

GOD'S PROVIDENCE

Proper 14, Year A: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
(RCL) Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

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Key Passages: *Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age.* (Gen 37:3)

When [the Lord] summoned famine against the land...he sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. (Ps 105:16-17)

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." (Mt 14:27)

The soap opera continues. We have been reading the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis for many weeks now. Today, the focus shifts to the fourth generation, to Joseph, one of the younger of the many sons born to Jacob and his various wives. (Jacob is now also called Israel, as we learned last week.) And the drama builds.

The dysfunction of the family is played out in the rivalries among Joseph and his brothers. The passage we read today gives two reasons for this enmity. First, we learn that Joseph is a tattletale. He is out with his brothers taking care of their sheep, and he gives a bad report to his father. "Dad, they were out drinking all night long." "Dad, they sold some sheep on their own and kept the money." "Dad, they wouldn't share their lunch with me." We don't know what the report was, but it certainly didn't endear Joseph to his sibs.

To compound the problem, instead of telling Joseph not to be a snitch, Jacob loves him all the more and continues to show favoritism to him. We read that Jacob gives Joseph a coat with long sleeves, a sign of prestige. (I am sorry to tell you that the "coat of many colors" famous from the King James Version of the Bible derives from a mistranslation in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.) In any case, Joseph gets better clothes than his brothers. Not going to make him any friends.

So the seeds of family dysfunction are sown, and we see how the brothers' resentment builds and spills over into a plot to kill Joseph and rid themselves of this obnoxious brother. Israel seems oblivious to the rivalries and sends Joseph to find his brothers who are watching the sheep several days' journey away. The brothers see their chance for revenge. Most want to kill him, but Reuben and Judah, some of the oldest, persuade the others to put him in a pit and then sell him. But while they are eating lunch, passing traders kidnap Joseph and then sell him to other merchants on their way to Egypt. So the brothers are rid of their pesky brother, but they don't get the profit from the sale. Our reading ends there, but the next verses tell us that when the brothers return to the pit and find that Joseph is gone, they don't know what has happened. They have his fancy coat, so they kill a goat and smear its blood on the garment. They take it to their

father, to cover up their treachery by making it appear that Joseph was killed by a wild animal. Jacob's grief is profound as he weeps over the loss of his favorite son.

The stories we have been reading for the last several weeks form the narrative history of the origins of the people of Israel. We see human beings, with all their failures and successes--jealousy, love, deceit, faithfulness, and just plain stupidity—woven together as the story of people called by God to live in covenant with their Creator. These traditions were collected and lovingly transmitted through generations, coming into written form as the nations of Israel and Judah attempted to understand their origins and thus their part in living as a covenant people of Yahweh. Through the stories they saw God's providence working through the seeming chaos of human lives, people who were sometimes working in partnership with God and more often at cross-purposes with a God of peace and justice. They saw meaning in the stories, a narrative of God's faithfulness that gave them courage for the facing of their own challenges.

And I think that's the point for us as well. Throughout the Bible we see God's steadfast presence, God's unwillingness to abandon the promise to be our God, no matter how self-absorbed or hateful or confused we may be. But it's a pattern we mostly see in retrospect. We are not told what Joseph is thinking as his brothers throw him in a pit and prepare to sell him into slavery. But we can imagine his terror: stripped of his coat and trapped in a deep pit, dug for the purpose of holding rainwater but fortunately dry at the moment. Then strangers pull him out and sell him to traveling merchants who are on their way to a foreign country. Surely at this point the once-favored son now knows what it means to fear for his life, to be abandoned by his family and to face a uncertain future at the hands of foreign people who care nothing for him except as property to be bought and sold. How can Joseph trust his life and future to the providence of Yahweh? Where is God's power in this situation?

