanes and other natural disasters, children born handicapped, or any other tragic occurrence. However, I do not believe God infects our lives with disease, nor directs terrorists to fly planes into buildings, nor dictates tornadoes and deadly weather patterns. Instead, I am convinced that there is no evil in this world which God cannot redeem, repair, or heal.

The Joseph story shows how God works even through our sins, sufferings and failures in redemptive ways. Scripture testifies to a God who desires shalom – healing, wholeness, justice and peace for all creation. And yet in the weighty words of author Scott Peck, "Life is difficult."ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, life inevitably involves suffering, loss, heartache, pain, sin, tragedy and alienation. Nevertheless, people of faith hold firmly to the belief that God can take any piece of

our life – however horrid and dreadful – and weave something redemptive and healing. As St. Augustine wrote, “God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to allow no evil to exist.” We do not understand the reason for evil and suffering, but as Christians we cling to the cross which proves that nothing, not sin, not suffering, and not even death can separate us from God. On Calvary, did God not take the worst that humans can do to one another and use it to reveal the unconquerable power of Love and the unquenchable light of resurrection?

How do we discern God in our own lives? Like Joseph, we usually see God’s hand in the rearview mirror, years later. A few months ago a prospective member asked me, “What personal experiences have convinced you of the presence of God?” and I immediately thought of the time when I heard God speak these words of Joseph to me, at a low point in my own life. In my early thirties I was forced out of my first pastoral position by a colleague whom I’ll call Walter. My faith in the Church and especially in myself, was severely shaken and I almost left ministry altogether. Three years later I was wiping off our family breakfast table one morning when I heard a voice inside me, but *not* me, say clearly, “Walter meant it to you as evil, but I meant it for good.” In that moment I suddenly understood that while I had suffered significant pain, rejection, and loss of confidence in the termination of my job, God had used my forced departure to deliver me from an untenable situation.

Of course, my angst was miniscule compared to Joseph’s, but Louis Zamperini’s ordeal neared Biblical proportions. The current bestseller *Unbroken* recounts Zamperini’s trials as an Olympic runner whose athletic career was cut short by WWII. Zamperini enlisted in the Army Air Corps and was trained as a bombardier. In April, 1943, while on a search and rescue mission Zamperini’s B-24 went down in the Pacific. For 47 days Louis and the pilot Phil survived thirst and starvation, scorching sun, unrelenting shark attacks, assaults by enemy aircraft and even a typhoon on a foundering life raft, only to wash ashore on a Japanese occupied island and be captured as prisoners of war. Anyone who has read this book can attest that Zamperini’s saga only got grimmer and grimmer – as he endured two more years of starvation, deprivation, severe mental and physical torture, grueling labor, and sadistic cruelty at the hands of a Japanese officer they called the Bird. While in captivity Zamperini discovered that he had been declared dead by the US military, and worried about the trauma this caused his family. Miraculously, Louie’s camp escaped mass execution as the war ended, and the news of his survival became a sensational story. Celebrated as a hero and pursued on the speaker’s circuit, Zamperini was plagued by nightmares of his torture and imprisonment, and soon began drinking heavily and stirring up fights. On the brink of divorce, and well on the way to drinking himself to death, Louis reluctantly attended a Billy Graham crusade with his wife. As Graham began to pray, Zamperini quickly rose to exit. Then something came over him, and he remembered how he had prayed incessantly on the life raft and in the POW camps, for God to let him live. Suddenly everything clicked for Louie, and he recognized God’s abiding presence throughout his ordeal. The blinders fell from his eyes and he could see God’s providential hand at work in his life. Moreover, he could hear Rev. Graham saying, “Jesus said, ‘If you have problems in life, cast all your cares on me, for I care for you.’”^{iv} Louie acknowledged Christ as his Savior that night, and felt an inner peace that dissolved his toxic hatred of the Japanese and his deep desire for revenge.

Can we see God at work in our lives? We need to be cautious, carefully weighing assumptions, and constantly open to the wisdom and light of the Spirit. Perhaps tracing God’s

hand is something that one can claim for oneself but should never presume for another. As baptized believers we are ever learning to be theologians of our own lives – seeking to embrace the life God intends for us; and watching for evidence of God’s guiding hand sustaining us throughout our days, delivering us from doubt to faith, from despair to hope, and from death to eternal life.

ⁱ Kathleen O’Connor, p. 8 “The Best Kept Secret” 2011 Baccalaureate Sermon reprinted in *Vantage*, Summer 2011.

ⁱⁱ Dan Clendenin, Ph.D., “The Dreams of Joseph” JourneyforJesus.net for August 7, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, opening words of Chapter One.

^{iv} Louis Zamperini, *Devil at My Heels*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003.) p. 241.