

The Cry Heard in all Egypt

Hespeler, August 20, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

[Genesis 45:1-15](#), Psalm 133, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matthew 15:21-28

Joseph's story in the Book of Genesis stands out as an amazing piece of ancient literature. The story is told in eight chapters and is the longest continual narrative in the Old Testament.

In the course of this story, terrible things happen to Joseph one after the other. His brothers, out of jealousy and spite and as a result of Joseph tattling on them for their sloppy work, make a plot to capture and kill him. They throw him in a pit. They then think better of it, decide to sell him into slavery for profit and just tell his father that he is dead.

Joseph lands in Egypt as a slave. There, despite excellent work done for his master, he is falsely accused and ends up in prison. As some of his fellow prisoners are executed, he seems to be on death row.

Horrible Experiences

And I think it is very important that we do not just breeze over that part of the story. These are simply horrible experiences for anybody to live through. Not only does Joseph suffer greatly but, and this point is stressed again and again, he suffers unjustly. He did absolutely nothing to deserve any of it.

The only negative thing that you can say about Joseph throughout this story is that he was a little bit boastful and insufferable with his brothers. He spoke to them about the dreams that he had that seemed to indicate that he would end up greater and more powerful than any of them. That's it.

And sure, that would have created some friction in the family, but there are so many better ways of dealing with that than through attempted murder and kidnapping! Like can't we maybe talk things out?

Before the Happy Ending

We didn't read anything about the trials and tribulations of Joseph this morning, but I think it is very important that we do not lose sight of them as we read the ending of the story today. Because it is very much an "all's well that ends well," and "happily ever after" ending. And I like a good Hollywood ending as much as the next person, but I also need to acknowledge that this one is not without its problems.

At this point in the story, Joseph has definitely seen much improvement in his situation. By being in the right place at the right time, he has become a ruler in his own right. He is the Grand Vizier – sort of like a Prime Minister under the all-powerful Pharaoh.

And this is all very fortunate for his family because a terrible famine has struck the land of Canaan. People there and everywhere are starving because nothing is growing. But there is food in Egypt, and Joseph is in charge of its distribution. He is now in a position to save his entire family.

Joseph's Realization

And that is exactly what Joseph himself says in our reading this morning. He says it like he is just realizing it himself for the first time as he explains it to his brothers. **"God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors,"** He declares in wonder. **"So it was not you**



who sent me here but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt!”

And let’s just pause here for a moment and celebrate what this is saying. There are indeed many people who have suffered unjustly in this world. I would even go so far as to suggest that it is a common human experience – that everyone has experienced at least some degree of unjust suffering.

Meaning in Suffering?

That is not to suggest, of course, that all such suffering is equivalent. A people suffering genocide or enslavement is not the same thing as an employee being unfairly passed over for a promotion. An abused woman is not the same thing as a person cheated in a transaction. Every experience is absolutely unique and brings its own particular suffering, but there is something that connects us all in the great tide of human suffering.

This story of Joseph holds out an enticing possibility to each one of us in the midst of the suffering of this world. Perhaps there is meaning in my suffering. Perhaps there is a purpose. Maybe, just maybe, I had to go through all of that because God had a plan to bring about something good. That seems to be exactly what Joseph is saying to his brothers.

Many Experience this

And I do believe that this is not an uncommon human realization. Many of us, when we have gone through a rough patch in life, have been able to look back on that difficult time afterwards and have seen how the lessons we learned or the decisions we made as a result set us up for success afterwards or put us in a position where we were able to do something really good.

It is wonderful when that happens. And we, like Joseph, might well want to jump to the conclusion that such a happy outcome means that all the bad things that happened were part of a divine plan.

And I will definitely agree that there is a great truth in what Joseph realizes and in what we may retroactively realize looking back at our own suffering. It is true that God has a way of working through even the worst events of our lives in order to bring about some good. That is an amazingly comforting truth.

Keeps People Going

Sometimes just holding onto the possibility that God might have a secret plan to bring good, even if you have no clue what it could be, is all that keeps people going through the darkest times. And sometimes that belief has also prompted people to use their pain to create a better world by mounting campaigns or changing policies for the better. Just believing it has allowed people to make it true by the sheer force of their own will.

But I also know from personal experience and from experience in counseling others that there is something in this that can absolutely mess us up and I do not want to lose sight of it.

Struggling with Why

Have you ever encountered someone who has lived through a horrible personal episode – the loss of a loved one, the diagnosis of a dreaded illness, the aftermath of a terrible accident – and they really struggle afterwards with that terrible question why? “Why did this have to happen to me or to this person that I care for. What is the purpose in it?”

