

## *God's Good Intentions*

Genesis 50:15-21

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In Genesis chapter 37 a young man named Joseph has a dream. Joseph was the 11<sup>th</sup> of 12 sons born to the patriarch Jacob, and he was his father's favorite child. To show that favoritism Jacob made Joseph a richly ornamented robe, or as it was advertised when this story made it to Broadway, a Technicolor Dream Coat. Joseph was wrapped up in that coat of many colors when he lay his head down to sleep, and as he slept he dreamt. He dreamed he was out in a field with his brothers binding sheaves of grain when suddenly his sheaf rose up and stood upright, while all the sheaves of his brothers gathered around his and bowed down to him. He had another dream. He told his brothers, "Listen, I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars (eleven brothers) bowed down to me." We are told that between tattling on his brothers, the special robe that was just for him, and these two dreams about him rising above his brothers and even his parents, his brothers hated him, could not speak a kind word to him, were jealous of him, and ultimately considered murdering him. They decided instead to sell him into slavery and just trick their father that he had been devoured by a wild animal.

Fast forward more than 20 years to Genesis chapter 50 and sure enough, the dreams God gave Joseph about rising to prominence over his family have come true. His brothers have had to come to Egypt, where Joseph ended up after being sold into slavery. They came begging for food from Joseph, who had risen to prominence. Now they are bowing down before him, telling him they are his slaves, and asking him in the name of their father Jacob, to forgive them for the sins they committed against Joseph. God has done everything he promised in the dreams he gave to Joseph as a young man. God has done everything he promised to Joseph in those dreams when Joseph was a young man, but boy what a journey to get to the place where those dreams came true.

When his brothers turned against him they threw him into a cistern and then sold him to caravan of Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt, the Ishmaelites in turn selling Joseph to an Egyptian official named Potiphar. Can you imagine how Joseph felt as his dreams of rising to power were dashed and he was reduced to slavery in Egypt? This story has gone wrong in a hurry. Yet if you follow the story there is a refrain that not only guides this tale, it redeems it. The phrase is, “The Lord was with Joseph.” How was the Lord with Joseph? His master Potiphar recognizes that Joseph has special abilities and so Potiphar puts Joseph in charge of his entire household. Under the management of Joseph the household prospers. But once again Joseph gets ambushed, this time by Potiphar’s wife. She is attracted to this handsome hunk named Joseph, throws herself at him, is offended when he resists her advances, and so she contrives to make it look like Joseph was making sport of her. Potiphar hears this, burns with anger, and has Joseph thrown in prison.

“But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him; he showed Joseph kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in prison.” (Genesis 39:21,22) In prison Joseph interprets some dreams of two men who are officials in the court of Pharaoh, the ruler of all Egypt, and have fallen out of favor and been put in prison alongside Joseph. He gives these two officials the interpretation of their dreams and all he asks is that when these dreams come true the officials remember Joseph. Well, the fulfillment of one of the officials is that he will die, so when that dreams comes true it has no benefit for Joseph. But the other official, the chief cupbearer to Pharaoh, is restored to favor in Pharaoh’s court. In another disappointing development for Joseph the chief cupbearer forgets Joseph and so Joseph wallows in prison.

Joseph wallows in prison until Pharaoh, the leader of all Egypt, has his own dreams. None of his royal officials can interpret the dreams. Finally the chief cupbearer remembers Joseph and his gift with dreams. Joseph is brought into Pharaohs court and interprets the dreams. The dreams are that Egypt and the whole region will have seven years of

amazingly abundant harvests and then seven years of equally devastating famine. Not only does Joseph interpret the dreams, Joseph suggests to Pharaoh that he would do well to appoint a wise and discerning man to be in charge of Egypt and make good use of those seven years of abundance. Pharaoh agrees, looks at Joseph, and says, “You da’ man!” Even better, Pharaoh says, “There is no one as discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”

Joseph was thirty at that time. It had been thirteen years since his brothers had thrown that brash young dreamer in a pit and sold him into slavery. The seven years good years come and Joseph stores up the excess grain. And then the seven years of famine begin. Soon everyone is running out of grain and there is nowhere to turn, except to Egypt, where this wise and discerning ruler named Joseph has a stockpile of grain. Now, more than twenty years later the brothers of Joseph are sent by the father Jacob down to Egypt to get grain. The brothers appear before Joseph but they do not recognize him. Joseph puts them through the wringer a bit but finally reveals that he, the ruler of Egypt, is none other than their brother Joseph. While the brothers are stunned Joseph is weeping and offering reconciliation and forgiveness. In Genesis 45 Joseph says, “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 not be 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.” (45:4-7) God has caused some mighty great maturing to take place in the life of Joseph to bring him to a point that he can see his rising above his brothers would not be for his own glory, but for the glory of God, for the purposes of God, and actually for the saving of God’s chosen people, his very brothers who made up the twelve tribes of Israel.

