

Exodus 3:1-15

"The Tapestry of God's Purpose"

When being examined for Ordination over seventeen years ago, I was asked what the Bible means to me. I started my explanation by saying that the Bible is the story of God's redemption of humankind through a particular people, Israel. Today I might also paraphrase Cicero and say that the Bible shows that while all other creatures look downward toward the earth, only humankind has been given the gift of being able to raise our eyes upward to see God's face. What Cicero meant was that God loved us enough before God even created humankind to make us in God's image and to provide a way for us to always be in God's presence. Above all other creatures, only you and I have the ability to be in relationship with our Heavenly Father. And it is God's desire for this to be our way of life.

Of course, this would only happen through the reconciliation brought about on the cross when God washed our sins with the blood of his Son, Jesus. Indeed, the cross and the empty tomb are the greatest pictures of reconciliation ever given. But it is possible that the story of Joseph and his brothers may be the second greatest picture of reconciliation that the Bible gives us. And in view of the climate in our nation and our world right now, I found much wisdom and comfort in dwelling with Joseph this week.

The passage that we just heard is the culmination of a long story. Joseph, his father's favorite, lorded it over his brothers. They grew angry and decided to kill their brother. At the last minute they had the *benevolent* change of heart to sell him into slavery instead. Their old father was told that Joseph was dead, and he was overcome with grief. Years later Joseph found his way into Pharaoh's court. In time he became a valued administrator, next to the Pharaoh in

power. And one day his brothers, desperate for food in a time of famine, came to Egypt for help. They met their brother, though they did not know who he was. Their story is a wonderful scene of reconciliation as Joseph forgave his brothers and met their needs. This is where we pick up the story this morning.

But in truth, their narrative is part of God's plan for preserving a remnant of the covenant people, as Joseph states plainly to his brothers. And as I marveled in the plan that God made involving the unsuspecting family of Joseph, I thought of the part that we all play in the tapestry of God's purpose. And I also thought of the things that we could all learn from this story.

As soon as Joseph meets his brothers, he testifies to the greatest gift that God gives us. The gift of life. After asking all those who are listening to give them some privacy in this family matter, he makes the simple declaration, "I am Joseph". In essence Joseph says, "I once was dead and now I am alive" the very heart of the Gospel message. God can take that which is physically dead and bring it back to life with the promise of Eternal life. Surely this is good news to any of us who have lost a loved one and who look forward to being reunited with them in God's presence.

But perhaps even more importantly, God can take that which is emotionally dead – a broken relationship, a love that has died, a trust that has been lost – and give *it* life again too. Through the power of forgiveness, through hope in the goodness of God's plan, through the love that is extended from an unexpected source, that relationship, that love or that trust can be reborn.

God can also take that which is spiritually dead – faith that has been shattered by hardship, a loss of belief caused by abuse in the manmade systems of the church – and give it life

again too. Through the stories of lament and salvation that are given to us in the gift of God's word, we see God reviving the heart and Spirit of his people.

All of this resurrection of life might be the end of the Joseph story. A true miracle that he still lives, despite the maleficence of his brothers. But if his story ended that way, it would not mean as much to us today. It would almost be like the empty cross without the empty tomb.

So God gives the tapestry more intricacy. Not only does God give Joseph life, but God gives Joseph and his brothers the gift of reconciliation. And God does this through Joseph's choice. You see, Joseph could easily have sought revenge on his brothers. He was in a position of power to bring them great heartache and hardship. Yet he did not.

I saw an excerpt from the Memorial Service held for Heather Heyer, the young woman who was killed while protesting at a white supremacy rally last weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia. Her mother said that she was there in the first place because she had made it her mission in life to "stand down hate". And perhaps this was the same choice that Joseph made when he made the decision, not only to forgive his brothers but to provide for their welfare.

Joseph's break with the past comes from his passion over what is at stake. *That is to say, his relationship with his family is more important to him than being able to say that he was right.* And friends, that is a great and wise gift. But I believe that Joseph also realized that his own family was a part of the tapestry of reconciliation that God was weaving for all God's children, even you and me.

In the weekly *Presbyterian Outlook*, Editor Jill Duffield writes, "God is always doing a new thing, grace upon grace, and sometimes our heart-felt cries for help and justice shape and influence that new thing God is doing. Sometimes our horrendous, jealous impulses are co-opted for God's life-giving purposes. Always the love for our fathers and our daughters and our

brothers is inexplicably wrapped up in God's love for the whole wide world." She goes on to quote Mother Teresa who said, "If you want to change the world, go home and love your family."

In *his* choice to stand down hate, to move beyond his past and to look at the new thing that God was doing, Joseph says a lot to us about what we could do to be better witnesses for Christ than we often are. And his words are for all of us – those who stand on both sides of the political aisle, asking us to place loyalty with standing down hate rather than with political parties.

But above all, Joseph realizes that God used his circumstances for the good of God's whole kingdom, for all of God's people. God used the egotistic immaturity of Joseph, the prejudice of Joseph's father Jacob, the petty jealousy of his brothers, the famine and drought – all of it – to preserve God's covenant people. To continue the work on His tapestry of salvation.

