



Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 16, 2020

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude

Gathering

Welcome and Lighting the Christ Candle

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* Liturgist: Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.

All: One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts.

Liturgist: They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, they meditate on your wonderful works.

All: They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. *Psalm 145: 2-7*

All Singing: 562 “We Will Extol You, God and King”
Singing verses 1, 3, and 4

Minister: To God’s people gathered in hope: Grace to you, mercy and peace, from God our Creator and Christ our Redeemer, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Passing the Peace at a Distance

Reconciliation

Liturgist: The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.

All: The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

Liturgist: The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.

All: The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.
Psalm 145: 8, 9, 13, 14

Silent confession and reflection

All Singing: 658 “Bring Peace to Earth Again”
Singing verses 1, 2, and 4

Liturgist: Paul writes to Israelites: God’s gifts and God’s call irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy, so too they (Gentiles) have now received mercy. They too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you.

All: For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Liturgist: Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

**All: Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?
Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?**

Liturgist: For from the Lord and through the Lord and to the Lord are all things.
To the Lord God be glory forever. *Romans 11: 29-36 adapted*

All: Amen.

Proclamation

* **All Singing: 755 “Speak, O Lord”**

Scripture: Genesis 45: 1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it.

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

“So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to him, ‘This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don’t delay. You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren,

your flocks and herds, and all you have. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'

"You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."

Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

Minister: The Word of the Lord

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: Part Two

* **All Singing: 459 "Within the Shelter of the Lord"**

Dedication

Prayer

Liturgist: The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. The Lord is near to all who call on him. The Lord fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.

**All: My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.
Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.**

Psalm 145: 17-21 adapted

* **All Singing: 943 "God Be with You Till We Meet Again"**
Singing verses 1, 3, and 4

Benediction

Praying with Elders – If you have a concern or joy that you'd like to talk or pray about with an Elder, one or two will be available in the shade near the sanctuary entrance following the service.

Worship Leaders

Pianist/Vocalist: Erin Pacheco
Vocalist: Aron Reppmann
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister: Roger Nelson

9:00 AM Service

Liturgist: Julane Bellin
Prayer: Steve Bellin
Violinist: Frances Boerman-Cornell

10:15 AM Service

Liturgist: Patty DeJong
Prayer: Richard DeJong
Flute: Sarah Rinkenberger

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Text: Genesis 45:1-15
Title: Part Two
Date: 08.16.20
Roger Allen Nelson

I spoke to a dear little old lady this week. I don't mean that in a derogatory fashion. I'm fond of her, she is small of stature, and she's 96. She lived through the Great Depression, World War II, civil rights struggles, the Vietnam War, 09.11, economic booms and busts, the war on drugs, and the war on terror. She's seen neighborhoods change, churches open and close, and fortunes rise and fall. She's buried two husbands, two children, and her last child is battling cancer with more bags and tubes than I can keep track of....

And yet, she said again this week that all we can do is "accept whatever comes from God's hand." All we can do is accept whatever comes from God's hand.

That understanding of God's sovereignty has served her well.
She's weathered life with the faith that God has a plan.

We don't know the plan.

We don't understand the plan,

We don't even need to like the plan.

But, we accept whatever comes as part of God's plan.

I can appreciate how that faith framework would be helpful. The troubles of life fit into a mysterious tapestry. We only see the knots on the back side; God sees the divine design. We only see the pandemic, the storm, the social-political unrest, the diagnosis, the anxiety, the peril, but God has a plan.

Dear friends, we often want to give meaning, or make meaning, or find meaning in the events of our lives. We're resistant to chance and coincidence and chaos. We like the idea of an overarching narrative - maybe even a God who has a plan. As Michael Fick puts it:

The gift of this perspective is that God is perceived to be near and active in the way a life unfolds. Good things happen? God is to be praised. Bad things happen? God is to be trusted to use it for some kind of purpose. The challenge to this perspective is that God then becomes the author of some pretty terrible things that do not seem to be working for any good purpose. It can also excuse us from taking responsibility for our own actions. All becomes God's will.

Joseph tells his brothers that God had a plan. They're not to be blamed for their role in human trafficking. It was God's plan. They meant it for ill but God used it for good. It was all part of the plan....

Well. We left off last week with Joseph being sold into slavery and his brothers returning home to report his death to Jacob. So, this morning let's consider the rest of the story, let's consider part two, let's consider the plan.

The writer of Genesis notes that Joseph was “well built and handsome” (seriously). And, as it turns out, his confidence, charisma and ability to manipulate a situation served him well. He became an overseer of his fellow slaves and while he had the sense to resist the advances of the master’s wife, he still ended up imprisoned on false charges of sexual assault. However, even in prison he rose to the top and the warden put him in charge of the other prisoners.