In a Bible Study I led with some members of Dunn's Corners a few months ago I used this story as an example of God's providence. A helpful definition of providence was provided in the Presbyterian Women's Bible Study Horizons. "Providence is derived from the Latin *pro video*, to see beforehand, denoting the foresight of God." Using that definition, God gave a dream to the seventeen year old Joseph that saw ahead to what God would do in the life of Joseph and his brothers. And sure enough, God saw ahead and used that long, convoluted, twisting and turning story with detours and derailments to bring about a mighty act of salvation. God saw ahead. God provided, and the story moved forward for Joseph and for the people of Israel. When we trust in God's providence, we are trusting in God's ability to see beforehand, to see ahead, to make a way because God has a plan and purpose.

The God who provides is the God who has the ability to see beforehand. But as humans, we do not have the ability to see beforehand. For humans, we usually, perhaps always, only see providence not by looking ahead, not by seeing beforehand, but by looking back. Here in the story of Joseph his witness to providence is not as a seventeen year old boy seeing into the future, it is as a man who has endured hardship and disappointment, betrayal, false accusation, and imprisonment. Now, more than twenty years down the road, a road where time and time again he realized God was with him, Joseph looks back and sees that God has been at work in all of it. So it is in Genesis 50 that Joseph gives a powerful testimony to God's providence. He says to his brothers as they fall down before him and beg for forgiveness, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Beginning in Genesis 37, the story of Joseph comprises about 25% of the book of Genesis. In a book that lays the foundation for our journey of faith with God, one quarter of that book is dedicated to a long story filled with plenty of disappointment, discouragement, and deceit. The story has a message, a key affirmation, which will guide as we move

forward with God through the pages of the Bible. Human intentions may be for evil, for harm, for destruction, for hurting others, but God's intentions are for good. Genesis begins with a story of God's goodness, seven days of creation that are marked by this confident and even joyful exclamation that everything God made was good, and in completion it was all very good. Genesis chapter one wraps that all up in one chapter where chaos is turned to order and God's goodness is exalted. The story of Joseph provides a bookend to the goodness of God, but instead of a clear and concise seven days of creation it is a story that spans more than twenty years and involves some of the darkest valleys and deepest moments of despair a human life will ever encounter. And yet the affirmation as Genesis comes to a close, spoken by the man who has been through it all, is that God's intentions are good. And God's providence assures us that God's good intentions will prevail.

More than a thousand years later, after not just another chapter in that story, but after the crowning event of the story of God and his children, after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Beloved Son, the Apostle Paul looked at the way God used the death of Jesus to overcome evil, sin, and estrangement in our world, and Paul wrote words that have comforted, encouraged, strengthened and inspired believers in the hardships they face. He wrote, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." How can he say that with such confidence? Paul looks at the fact that God did not spare his own Son, but gave Jesus up for the sake of the children of this earth and he says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

There have been moments in my life when I looked back and saw what God had done for me, just one little bitty person in this vast universe, and what God had done for my little family and some of my closest friends, and in looking back the ways God had worked for good in our life was not just sweet and satisfying, it was humbling and even overwhelming. I hope you have had moments when you were able to look back and to see that God had provided, God had made a way, God had seen beforehand and prepared a path for you. I hope you have had

moments when you could see God's good intentions come together just as Joseph did at the end of his long journey of faith.

I needed God to see ahead for me, to provide a way for me. I grew up in a small town in California, the town of Hanford, a town with a lot of similarities to Westerly, except that it was in a pretty plain and flat valley and the ocean was a long ways away. But it was a great town to grow up in. At nineteen I moved to Sacramento to work at a church. Driving away from the only town I had ever known, the only friends I had ever known, the only family I ever had, I got scared. I was bawling as I drove the 200 miles to a new home in a big city filled with strangers. I wondered if God would provide a way for me to make a new life.

In Sacramento, the town of Fair Oaks, within a few weeks I was working with junior high kids and I fell in love with the young people. One person in particular helped me connect and feel like I belonged. Her name was Susie, she was a little seventh grade girl, she and her family lived a few blocks away from where I was living, and Susie and a couple of her friends would walk over to the house I was living in and visit. That act of kindness opened the door to a friendship with Susie, her parents Tom and Ethel, her sister Cindy and her two brothers. That was the fall of 1980. The culmination of that special friendship came ten years later in 1990, when Susie, now a beautiful young woman married Brian, another young man from the youth group. By now I was an ordained pastor, and it was my honor and an incredible blessing to perform their wedding ceremony.

