

The gifts of long sight

Menno Mennonite Church

August 23, 2020

Outdoor worship

Purpose: To reflect on the importance of being helped to see God's working in our stories.

Message: We are gifted with the opportunity to see God with us in the breadth of our story and that is something to be shared.

Scripture: Genesis 45:1-15 (complementary to Genesis 37 from week previous)

Synopsis: We are always in the middle of the story. We never quite know where we are headed or how it ends. As much as we would like to know what is around the corner we don't, really. Yet time and again we are invited to see the long view of God with us along the way. Joseph moves from the aggrieved and threatened one, sent to what would seem to be certain death to the one who is in a position to see the long view of what life has given him.

To be sure, the easy equivalence of "all bad is to be used for God's good" is an easy and exploitative equation. Yet when we share our stories—the good ones and the bad ones—we are given a context of long sight that can perhaps give us hope for the many bends along the way. God's work comes along side us and provides for us in ways that amaze and bring us to new things always.

Notes (For Bryce's use- links go to private materials)

[Finding ourselves in deep](#)

[Sermon Seeds August 16 2020 - United Church of Christ](#)

[Genesis 45:1-15 Commentary by Roger Nam - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week \(RCL\)](#)

<https://www.evernote.com/shard/s249/u/0/sh/38ab2221-4861-4189-b9e3-e0cd9c522653/25f2a7e419bcc548813ff44f2551e29f>

Genesis 45:1–15 (The Message)

¹⁻² 45 Joseph couldn't hold himself in any longer,
keeping up a front before all his attendants.

He cried out, "Leave! Clear out—everyone leave!"

So there was no one with Joseph
when he identified himself to his brothers.

But his sobbing was so violent
that the Egyptians couldn't help but hear him.
The news was soon reported to Pharaoh's palace.

³ Joseph spoke to his brothers:
"I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?"

But his brothers couldn't say a word.
They were speechless—
they couldn't believe what they were hearing and seeing.

⁴⁻⁸ "Come closer to me," Joseph said to his brothers.
They came closer.

"I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt.
But don't feel badly,
don't blame yourselves for selling me.

God was behind it.
God sent me here ahead of you to save lives.
There has been a famine in the land now for two years;
the famine will continue for five more years—
neither plowing nor harvesting.
God sent me on ahead to pave the way
and make sure there was a remnant in the land,
to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance.

So you see, it wasn't you who sent me here but God.
God set me in place as a father to Pharaoh,
put me in charge of his personal affairs,
and made me ruler of all Egypt.

9-11 “Hurry back to my father.

Tell him, ‘Your son Joseph says:

I’m master of all of Egypt.
Come as fast as you can and join me here.
I’ll give you a place to live in Goshen
where you’ll be close to me—
you, your children, your grandchildren,
your flocks, your herds,
and anything else you can think of.

I’ll take care of you there completely.

There are still five more years of famine ahead;
I’ll make sure all your needs are taken care of,
you and everyone connected with you—you won’t want for a thing.’

12-13 “Look at me.

You can see for yourselves,
and my brother Ben-jamin can see for himself,
that it’s me, my own mouth, telling you all this.

Tell my father all about the high position I hold in Egypt,
tell him everything you’ve seen here,
but don’t take all day
—hurry up and get my father down here.”

14

15 Then Joseph threw himself
on his brother Ben-jamin’s neck and wept,
and Ben-jamin wept on his neck.

He then kissed all his brothers and wept over them.

Only then were his brothers able to talk with him.

You can't get much more soap opera than all of this. Last week we had the family split; this week the big reveal and confession of all that had come before. In between there is a good bout of double dealing, some salacious sexual exploits, and even our hero Joseph running naked into the night to escape the designs of another one's wife. There is murder, deceit, dreaming and interpretation, and a good deal of skullduggery between Joseph and his brothers. Think *Game of Thrones*, but in Egypt populated by people we have seen fit to put a halo around and tell stories about with distance and awe rather than thinking that this could ever be real, ever could have consequences for the here and now. Make no mistake, this is an utterly human story with all the brokenness and awkwardness to go with it. One could end up wondering if this story is about YHWH and the people of Israel, or just some really juicy campfire gossip that got written down and changed along the way. More than likely it is a little bit of both, though we can only really pick up on it all when you read it not in abstract for chunks at a time but as a whole reading. If you want some fascinating reading try reading the last 15 chapters of Genesis sometime—really the Jacob's children section. But don't read it as scripture with a moral to tell. Pop some popcorn, sit back and binge it like some guilty pleasure. It gives it a different cast, and, I think, even speaks more loudly of God within it all.

We are living a cliff hanger. We never really know what is around the corner to be present to us, to surprise us or just to see where it goes. Like hiking in the mountains, we might be going around and around the switchbacks of life, not always being sure that we are getting anywhere, or if we do find ourselves some place where the next place might go (because face it, we don't always like where we find ourselves along the way). Many times we struggle to put into context the reality of what we are going through right now. Indeed, sometimes we likely shouldn't even try—when grief is raw and anger is real, it might not be the time to try to place our happenstances into theological context, trying to shoe horn our circumstances into the grand “plan of God”. It must be said this thinking and these efforts are invitations for disillusionment and disappointment and should be avoided. But, in time, when we have had time to find distance and at least to start healing, then we can start considering and wondering where God might have been present in it all. Often times, we might need some guidance to give us a glimpse along the way—the wisdom of other paths and other vantage points not to make easily equivalences or wrong headed notions diagnosing where God might have been or not been, but rather to invite us with long vision to see anew what might be possible.

