

“God Meant It for Good”
Narrative Lectionary
September 23, 2018

Last week, God promised Abraham, in Genesis chapter 12, a land, and a people, and a blessing. And a lot has happened since the call of Abraham. Abraham and Sarah finally have a son named Isaac. Isaac and Rebekah have twin boys, Jacob and Esau. Maybe you remember that Jacob is a swindler who steals his older brother's birthright and the family blessing. So the promise of land and a people and a blessing now goes through Jacob.

Jacob has twelve sons and the eleventh is Joseph. His brothers don't like him, and honestly, they have good reason. He is his dad's favorite. One day his dad takes him down to Brooks Brothers and buys him the fanciest and most expensive suit he can find. In those days it was a coat of many colors.

So they don't like him because he is their dad's favorite son. And then he is a dreamer. He has this dream one night that his brothers would one day bow down to him, and then he tells them about it at the breakfast table. Not a good way to make points with your brothers.

One day they get tired of all this and they throw him down a well. They kill a goat, cover his wonderful suit coat with blood, show it to their father, and say, Sorry, Dad. We can't even find his body. Meanwhile he gets sold to traveling salesmen who take him down to Egypt and unload him on an Egyptian Army man named Potiphar. And that's the part of the story we have in our reading today.

The text says that at Potiphar's house, things went well for Joseph. “The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man...His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands...From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and in field.”

Four times in this story, it is clear that the Lord is with Joseph and he is successful, meaning in a material way. You need to know that within portions of the Hebrew Bible there is a theology of prosperity. The theology says that if you do the right thing in God's eyes, God will bless you. This was the theology that was behind the Law of Moses.

The Israelites were told in Deuteronomy, “If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God: blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.”

And conversely, if they didn’t follow God’s laws, then they would be cursed. They would not be blessed materially. There are preachers who have turned this into the prosperity gospel. God wants you to be healthy and wealthy, and if you are not, you’re not following God’s ways.

The problem with this is Jesus isn’t on board. Jesus constantly warns about the dangers of riches. Jesus says you can’t serve God and material goods. He says don’t worry about having enough; God will take care of you. But he also says seek first the kingdom of God. (Matthew 6).

So we can’t take the theology of prosperity in this story and lay it on our lives. God in this story is helping Joseph to succeed. That is a part of God’s purposes here. But our relationship with God is not about creating wealth for us.

Joseph looks like a model for GQ, and Potiphar’s wife goes after him. Joseph says no to temptation, although she tries to seduce him day after day. She is a married woman. He will not take part in this. But one day as he tries to escape her, she holds onto his coat, and when hubby gets home that night, she shows him the garment, and says, He tried to have his way with me, and he left this behind.

Potiphar throws Joseph in jail. But because he’s got a gift of being able to interpret dreams, he ends up deciphering the dreams of a couple of the pharaoh’s servants who’ve gotten in trouble and are in prison with him. When pharaoh has a dream, somebody says, There’s a guy in prison who can interpret that for you.

Joseph tells the pharaoh about his dream, which is a prediction of seven years of great crops and then seven years of famine. Joseph gives some agricultural advice to the pharaoh, and says, You gotta save during the first seven, so you’ll have

something to eat for the second seven. And the pharaoh is so taken with Joseph, that he makes him Secretary of Agriculture. During the famine, Joseph's brothers come down to Egypt looking for food. And they meet their brother, but they don't know it's him because of the Egyptian haircut and clothes. And Joseph plays with them. He is so grateful to see his family that at times he has to excuse himself and go into the backroom and weep.

When he finally tells them who he is, they are incredibly afraid that he will kill them for what they did to him. And Joseph says: Don't be angry with yourselves because you sold me here. God sent me before you to preserve life. It wasn't you who sent me here to Egypt in the first place, it was God. (Gen. 45:5, 8)

At the end of the story, the father Jacob dies. And now that their dad is dead, the brothers are afraid that Joseph still bears a grudge against them, and now he'll get revenge. So here's what they do, and they are very manipulative. They come to Joseph and say, Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." (Gen.50:16-17)

Did their father really say this? Or are the brothers making it up? And if they are making it up, their repentance doesn't seem very genuine, does it? In fact, they don't even say they are sorry for what they did. We learn something about forgiveness from this story: We might not always hear the words we want to hear from somebody. We might never hear the apology we'd like. Sometimes we need to forgive even though someone may not be repentant. The forgiveness is work *we* do. It sets *us* free from holding the grudge forever. It doesn't mean there aren't consequences for the other person's actions. But it does mean that I won't live with anger and resentment in my heart forever.

Do you notice how the brothers describe themselves? Look how sin tears people apart. "Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." They don't even call themselves his brothers anymore. They are "servants of the God of your father." They feel very removed from their brother Joseph.

