

Life Beyond Dothan
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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2-24-2019
Genesis 45:3-11, 15

They'd finally done it. Ten brothers had disposed of an eleventh, the object of their father's affection. Perhaps he wasn't malicious, but this dreamer was spoiled, and his teenage arrogance led him to reveal visions – visions about how his brothers (and even his parents!) would bow down at his feet. And on that particular afternoon, Joseph's father had sent his favorite son to Dothan. He told Joseph to bring a progress report regarding his older brothers' labors in the fields, and with the herds. And when they saw him from afar, and wearing that fancy robe their father had given him, their blood ran hot. They stripped him; threw him in a pit; even considered killing him, before eventually deciding to sell him to slave-traders. They ripped his coat, doused it with animal blood, and told his father he'd been killed by a wild beast. And then the brothers left Dothan, and Joseph left it, too. Ten brothers went back home to their old lives. And Joseph went to Egypt. But once you've been to Dothan, it's hard to leave.

Unlike Poe's narrator, the brothers didn't have a corpse to hide beneath the planks, but they still heard the beating of a tell-tale heart. And decades after the event, they wondered aloud if their misfortune was the result of their regrettable actions.

Joseph, it seems, had plenty of time to ponder Dothan, too. He endured slavery, servitude, and even prison. And yet through it all, he met his challenges with a sense of dignity, a resilient faith, a devotion to God, and genuine concern for his neighbors. He was thrust into so many situations where he should have failed, should have been discouraged, should have been broken. And yet he was not only resilient, he was also remarkably successful. The Count of Monte Cristo would envy his fortune.

For the whole of the Joseph novella, we're led to believe that there will be a predictable resolution for the events of Dothan: the brothers will pay their penance when Joseph finally exacts his revenge.

The moment arrives. Joseph has risen to become the second most powerful man in Egypt. He controls vast grain supplies in the midst of a famine. His brothers on the other hand, have fled their homeland to seek grain for their very survival. They walk into a room to beg for assistance from the local authority, and they are completely unaware that their source of assistance is the very person they have wronged.

And what does Joseph do? He says, "I'm your brother. And it's okay. I forgive you. I don't want to stay in Dothan anymore. And I don't want you to be trapped there anymore either. So let's be brothers again."

And he tells them that he wants to see his father. He wants to know if he's alive. There is an authentic love.

And he invites his brothers to come and live with him in Egypt, and not only live there, but live with their herds among the best lands.

They say that Joseph's is a story of two things: forgiveness and God's providence.

I would most certainly agree with the concept of forgiveness displayed in this story. I think the story tells us that the ways we hurt one another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, force us to stay in

places of pain and trauma. Whether we're tossed into the pit at Dothan, or we do the tossing ourselves, the wounds fester if left untreated.

Joseph doesn't endorse the actions his brothers took against him. And his forgiveness doesn't offer a meaningless pardon. So don't read this story as license to cast away your siblings without consequence, and with sure certainty of reconciliation. Joseph knows the pain and alienation his brothers now feel, because he's experienced it himself. And he sees their true remorse. And he makes the decision to believe that the transforming power of forgiveness will offer much more benefit to his life, and to the lives of his brothers than will the temporary satisfaction of self-righteousness and revenge. Joseph chooses to be one who heals and restores rather than one who breaks and ends. Joseph chooses to believe that there is life beyond Dothan.

And then there's this issue of Providence. And I'll admit this bit makes me uncomfortable. Joseph, or at least the writer who speaks for him, says that all these things happened because of God. God sent Joseph on this path, even the being-thrown-into-a-pit part, and the slavery part, because it was all wrapped up in the larger plan to save his family.

This, of course, is the kind of idea of Providence that is bound up in the image of a God who is a clock-maker, or a grand architect, intricately devising plans for the universe. But even in the vacuum of a short novella, this theology is troubling.

The God we profess to know is good, and thoughtful, and full of grace. That doesn't really square with a force that's twisted enough to put together a ruse in which assault, slavery, imprisonment, starvation, etc. are all essential ingredients in the recipe for grace. It also ignores the dilemma created by a God who can act with such intricacy and precision, and yet chooses not to.

I wonder, are famines providential? Does God want us to be hungry, die even, in order to appreciate sustenance? I wonder, is violence providential? Were the atrocities of Auschwitz, or Jim Crow, or more recently in Syria necessary to both remind us of and work for the need to ensure the dignity, equality, and humane treatment of all people? Are car accidents, or the avoidance of them providential? And I wonder, have the last 50 years of theological conferences – this week's United Methodist Conference is only the latest in a long line of them --- have all these conferences where the privileged debate their views about whether to include or exclude the marginalized, have these been providential? Did we need to exclude women, and gay persons, and persons of color all this time so we could just now realize their value?!? And they theirs?

Just in case you don't hear me asking these as rhetorical questions, my answer would be no. No, I do not think that any of this is Providence. I don't think that's how God works. Not in the story of Joseph, not in the story of the Christ, and most certainly not in each of our lives. I don't think God is out to get us, nor do I think God wants to teach us with tough love.

I suppose I prefer the lesser known, less specific definition of Providence. It's not one that focuses so much on God's omnipotence and omniscience. Instead, it simply considers God to be providential, because God is a source that provides protective or spiritual care. In other words, God stewards creation.

Financial stewards don't eliminate disaster, but they do help you respond to it. Physicians don't create health issues, but they do act as stewards who offer guidance and support to meet issues brought on by

illness. Parents, friends, and other supporting relationships can't prevent life – the good and the bad – from happening to us, but they can be stewards who help to prepare us to meet its ups and downs.

I believe the same is true of God. I don't think God believed it would be a neat party trick to torment Joseph, and for that matter his brothers, in order to solve the issue of famine. I think, like you and me, God wept when Joseph hurt, and I think God wept that Joseph's brothers had to resort to violence and trickery in an attempt to mask their pain. And I think, God, like you and me are often prone to do, wished that He or She were omnipotent enough to prevent the frailty and carelessness that humanity can sometimes bring upon the world.

I do not believe that God is omnipotent and omniscient in such matters. But I do believe the power of God was present in this story, as was God's Providence. Something – let's call it a source, or an energy, or a spark, or a spirit – something allowed Joseph to meet each day with grace, and love, and generosity, and, perseverance, and courage. I believe that something had God's hand in it. And even in the midst of those who betrayed him, captured him, enslaved him, imprisoned him, schemed against him, marginalized him, Joseph, from Dothan forward, lived as if God was present, and as if the forces of good would one day work to transform a broken present into a hopeful future. I see that same providential "something" in the story of the Exodus, in the story of Jesus, in the story of Paul, in the story of each of you. God's Providence is the inbreaking of God's goodness into our world, even when it feels like the world is broken.

Sardis Baptist Church, we've all got a Dothan in our past. And whether your departure is in the recent past, or many decades ago, we cannot become God's people, until we look beyond the plains of Dothan toward the horizon of reconciliation. May God give us the courage to forgive our brothers and sisters like Joseph did. And in the presence of this extended family, may we always be aware of God's providential stewardship both in times of peace, and in times of crisis.

May it be so! And may it be soon!

Amen.