I ended the Joseph story last week in the deepest valley—sold off into slavery, likely to die, likely to never be heard from again. But then all this stuff happens to Joseph. He is given opportunities to minister, to interpret, and to find himself where even he likely never imagined. When we pick up the story this week, I find myself wondering when, exactly, he decides to be gracious with his brothers. To this point, he has been doing a fairly admirable job of screwing with them, testing them, and generally putting them through a small bit of the hell he has been through. I can't help but wonder if it isn't in this confrontation where they are in need and speak of the needs of their father and pleading for the favor of Benjamin's freedom that he comes to realize the working of YHWH in his life, and the opportunity that YHWH has placed in front of him now. We read this with an eye toward reconciliation because we read this as a story of reconciliation and provision. Sometimes we do well to drop the historical script we have all internalized and to read things again through the eyes of the now, and in that reading to get the AHA moment with Joseph to see the moment of grace that might surprise us, the way that God has provided that we couldn't see because we had our heads down and were just trying to make time. Joseph's story is one of the longer vision that can come to us, speak of what we miss in day to day living and can change us for it.

One quick side note. This story and those like it have been used to justify and rationalize violence and abuse. I would be remiss not to say this: suffering and abuse is never part of God's plan. Those are the circumstances we introduce to each other for the wide variety of distortions contained within the human soul. To bathe a bad situation in virtue by supposing God's provision through it is merely an excuse to enable more damage and cannot be supported or morally justified. God can work in spite of the misuse of the created order and the pain inflicted on each other, but that doesn't mean that this is what God's will is in the first place. I have seen it time and again, and it is a profound misunderstanding of who and God is and the way God works along the way.

This week my grandmother celebrates her 100th birthday. She moved into a care home only this spring from the farm she worked with my grandfather for decades, residing outside a 10 mile radius of the place her birth for the first time in her life. Gone are the various big deals we might have made for the occasion due to the pandemic. But that does not mean we are not celebrating. Far from it. When I think of basic public history that she has lived—the advent of electricity, technology, war, depression, a 1965 F4 tornado that killed 70 people in their area, demolishing their immediate neighborhood, but somehow not that house, it is impressive and

then some. Layer on the personal history of family trauma, a 35 year battle with congestive heart failure with my grandpa that took them to the forefront of medical innovation and saw her work night shift sewing curtains for RVs while raising 4 kids and maintaining an operating farm well past usual retirement age, it is a wonder to behold. On and on it goes—with the stories and the happenstances. Suffice it to say she is a tough old bird, broking no nonsense from anyone, even though she comes up to my sternum. My uncles would pop her on top the refrigerator just for the fun of it since they were boys. She loves well, and she is well loved.

It is not my purpose to use my latitude this morning to canonize my family by way of making up for the birthday card I didn't get in the mail, though I could. Instead, I raise her up only by way of reflecting on the gift that she best gives today: she is a woman of long vision and deep experience. She struggles to read what is right in front of her anymore, even with a strong lens. But when you ask her what she finds most impressive of her long life, her vision goes a long way: *I am always amazed at what God has done; I am amazed at the ways the Lord has blessed us, blessed me.* She, like so many others of your lives that you are no doubt considering right now, have been given the long vision of hindsight that can be less-clouded by the immediacy putting one foot in front of the next as we all must in day to day living and can see the long road behind her, and is fortunate enough to find peace along the way. To recognize provision of God what God is doing in our world and in our lives is a rare gift, and often one that can only really be appreciated looking backwards. It is one of the greatest blessings that one generation can give the next—the gift of being imparted a sense of grace as perspective changes and focuses lengthen to testify to the way God has been with them with us along the way.

We Mennos like our history. I know that I do. We have our stories of going and coming, of adversity and challenge along the way, the joys and triumphs of ages past. At the bottom of it all we tend to be pretty proud of where we have come from, how we have survived and thrived even in the context of a challenging couple of centuries we have been through. So we tell our stories and we love our stories. We have our ancestors that we revere and the loops and valleys that they have come through to deliver us to the comfort with we have been known in the new world especially. We must know and acknowledge that our stories are not the whole of Anabaptist history—not by a long shot, and we do well to tell the story as broadly as we can.

There is something else we have to be careful with in here too. It is fine to appreciate history and to enjoy the stories. But we do even better to tell the stories that we might see and understand the mover in the stories—the provision of the living God—far more than the great

deeds of good people. The testimony of history and the happenings of those who did great things can lead us to put them on a pedestal rather than to use them as a lens through which to see yet again the working power of God in our world walking with us, yes; always; but the world as a whole more generally. We celebrate that we were moved to start sharing with people in need 100 years ago through Mennonite Central Committee. That is good and right and proper. But it cannot stop with the dry recitation of the deeds of our heroes and the visions of the founders. There always must be within those stories to long sight of Joseph to help us realize the hand of God moving then; the provision of God being given now. Anything else is an idolatry of the achievement far more than the praise of the God who is the author of the work. How might our history change if this is the telling? How might our faith be strengthened if we were quicker to tell each other our stories of the hard times and God's presence in them rather than to diagnose the working of God in our misfortunes?

Friends, we write history all the time. Many times we cannot see our the ways that God provides for us along the way. We are invited to be like Joseph, open to surprises that would amaze us with what God is doing even in the places we might struggle to imagine God in right now.

In all thing God is working and invites us to work too. May we declare to each other all that God has done, is doing, and shall do, now and forever more. Amen.