Joseph begins to weep, which is a sign of his deep connection to this family, even after what they did. They are now really afraid that his emotions will get the best of him, and he'll want revenge, and so they fall at his feet and say, We are here as your slaves. And then Joseph says this: "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in

order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” Joseph says, It’s not my place to judge or to punish you. That’s God’s job! And the Hebrew here for *intended*, God intended it for good, comes from a Hebrew word meaning to weave. God was *weaving this together for good*. Joseph said, It looked like this, but God was doing this with it.

It’s like one of those pictures where you can see it a couple different ways...do you see two faces or do you see a chalice? Joseph said, You brothers were doing this, but God the weaver was making this design out of it. God was rescuing the Jewish people by bringing them to Egypt. This is part of God’s purpose. Joseph isn’t letting his brothers off the hook; what they did was wrong. But Joseph knows that God took it and used it for a greater good.

Let me share one other Hebrew word here that tells us something. When the brothers ask for forgiveness from Joseph, they are literally saying, Will you remove a heavy burden from us? The Hebrew word for forgive means to take off or to lift up, as if Joseph is removing heavy chains from them by forgiving them. That’s what forgiveness does. When we forgive somebody, it removes the chains from them and from us. We feel a lightness of spirit, and so do they. We get to move ahead without carrying that heavy grudge anymore.

By the way, Joseph never says, I forgive you. But he treats them as if he has forgiven them. He is not carrying a grudge. He says, Don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your little ones.

We just observed the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Joseph says, You brothers meant what you did for evil, but God meant it for good. I don’t believe the terrorist attacks happened in order that we could learn a lesson. God did not want those attacks to happen. But I do believe that God has taken that evil and found ways to create good. Some years ago I heard the story of the first person who died in the attacks, and his job in life was to help people get right with God. And it made me think that forgiveness is one of the works that helps people get right with God, and with each other.

Father Mychal Judge was a chaplain for the New York City Fire Department. Father Myke arrived at the World Trade Center shortly after the first plane hit. And as firefighters and other rescue personnel ran into the North Tower, he went with them. When the South Tower collapsed, he was killed by falling debris that hit the North Tower.

This is a picture that came out the next day. Bill Cosgrove, a New York cop, found Father Myke's body in the stairwell, and he and a group of firefighters carried him out. Here's what Officer Cosgrove says about that morning: "It's my firm belief that the only reason I'm here today is because of him. I know it sounds weird, but you see everybody in that picture was saved. Had he not been there, I would have been trying to look for other people, and when that north tower fell, I would have been right in the middle of it just like the rest of the firemen were and some of my cops.....

Father Michael Duffy was the preacher at Father Myke's funeral. Listen to what he said about the life of Father Myke: "(Father Myke) loved to bless people, and I mean physically, even when they didn't ask. A little old lady would come up to him and he'd put out his big thick Irish hands and press on her head until I thought the poor woman would be crushed.....

"Everybody thought that Michael Judge was their best friend. He'd remember the significant things in their life and he'd write them a little note, just one or two lines, and they'd write him back, so he had a big black satchel filled with letters to answer.

"He would say to me once in awhile, Michael Duffy? (he always called me by my full name)...Michael Duffy, you know what I need? And I would get excited because it was kind of hard to buy him a present or anything. So I said, No, what? You know what I really need? No, what, Myke? Absolutely nothing. I don't need a thing in the world. I'm the happiest man on the face of the earth. Why am I so blessed? I don't deserve it.

"Mychal Judge's body was the first one released from Ground Zero. His death certificate had the number "1" on the top. Of the thousands of people who perished in that terrible holocaust, why was Mychal Judge Number 1? And I think I know the reason. Mychal Judge's purpose in life was to bring firemen to the point of death so they'd be ready to meet their Maker. Mychal Judge could not have ministered to them all; it was physically impossible in this life. In the next few weeks we're going to hear name after name of people who are going to be brought out of the rubble, and Mychal Judge is going to be on the other side of death to greet them instead of send them there.

And Father Michael Duffy concludes, "And so this morning, we come to bury Mychal Judge's body, but not his spirit, we come to bury his voice, but not his

message, we come to bury his hands, but not his good work, we come to bury his heart, but not his love. Never his love.” My guess is that Father Myke didn’t hold grudges. Father Myke didn’t have room in his heart. Jesus tells us how important the work of forgiveness is. On the cross, he forgave his enemies. He forgave the people who put him up there. Forgiveness is one of those works we do that helps us keep a clean slate.

It’s really only a work God can do. Forgiving somebody from the heart, like Joseph did, is God’s work. We can do some groundwork. We can acknowledge the hurt, and write a letter if we need to, and hold a conversation. But not to retaliate? That’s the strength of God’s Spirit in us. Part of that is seeing that God can take all things and work them together for good. Is that possible? Remember the story of Joseph. Amen.