

**Highland Presbyterian Church**  
**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 17, 2023**  
**A sermon by Megan McCarty**

Psalms 103:1-9

Genesis 50:15-21

Before we dive into the short pericope of the text this morning, we need to set the stage a little bit. This scripture is tied to the much larger and longer Genesis drama. You heard Nolan and I preach about Abraham and Sarah's fraught conception of Isaac. Then we heard the tumultuous story of Isaac's sons – the twins Jacob and Esau. At Nolan's installation we heard Lee Hinson-Hasty preach about Jacob wrestling with God as he was coming home to reconcile with his brother Esau. And now, we flash forward many more years to hear about Jacob's children. Jacob had 12 sons, but he loved one of them more than the rest – a trait that it appears he learned from his mother, Rebecca... The son that Jacob loved the most was named Joseph and to show his love for him he gave him a brightly colored cloak.

And as it seems to be the case in many of our human stories, jealousy then guided Joseph's brothers' actions and they sold him into slavery. There are a lot of things that happen to Joseph after he was sold in Egypt, but a big part of our story today is knowing that Joseph became an advisor to Pharaoh and was able to interpret dreams and persuade Pharaoh to ration food for a coming drought and famine. During the famine, Joseph's brothers had to come to him for food, but they didn't recognize him. When Joseph reveals himself to them, he does so with kindness and gives them and his father a place to live in Egypt.

Now... fast forwarding again, we come to today's scripture. Jacob has recently died, and Joseph's brothers are worried that Joseph will no longer look upon them with favor. Listen now for the word of God for us today in our ancient Hebrew scriptures:

"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?' <sup>16</sup> So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup> '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. <sup>18</sup> Then his brothers also wept, fell before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> What you have intended for harm, God intended for good, in order to save so many people, as God is doing today. <sup>21</sup> So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them."

So. This is a turn of events. The same brothers who repeatedly said that they hated Joseph and were jealous of him now fear that he's held a grudge against them all those years.

Their fears are reminiscent of Jacob's fear in anticipation of his reunion with Esau: that Esau would kill him in retribution for his wrongdoings.

Joseph's brothers believed that while Jacob was alive, he stood as a protective barrier between them and Joseph's wrath. And, to be fair to the brothers, during the famine, as Pharaoh's overlord, Joseph used his power to deceive, imprison, test, and instill fear in them. Despite Joseph's tears of joy when he finally revealed his identity to his brothers, they could not be certain that upon their father's death Joseph would not take vengeance against them for selling him into slavery. Therefore, they resorted again to deceit by sending a false report to Joseph alleging that Jacob instructed him to forgive his brothers for their offense against him and the harm they caused him. The adage that 'time heals all wounds' did not hold true for Joseph and his brothers. Both sides bore the weight of grief and trauma which that fateful decision of Joseph's brothers inflicted.

What follows is a theological statement that is often interpreted as Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers. In verse 17 the Hebrew verb *nasah* translated "to forgive" means to take away or carry off someone's guilt or iniquity *and* the resulting penalty. Joseph acknowledged that his brothers caused him harm but rather than retaliate against them he assured that they need not fear him. Instead, he told them that God turned their evil into good so that many people might live due to Joseph's position in Egypt, and he reassures them that he will provide for them and their families.

Joseph's cycle began with a family torn apart by jealousy, lies, conflict, and violence and ended in reconciliation and inclusion. His story presents us with an opportunity to address family dysfunction, failure, and resentment, especially within the larger cycle of suffering and trauma in the ancestral narratives in Genesis. Rather than their stories being defined by tragedy and grief, their narrative arc is the rebuilding of broken relationships by fallible, weak people - the people of God. Despite their bad acts, God's plans still come to pass.

What you have intended for harm, God has used for good. When I worked in Florida City, FL after college, I worked in a church that housed an afterschool program working with a Haitian and Cuban refugee and immigrant population. Shortly after my time began there the sanctuary was set on fire and it was deemed as arson. There were many years and many hurricanes where we worked out of a tent in the hot Florida sun. But what now exists on the spot where that tent sat is a massive state-of-the-art building with more technology and resources than this tiny community could have ever dreamed of. This happened because the arson in Florida City gained national attention and money began pouring in for a capitol campaign rebuild.

And, when we start to think about it, we all know these examples in the world: an addict who discovers a higher power or deeper meaning in their life that turns things around for them, a terminal patient who meets their diagnosis with a rejuvenated sense of joy for life, a renewed desire for community and closeness following a long pandemic, the death of a loved one that

brings together an estranged family, transformation in the life of this congregation following the loss of staff and an upheaval of what most of us knew as church.

Now, this does not mean that God, our puppet master is making bad things happen so that God can then turn around and be the savior who strengthens our faith and renews our lives. I personally can't get behind a theodicy where God is making bad things happen. But it is our daily reminder that just as Joseph said - we are not God - and most days we don't understand what God is up to. When we see tiny pericopes of a much larger narrative, it's easy to get bogged down by the negative, the tragedy, the grief.

But that is not the end of the story. God is bigger than these stories and so much bigger than we can ever comprehend. So, it's our job to figure out how to respond to adversity. Bad things will happen; evil exists in this world. Being in this church or being Christian does not protect us from any of it. But what we humans destroy or intend for evil, God can redeem. No one or nothing is too far gone for God's redemption.

It's often so hard for us to acknowledge what God is doing amidst tragedy and grief. It's hard to look outside when the world has caved in on you. If this is the case for you now, or in the future, let us remember that we don't always know what God is up to. There is not a purpose or a reason for the bad things that happen to us, but as this Joseph story reminds us, good things can still come out of what was meant for harm. The full human experience allows us to feel so many emotions all at once. We can still grieve while we recognize that there is joy around us that we are allowed to receive.

This table is the ultimate reminder that in Jesus's death what we humans meant for evil has been transformed. And even though we couldn't see the whole picture of what God was doing, we now all have eternal life and a great way to remember that with joy as we come to the table of grace today. Let us gather for redemption this morning. Amen.