Word of his ability to interpret dreams worked its way up the ladder, and after interpreting the Pharaoh’s dream, he advised the storage of 20% of the harvest in seven years of abundance in preparation for seven years of famine. In doing so he became the Pharaoh’s second-in-command and scripture records that he went back to wearing fancy clothes.

Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot and people shouted before him, “Make way!” Thus, he put him in charge of the whole of Egypt.

But, then Joseph’s past interrupted his present.

Facing starvation in Canaan, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy some of the stored grain; but when they appeared before Joseph to plead their case they didn’t recognize him. And, that reality, combined with control over food in a famine, gave Joseph all of the power. He used it.

Rather than with reconciliation, Joseph met his brothers with manipulation. He pretended not to know them, accused them of spying, and threw ‘em in the hoosegow. And, when he finally sent them home with grain he added the stipulation that they return with Benjamin, their youngest brother, and he held an older brother as guarantee of that return.

I know, this is like someone recounting a movie they saw....

But, remember, God has a plan...

I guess as a gesture of generosity, Joseph slipped the money the brothers paid for grain back into their traveling-sacks. But, when they discovered the money they were terrified that theft would be added to the spying charges.

As the famine continued the brothers were forced to return to Egypt for more grain, this time with young Benjamin in tow. And yet again...

rather than reconciliation,
rather than revelation,
rather than a modicum of human kindness,

Joseph has his favorite silver cup slipped into Benjamin’s sack, setting him up as a thief. All of this toying with his brothers reaches its climax when Judah is forced to plead for Benjamin’s release by saying:

If my father (Jacob), whose life is closely bound up with the boy’s life, sees that the boy isn’t there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow...

And, it is at this point, with Jacob's life on the line, that Joseph cracks and confesses his identity. Years of disconnection and deception well up, and as our text has it, "he could no longer control himself." He blubbered and bawled so hard that the Egyptians took word to the Pharaoh.

Now. This is where it gets dicey. Four times Joseph says that all of this was God's doing. As one preacher puts it:

Joseph believes that the events of his life have had a purpose. Through their betrayal, he has not only grown powerful in worldly authority but will now be able to save a remnant of his people from the famine. Joseph believes his life is the means of grace by which God will save his people.

Dear friends, that's clearly part of the story. Throughout Genesis, God chooses, calls, and works out his will for the reclaiming of a people, the reclaiming of all people, through flawed and fallen people, like Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Joseph.

They are without exception weak and weasley, full of faith and crippled by fear, doubters and double-talkers, schemers and dreamers, laughers and liars, just like you and me. And yet, God keeps weaving his covenant promises through their lives. God keeps working out his will for the salvaging of creation through the line of Abraham. That's God's plan....

There's an ancient Chinese parable about the Red Thread of Destiny that has all sorts of variations and shows up in all sorts of eastern cultures. For example...

As a young boy was walking home he came upon an old man who told him that he was attached to his future wife by a red thread that ran unbroken throughout life. Then, with a knowing smile, the old man pointed to a young girl across the way. Being young and having no interest in girls, the young boy picked up a rock, threw it at the girl, and ran away.

Many years later the boy's parents arranged his marriage. On the night of their nuptials, his bride awaited in the wedding tent with the traditional veil covering her face. As he lifted the veil he was delighted to find that his wife was beautiful. However, she wore an adornment on her eyebrow. He asked her why and she told the story of a young boy who threw a rock that struck her, leaving a scar above her eye. And with that the groom wept with joy knowing that they were connected by the Red Thread of Destiny.

I know, sort of hokey, but I like the image of an unbroken thread that runs throughout life. One way to think of God's activity in this world is as the unbroken thread of a promise that runs from creation to crucifixion to consummation. That thread weaves its way through all the heights and horrors of human history, and there are times when it's barely visible or stretched and strained beyond credulity. And yet, God's will for reclaiming creation ultimately never fails and never breaks.

Look. If we see life as a grand plan with every detail ordained by God we end up with God as the author of unspeakable evils. And, if all is a divine design than we're off the hook for any responsibility.

But, if we disconnect God from the unfolding of history and the details of life we end up with an absentee God who is distant, cold, and uninvolved. And, any notion that God is merciful or loving or engaged in his own creation is jettisoned. We're on our own.

It seems to me that somewhere between every detail being hammered out in God's grand design, and a God who just watches from a distance, there is the mystery of a God who works out his will in the unfolding of human history. There must be some middle space between divine determinism and divine indifference. That is not to say that God makes everything happen, but it is to acknowledge that God can use even brokenness and loss toward redemptive ends.

So, dear friends, while I don't know that we're called to accept that everything is from God's hand, and I'm not sure that everything is part of God's plan, I do trust that the thread of God's covenant promises runs through Jacob and Joseph, to Mary and the other Joseph, to you and me and a dear little old lady. And, that thread will never falter or fail,

for ultimately God's will will be realized,
the very hand of God will wipe away our tears,
and all manner of things will be made well.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.