On Sunday, February 1, 2015, Julie nudged me on the shoulder and said it was time to wake up. That morning, early that morning, about 4:30 am, we began a journey that was filled with hope and expectation. That morning we began our drive to Westerly, Rhode Island, to begin this new chapter in our life with you, the members of Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. It happened to be Super Bowl Sunday, a date you Patriots fans will remember well. Fortunately, America is filled with football fans. The highways were absolutely

empty that day and we covered ground as we cruised along. Julie posted on Facebook that we had begun our journey. There are numerous routes you can take from Houston to Rhode Island, and we picked one out that would take us up and through Tennessee. She posted that on Facebook and about ten minutes later we received a message on Facebook from Brian, the young man who married that little girl Susie from our church in Fair Oaks, California. Brian told us he and Susie had moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, and if there was any chance we were traveling that way they would love for us to spend the night. About eight hours later we pulled into the driveway and Brian came out, the two kids he and Susie have were with him, and Susie came out, smiling and welcoming me like she did 35 years before. She is Sue now, a grown woman and a mother. Sue and Brian reminded us of the wedding and said they were preparing to celebrate their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Wow! Then there was a knock on the door. We opened it and in walked Sue's parents, Tom and Ethel, who had also moved to Tennessee. No sooner had we given them hugs and gushed about how amazing it was to see them than the doorbell rang again and Sue's sister Cindy walked in. She also has moved to Tennessee. We had left Houston fifteen hours earlier expecting to spend the night in some motel and now God had seen beforehand, had seen ahead, and prepared a homecoming with a little girl who played a central role in welcoming me to a new life 35 years before. It was one small way of God saying I know how to go before you and prepare things for the good. You are on a new adventure. Trust me now. I will go before you, I will see ahead. I will provide. So we come here trusting God's good intentions.

That episode in itself would be enough to trust God, but there is more. Sometime in the late 1950's a young couple with their two kids made the journey north from Southern California, where the young father had just graduated from college with a teaching credential. He was hired to teach math and science in a little town in the Central Valley town called Hanford. But this young family was so poor at the time they couldn't afford the high prices in Hanford. Somehow a dairy farmer in Tulare, California, heard about their need for a place to live and he invited this

young family to live in a small house on his dairy farm. The farmer's name was Alan Asay, although to this day he has never been anything other than Mr. Asay to me. The young teacher was my dad.

Letting that struggling young family have a place to live while they got their feet on the ground changed the landscape of life for our family. Mr. and Mrs. Asay welcomed the stranger. Mr. and Mrs. Asay made a place for our family to find a home and find a place in a community. When I was born a few years later, the Asay's daughter Dawn was my babysitter. Our families formed a bond of friendship that was deep and lasting. Those types of friendship are cemented when you go through struggles. Dawn, my babysitter, the Asay's daughter, was diagnosed with cancer and died at a very young age. That was a dark time for the Asays and for the Eberlys, and yet our families went forward, believing God was preparing the way for us. It was a rare graduation, wedding, or birthday that the Asays did not join us and help us celebrate. In 2002 my parents celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. By this point my dad was in a wheelchair, could barely talk, and was just a shadow of his old self. How do you express thanks for a man like Mr. Asay walking into that room, coming over to my dad, greeting him with that beaming smile and taking time to remember all the old memories. Mr. Asay was a dairy farmer, and when you drive through the San Joaquin valley the many dairy farms can throw off a powerful aroma. On the school bus and on field trips the other kids would plug their noses and make jokes about how bad the dairy farms smelled. But when I smelled a dairy farm I was transported right back to Mr. Asay and his farm and his cows. I breathed in deep of that wonderful smell.

On Sunday morning, November 16, just this past year in 2014, I walked into the Crossroads Presbyterian Church in Waterford, Connecticut. We had spent that weekend interviewing with the Pastor Nominating Committee of this very church. We had fallen in love with those dear friends who made up the committee of twelve. We had never dreamed of coming to the east coast and we knew absolutely nothing about Rhode Island. But in the space of 48 hours, which included a visit

to the Christmas Bazaar that you all hosted, and which we sneaked into incognito, in those few hours we realized that God was putting a call on our hearts to come and share in ministry with you. We really didn't need any more confirmation.

But on that Sunday morning I walked into the Crossroads Presbyterian Church in Waterford, Connecticut, and something happened that was just like a tap on the shoulder from God. Or a wink of the eye and a nod of the head. Or a gentle whisper that says, "Trust me. I will go before you. I will provide." I walked into that church and the first person who greeted me, the very first person who greeted me shook my hand and said, "Hello, I'm Mr. Asay." In my whole life I have never met another person named Mr. Asay. Never. Not once. And now on this day, when we are contemplating a change in our lives bigger than we ever imagined, I met a man named Mr. Asay, a name that represents God preparing a way and opening doors and providing a welcome and making a home and supplying endearing and enduring friendships.

Do I believe in God's good intentions? Do I believe that God works all things together for good? Oh yes, I firmly believe that. Does it mean there are not moments of doubt and discouragement, seasons when we walk through the valleys, even the valley of the shadow of death? No, we are not immune or exempt from those trials. But every once in a while God provides us with moments when we look back and see that he has brought it all together for good, in ways only the Lord of the Universe can do.

I firmly believe there will be moments in our life when we, the members at Dunn's Corners, the family at Dunn's Corners, will be able to look at all that God has done and with a faith that has been strengthened by the trials and tribulations, will be able to affirm with confidence, and even with joy, that God has worked it all together for good, that all things work together for good. With that hope in our hearts, let us join together in worshiping and serving our great and mighty God,