

God Intended It for Good

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Text: Genesis 37:3-8,17b-22,26-34,50:15-21

Some time after my wedding, my parents told me something that the minister who married us had said to them and my in-laws at the reception. She said, "What a great celebration this is! And everyone's so well behaved!" This caused our parents some confusion, and one of them asked what she meant. "I mean there's no fighting, no hostility on display. It's wonderful!" "We don't understand," they said. "Why would anyone spoil a special occasion like this? Is that typical?" And she said, yes, yes it was very normal to see families in conflict at a wedding, and all manner of bad behavior.

We later found out, of course, that we had seated two members of one of our families together who weren't on speaking terms, which explained why we had such a tough time getting one of them to RSVP. But it's true, they managed to be civil to each other during the celebration. And it's not as though they were alone: there were any number of other disappointments and hurts and resentments lurking below the surface. I love my family, and I'm so pleased that our love for each other means we can enjoy each other's company and celebrate together without fighting. That's an amazing blessing that not everyone has. But our relationships, like all human relationships, like those in your family probably, are messy.

Families are messy. Our families are the people who are closest to us—and by that I don't mean just the people we share DNA with, but anyone we live with or share life experiences with. Sometimes our families include close friends we grew up with and stayed together into adulthood. Sometimes a close-knit neighborhood or town or a church can function like a family for us. These are the people who get to see us not only at our polished best, but when we're stressed out, vulnerable, or in pain. And because we share history with our families, and because we know they know us not as we want to be known, but much closer to who we really are, they're really able to push our buttons. An insult from a stranger on the street you can shrug off. What do they know anyway? The same word coming from someone in your family? That cuts right to the heart. And sometimes it happens that you don't even know why you treat members of your family the way you do. Have you ever been with family for Christmas or a reunion, and all of a sudden you get into it with your brothers and sisters and parents, and it's like you're five or ten or fifteen years old again? Those grooves, those wagon ruts for the way we act or speak have been laid down over many years, and sometimes they even go back generations. There are good things that come with this reality of families, and there are not-so-good things. We need close relationships—we need spaces where we can be ourselves and turn for care and comfort. Our families are necessary for making us the people we are, and yet they're messy and mysterious and confounding all at the same time.

The book of Genesis is a gift to people like us who live in the middle of messy families. Most of this book of scripture is the story of one family, the family of Abraham, whom we talked about last week. And you might think that because Abraham's family

is a special people blessed by God that they might float above the messiness—the secrets, the betrayals, the resentments—that other families live with. But that turns out not to be true.

Joseph's brothers hate him, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why. Their father Jacob, we're told, loves Joseph, the youngest son, more than all his other children. He plays favorites, and he shows his favoritism by giving Joseph a lavish gift, a long coat that would have taken countless hours of labor to produce. Now, when it comes to parents playing favorites, Jacob is only reproducing the same pattern that existed in his own family as he was growing up, where his father Isaac favored his brother Esau, while Jacob was the favorite of his mother Rebecca. It didn't work out well there either—but that's another story. In any case, this poisonous parent-child relationship gets passed on to the next generation, as Jacob's favoritism produces jealousy and hatred among his sons.

Then, because Joseph is an arrogant, clueless teenager, he starts telling his older brothers about dreams he's having, dreams that put Joseph at the center of their family, with everyone bowing down to him. The anger and resentment starts to build, like steam pressure in an overheated boiler. It's about to explode, and it finally does when Jacob, the father, sends Joseph alone to check on his brothers, who are out grazing the family flocks:

So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" — that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

I'm not sure what Reuben's plan is. Maybe he's hoping to play himself off against his brothers so that he can be the hero and win his father's favor. In any case, the plan backfires when Reuben is away and Judah, another brother, takes charge:

Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." His brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?"

Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days.

I just want you to stop for a minute and notice the cruel irony and hostility of this

gesture. The coat, the symbol of Jacob loving Joseph more than the others, the focus of all that anger and jealousy, is what the brothers choose to hand back to their father, empty and bloody, letting him draw his own conclusions. "What do you think, dad?" they ask. "Is this *your son's* robe?"—notice they say "*your son*," not "*our brother*"—"So, dad—what do you think happened to him?"