Friends, in this story we see that the guilty fear of Joseph's brothers is overcome with love. The grief of Jacob is resolved when he finds out that Joseph is still alive. The revenge that Joseph could have taken on his brothers is superseded by his realization that God is at work – even in the tragedies of our lives.

In fact, this passage is a perfect illustration of the fact that God can and will make use of all human action but is not limited by human choice. And it is a statement of faith for us all to ascribe to. Because I don't believe Joseph realized that God was working so intimately in his life until this very moment – until he made the choice to stand down hate. The Joseph story reminds us to have faith that God is acting in our lives and our world even when we think we cannot SEE God acting.

So in today's world, in view of Charlottesville and Barcelona and Sierra Leon and other places where devastation and destruction and hate seem to be winning the day, I think this passage asks how we can be passionate about what is at stake for us while standing down hate and moving beyond our past.

And perhaps the most relevant thing in Joseph's story for us to consider is that Joseph did not try to erase the past. Joseph acknowledged the sinfulness of ALL involved yet recognized that the purposes of God have been at work in, with and under the sordid actions of him and his brothers and in spite of, through and against every human effort. God's tapestry for our lives began with a plan for our salvation. And God's plans will not be thwarted by you or me or terrorism, or political parties or the mistakes of our past or the times when the world embraces hate rather than love.

I saw a very interesting interview with Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State, this week. I am sure that you don't need to be reminded that Condi Rice is an African American woman. She was asked if she felt that tributes to nine of our first twelve Presidents, who were slave owners, like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington should be removed.

Her answer was that they were men of their time and that she is a firm believer in the principle that we should keep our history before us. That she wished that had been different but they were not.

She was also asked if she could see herself in today's constitution. Rice pointed out that the Constitution at one time counted her ancestors as three-fifths of a man. That in 1952, her father had trouble registering to vote in Birmingham, Alabama under the Constitution. And yet, in 2006 Condi Rice stood in the Ben Franklin room and took an oath of office under that same Constitution that was administered by a Jewish woman Supreme Court Justice. Then she said,

"THAT'S the story of America – the long road to freedom has indeed been long, it's been sometimes violent, it's had many martyrs but ultimately has been Americans claiming those institutions for themselves and expanding the definition of "we the people".

In the same way, if we as Christians try to erase our past, we will not have much of a story to tell. If we take away the violence that enabled God's people to dwell in the Promised Land there will be considerably less of the Old Testament to read. If we remove from our Christian heritage the stories of the sins that David made as a man and a king, we will not have the hope that God can redeem us and use our poor choices nor will we be able to see as vividly the picture of God's unconditional love.

And would the resurrection be as powerful to you and me today, if we just skipped over the part of the betrayal of Judas, the cowardice of Jesus' disciples, the pain and brokenness that Jesus experienced on the cross for everyone here? Well, I think not. It is the tapestry of God's purpose that has and will and should hang ever before us.

Nowhere in our Scriptures do Joseph or Jesus condone the hatred and violence that is a part of their story – of our story. And neither should we. But this story in Genesis is both a powerful and timely reminder that *God rises above the circumstances of this world* to bring about good that enables us to look forward to the glory of the next world. It is a reminder that we cannot erase the mistakes of our past but we can rise above them when we seek God's will and choose to stand down hate today and in the days to come.

And friends, this idea of God's working in our lives is not our benediction – our blessing that we take when we leave this place. It is our call to worship! To seek, to live out, to preserve, and for each and every one of us to be a thread in the tapestry of God's purpose by our loving one another. No matter where we stand in the political arena, as American Christians, God and God's

Holy Word calls each of us here to make the choice to stand down hate. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

Nazareth Presbyterian Church, Aug. 20, 2017

+Because many people commented about the prayer from yesterday, I am including it as well. Parts of it were taken from Jill Duffield's prayer. Jill is Editor of the "Presbyterian Outlook" and wrote a prayer for us to use with our congregations this week. I edited it to "fit" our congregation.

You have told us, O Lord, what is good: to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with you. Yet, we are dismayed when we see what is happening in our world today. Give us faith, Lord. Help us see your purposes at work – even in the hatred, the violence, the personal trials, the family divisions, the sorrow of our friends and loved ones. And lead us by a sense of your justice to make choices that are in accordance with your plan.

Prince of peace, you tell us to pray for those who persecute us and love our enemies, but right now, in this moment, those prayers are not readily on our lips. Help us. Intercede for us. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you even if, in this moment, they are colored with anger and weariness and questions about your presence during the storm.

This very day you have made. Creator God, Living God, God of the new thing, the very good thing, show us where to be and what do to and how to be the light and the salt and the love you call us to be.

Tomorrow, as we take the time to marvel in the mystery of your creation while slowing down our lives to view the eclipse, renew our sense of your presence in every aspect of your world. Give us faith to believe in your powers of healing, of resurrection and reconciliation. We pray that you surround those that we hold in our hearts who are suffering because of illness, grief or any kind of despair with your amazing presence. Lord, take our hands, lead us home to the place you prepared for us and give us rest. Put us beside still waters and overflow our cups with grace upon grace until it spills into the streets and washes away the evil in our land. Wash us and we will be clean. Made new. Clothed and in our right minds. Together.

Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. In the name of your Son, our risen Lord, Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.