Today's Psalm gives us the meaning seen from a point far into the future. Joseph is sent into slavery in Egypt as part of God's plan for saving his family from a future famine. Joseph cannot see this future, despite his visions and his security as a favored son. He seems to be at the mercy of his jealous brothers, but God does not abandon him. We'll see more about how the story develops next week. But the overall narrative continues to see God's hand working through the arrogance, jealousies, and deceit of the people. The Psalmist recites this history (and there's a lot more in this psalm than we read today) as the basis of praising God who has blessed and saved the people. Joseph is not in a position to see what the Psalmist declares in retrospect.

But we are Joseph. We are in the midst of circumstances in which we cannot see the future. We are in the proverbial pit—wondering how we got here, trying to figure out how to get out, terrified that it will start raining while we are trapped.

As I am writing this sermon, I am listening to *Science Friday* on WHQR public radio. Some scientists are talking about the incidence of “wrong science,” of research that draws conclusions, which are later shown to be mistaken. There are a variety of reasons—sometimes a lazy researcher fakes the data, sometimes not enough cases were considered, sometimes the research was just sloppy and drew mistaken conclusions. The overall question they are considering is, “Can you trust science?” The speakers are talking about the self-corrective process by which other scientists try to replicate the processes to see if the results are the same. If different results

are obtained, it begins to cast doubt on the theory, and more research is done. They say, “Scientists are always working in the dark, trying to make sense of something. Maybe they get hold of an elephant’s tale and think it is a snake.” If they share their results with others, some of the darkness can be alleviated.

That’s a good analogy of what we are about as people of faith. Often each of us is living and walking in the dark. We construct a narrative about what is going on. Then we listen to the experience of others, to see if their experience squares with our own. That’s what we are doing when we gather as church. And it’s what we do as we read the Scriptures. We match it against what we are experiencing, and it helps us make sense of our own darkness. It corrects us, or encourages us, or confronts us, or continues to confuse us. In reciting the history of God’s providence, we learn how to look for it in our own lives. Being here, engaging with our sacred history, helps us see the bigger picture, perhaps to see what God is up to, where God’s power of peace and justice is at work.

A recent series of stories on *All Things Considered* has been dealing with the problem of high school dropouts and the life consequences of their decisions. When 44-year-old Kenny Buchanan dropped out of school in the ninth grade, he immediately got a job at a fast food restaurant. Over the years he worked in foundries, drove a forklift, and operated overhead cranes. But jobs are harder to find now, and employers have recently begun requiring a high school diploma just to be interviewed. Two years ago, after eight jobs in ten years, Kenny went back for his GED and realized that he would need to enroll in remedial reading and math classes. Lots of his fellow classmates gave up when they had to learn algebra and trig. But Kenny persisted, earned his high school equivalency, and now has a probationary job in an aluminum fabrication plant. He told the interviewer that if he is hired permanently, he and his family will finally have enough to live on, so he says, “I am praying the job lasts.” He continues, “I am a religious man, and when all else fails, God is always there for you. I mean, He’s been good to me. If I didn’t have my faith to support me, it would have been a lot easier to give in and stay poor and miserable. God helped me stay on course,” he concludes.

Martin Luther King, Jr. often said that his favorite hymn was “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” For a man who knew more than his share of dark nights, its plea for God’s presence is powerful:

“When my way grows drear
Precious Lord linger near
When my life is almost gone
Hear my cry, hear my call
Hold my hand lest I fall
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.”

My friends, we may be stumbling along in the dark, but we have come together to hear the narrative of God’s steadfast love for us as God’s people. We have come to praise the God who is faithful, whose love in Christ is completely reliable. We have come to help each other along the way, and to find reassurance for ourselves. We have come to encounter the Jesus of today’s Gospel who says to his terrified disciples, “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid,” (Mt 14:27).

I'd like to close with one of my favorite Bible verses, which is part of Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer. Since we don't often use Morning Prayer, maybe it isn't familiar to you. Let's read it together, as an act of affirmation in God's providence. Please turn to page 102 and read this passage from Ephesians:

*Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine;
Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.
Amen.*