For the sake of time we had to skip a lot of what comes next. In Egypt Joseph is a slave but eventually becomes a servant to pharaoh, where he's so effective and trustworthy as a manager that pharaoh essentially makes him second in command of the whole kingdom. When a famine strikes, Egypt has plenty of spare grain, thanks to Joseph, and his brothers come looking for help. One word from Joseph and he could have had his revenge, but instead he gives them grain, and the whole family comes to live in Egypt. Joseph's father Jacob is reunited with the son he thought was dead before dying himself of old age.

The final episode from this story comes right at the end of the book, after Jacob has died. The older brothers get scared. Maybe Joseph was only holding off on his revenge for the sake of their father. Maybe their lives are in danger.

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "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." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "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." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

I love this: essentially they shuffle up to Joseph and say, "Uh, dad's dying wish was that you should forgive us. How about it?" We skipped a lot of the story, but take my word for it—nowhere did Jacob ever say this. The brothers are more vulnerable now, and they're desperate, but they're still scheming, aren't they? Joseph is a smart guy, and he knows what's going on, but he doesn't get angry. He brings their conflict to an end, reassuring his brothers and speaking kindly to them.

But he also says something here that's worth lingering over. It's the reason this story is in the Bible in the first place. Joseph says, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." Looking at the situation purely logically, Joseph can see that because his brothers sold him into slavery, he was in a position to rescue his family from the famine. But Joseph isn't just saying to his brothers, "Oh well, it worked out for the best." He's saying something stronger. He's saying that *God* is at work in this story that involves jealousy and betrayal and wrongdoing: "God intended it for good." What does this mean?

I don't think it means Joseph getting thrown in the pit and sold as a slave, and his father thinking he was dead, was part of God's grand master plan. God is good, and God doesn't intend evil. God didn't plant jealousy in the brothers' hearts. God didn't make them plot against him. God is not the "author of sin," as one of our Presbyterian confessions puts it.¹ The scriptures tell us that "God is light and in him there is no

1 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter III.

darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). God is not an ends-justify-the-means kind of God. God is not a I'm-doing-this-to-you-for-your-own-good kind of God. God did not plan hurt and suffering and broken relationships for Joseph and his family.

So what does Joseph mean when he says, "God intended it for good"? I picture it like a little kid pushing a toy sailboat into a park fountain. This little boy or girl gives the boat a shove in a certain direction, aiming for a point on the other side. But maybe the current from the fountain or the wind or something else pushes it in a different direction. It's like that when we make choices, good or bad. Those choices are aimed at some purpose, whether we understand what that purpose is or not. We launch the boat when we stand up for someone who's being pushed around or help someone in need. We also launch the boat when we let down our friends or say something we regret. In one moment, in a flash, we've pushed the boat in a certain direction, and now it's out of our control. What Joseph is saying is that the boat his brothers launched toward an evil purpose, with the intent of harming him, was directed by God so that it landed somewhere else, so that their actions wound up benefiting and protecting their whole family. And God does this all with the intention of keeping God's own promise to Abraham—your descendants will be a great nation, God promised. And so try as they might to dominate and hurt each other, they can't thwart God's promise. Would it have been better for Jacob to be fair and evenhanded in showing affection for his sons? Of course. Would it have been better for Joseph and his brothers to rise above petty rivalries and work out God's amazing promise to them as a united family? Of course. But their brokenness can't break God, and it can't break God's promise.

There's a reason we gather to worship God under the cross. Remember, in the time of Jesus, nobody saw the cross and felt hopeful or comforted. It was a tool of torture and execution, and it was used that way by those who wanted to silence Jesus, to put an end to his healing and feeding and teaching, and his upending of the existing powers and authorities. The cross was intended for evil, but God pushed that boat in a new direction. God intended it for good. God raised Jesus from the dead. So the cross doesn't frighten anymore. It's lost its power. That's why Jesus can command us to love our enemies—after what God did with the cross. There's nothing they can do to us that can thwart God's promise—"You are my children, and I love you forever. You will live abundantly."

In the messiness of our families, in the messiness of our lives, we see so many different intentions, some of them evil, some of them good, some of them petty and insignificant, some of the bold and daring. If it were up to us to launch the boat and get it to the right place, we'd never make it. But it's not up to us. God uses all the stuff we do—the good and the bad—and all the stuff that happens to us—the joys and the hurts—to work God's own purpose out.

May the God who called light out of darkness shape your life. May God take all your choices, good or bad, and all the things that are done to you or for you, and direct them, and may you see, may you believe that whatever you might do, whatever might happen to you, nothing can separate you from God's love in Jesus Christ. Nothing. Amen.