People ask that why question because of what seems to be promised in this story of Joseph – that God only puts you through hard times because there is a plan to bring about something better.

And sometimes that only creates more pain for people. It creates pain because the answer to that why question is not forthcoming. And so, people engage in a fruitless and frustrating search for that sense of purpose.

Disturbing Conclusions

In desperation they might settle on some sense of purpose that is deeply disturbing like, for example, when grieving parents are told that their beautiful infant died because they were too good for this world and so God took them because God wanted them.

Explanations like that only create an image of a cruel, capricious and selfish God who cares nothing for the very real pain that those parents are going through! That is a horrible explanation! But sometimes people are so desperate for a purpose that they will embrace such deeply flawed explanations.

So, let me be very clear about one thing. God doesn't want you to suffer. Nor does God make plans that include or depend on your suffering. Above all, I know that God takes no comfort or joy from your suffering. I know that because God's relationship to suffering is very clear in the Bible.

The Depth of Joseph's Grief

There is an amazing description of Joseph's grief in this story. It says that, once Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he wept. It seems that all of the grief and pain and sorrow that he had bottled up suddenly came out of him all at once – an incredible release of years of tension and tears. And so, this was no ordinary weeping, but an extraordinary display.

This is how Genesis describes his weeping. **“And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.”** Now, does that sound realistic to you – that Joseph or anyone could actually weep that loudly? I mean we are not just talking about a cry being heard by his next-door neighbours. The pharaoh didn't just have a house, after all, he had a palace complex. Can the sound of weeping really travel so far?

Hyperbole

This is an obviously and intentionally hyperbolic description. It is kind of like the trope you see in comics sometimes where the comic character is hurt and we hear them cry out, and then the scene pulls back, and you see their scream echoing over the whole city. Then it pulls back even more, and you hear it throughout the continent, and then the whole world and then from a small corner of the Milky Way galaxy. It is an illustration of an extreme reaction.

But I do not think that it is just a comic trope that the author is using here. He trying to illustrate to us just how extreme Joseph's feelings are at this moment. It is as if everything that he has suffered over years of mistreatment is all concentrated and released into this one powerful cry.

This is certainly a warning that we should never take anyone's suffering lightly and that, even if it does lead to a positive outcome that might never have been anticipated, that hardly makes the suffering just or worthwhile. Suffering is just suffering, and it is a part of the human condition. The author is inviting us all to respond to those who have suffered with deep empathy and love and support.

God's Response

But he is also saying something much more important. He is saying something about God's response. For, if the cry of Joseph reverberated in the household of Pharaoh, how much more was it heard in the halls of our heavenly father? He is reminding us that God's first response to all of our pain and suffering is empathy. God feels our sorrow deeply.

That is, of course, what the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is all about. The reason why Jesus had to come into this world, the reason why Jesus had to be completely human and yet, in a way that defies all logic, entirely divine, is so that God might know our suffering. Jesus on the cross is a picture of God entering into the reality of human suffering.

That is how I know that God's first and primary response to whatever you have suffered is deep, deep empathy. God weeps when you weep. God feels your pain deeply. That is what Jesus shows us.

That is how I know that God never plans or intends to put you through terrible suffering. Yes, God can and does indeed bring good things out of terrible episodes in your life, but that is simply a testimony to the greatness of God.

Florida Controversy

There was something in the news earlier this summer that I think is a good illustration of the principle I'm trying to state here. Do you remember all of the controversy that hit the news when the state of Florida published its curriculum on history and, as part of its coverage of the history of the institution of slavery, made a point of including the notion that enslaved peoples learned some skills as slaves that they were able to use to their own benefit when they were freed sometime in the future.

Now, I hope I don't need to say all of the problems with a statement like that. A lot of it has already been said. It is rather ridiculous in a number of ways. After all, if any master permitted any slave to learn a skill, they did so in absolutely self-interested ways. They were only looking for how that skill might be used to enrich themselves. That's what slavery is; it is using another person and any skills they might have to enrich only yourself.

And if, in spite of that intention and all of the inhumanity of the system, somebody survived and was actually able to build a future for themselves, that only reflects well on them and in no way on the institution of slavery.

Doesn't Make it Okay

It is the same thing in the Joseph story. If Joseph was able to survive and save his family, that in no way makes what happened to him okay. It certainly doesn't mean that God wanted and endorsed what Joseph went through. It only reflects well on Joseph and his character, and it reflects on a God who is able to perform the miracle of bringing something good out of the worst of evil.

But never forget that the cry of Joseph's heart was heard and felt by God. Let us also be like God in practicing deep empathy for all who suffer.