

WE BELIEVE: PROVIDENCE

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Genesis 50:15-21 Daniel 4:28-37

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Service for the Lord's Day

We are continuing our series of sermons on the teachings, the doctrines of Reformed Christianity, and today we come to doctrine of providence. Last week, Ken talked about election, or predestination, and he made a point of clearing up the fact that predestination is only about salvation. That predestination doesn't mean that every event of our lives is predetermined, that it doesn't mean that we are puppets, that we still have freedom to act. Today we need to make a similar clarification. Providence is about God's work in the world, about God's working out God's purposes through us, through our choices, through world events, through moments that seem insignificant at the time, or that seem less than desirable at the time. And the idea of providence is going to raise some questions for us. Does God control our every action? Does God cause bad things to happen? Does God cause wars? Does God give people cancer? Why are people starving? How can these things be the case if we believe in providence?

The truth is, we can't answer all these questions, but I will repeat again something of what Ken said last week. Providence doesn't turn us into puppets. Or robots. Or cogs in a machine. We are free to act or not act. We human beings are free to start wars and we are free to not feed people who need feeding. Providence means that God is involved in the world, but God is involved with us, with a bunch of people who oftentimes try to thwart God's purposes, despite what God has called us to do. The good news of providence is that even when we do that, God can still bring something good out of the mess we have made. That is the promise of providence. That God is acting in our world for good, not through the evil that we do, but despite it. And that God can turn even evil purposes to good.

We read two different stories today, which give us two different perspectives on providence and our relationship to it. The first story is one of the most classic texts, the most famous claims of God's promise of providence. It comes at the end of the book of Genesis, the end of the Joseph saga. If you remember, Joseph was one of Jacob's sons, favored by his father over the other 11, and as a result, resented by his brothers. As a boy, Joseph had two dreams, and the only possible way to interpret them was that the other brothers would someday bow down to him. Now this was just too much for the brothers, who were older than Joseph. So they threw him in a pit, and eventually sold him into slavery in Egypt. To make a long story much shorter, Joseph's dream-interpretation skills paid off, and eventually he became indispensable as Pharaoh's right-hand man. A famine came over the land, and Joseph's brothers wind up having to come to Egypt looking for food, and who is it that they come to, but Joseph himself. After Joseph reveals himself, and once their father has died, the brothers are afraid, because of what they have done to him. Which brings us to the text we read today. Now, Joseph had overcome a lot. He is the kind of person who would have had every right to brag about how he has pulled himself up by his bootstraps—started at nothing and becoming such an important man. And who could blame him for a little retribution towards those who had enslaved him? But Joseph does not do this. What Joseph is able to do is to look back over his life, and to see God at work. Despite the evil intentions of his brothers, God was able to use that to bring about God's good purposes through Joseph's life. Joseph says to his brothers: *"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God*

*intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.”*¹ Joseph understood himself to be a part of God’s work. Joseph understood providence.

The story of Nebuchadnezzar is another story. You’ll remember Nebuchadnezzar from the first part of the book of Daniel. He’s the one who had Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego thrown into the furnace for refusing to bow down to the golden statue he had set up. And it seemed like Nebuchadnezzar almost got it, after God protected those three men from being destroyed in the furnace. Nebuchadnezzar was almost there—but not quite. See, it was still all about him. And so he has a dream, which serves as a warning to him. But even after this dream in which he is warned of exactly what is about to happen, Nebuchadnezzar looks out over his kingdom and says, *“Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?”*²

See, he missed it. Unlike Joseph, who had worked his way up to his special status in Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar was king simply because he was the son of a king. And yet, he still missed it. He missed that he was the beneficiary of God’s providence. He still had not learned that God is the one who puts down one and raises up another.³ That he was a part of God’s story. And that there was so much of his life’s successes that he couldn’t claim any responsibility for at all.

And then you know what happened to him. You heard it this morning. For seven years he lost his throne and his mind.

So this is another part of providence. Providence also recognizes the things that we are given, the places we are put, the ways we are born, that have nothing to do with us at all. Very often we are quick to take credit for things that we did not do, and neglect to thank God for what we have been given.

The good news for Nebuchadnezzar is that there was redemption for him. And that is part of providence, too. That God gives us second and third and fourth and more chances to get things right. And so Nebuchadnezzar is restored to his right mind when he finally acknowledges God’s power instead of his own, when he praises God instead of himself.

And so providence is about both God’s ability to bring good out of bad situations, and it is about the gifts God has given us and the places God has put us and our need to recognize that.

And sometimes, I think providence means that God does things just to make us smile. I remember a story from a time before I went to seminary, when I was working for an urban ministry. A woman was in need of a sofa for her living room. The ministry had acquired a used one for her and some volunteers agreed to bring it to her apartment on a Saturday. She met them outside as they began to unload the sofa from the back of the pick-up truck. She was happy to see them, of course, but the smile on her face grew broader and broader until it erupted into a fit of giggles. And it was just moments before the men who unloaded the sofa into her living room knew why she was laughing. The plaid sofa was an exact match to the chair and ottoman that she already had! Now she had a complete set!⁴

We can call that coincidence. And perhaps it is. Or perhaps even things like that are the way God chooses to care for God’s people.

¹ Genesis 50:19-20, NRSV.

² Daniel 4:30, NRSV.

³ Daniel 2:21, Psalm 75:7.

⁴ The details of this story are a little sketchy, but I’ve got the main outline, I think. This is a story that I remember hearing at Building Together Ministries in Raleigh, NC when I worked there from 1994-1999. The woman who received the sofa would have lived in public housing, in the Halifax Court public housing project, which no longer exists.

Caring for God's people and caring for the world is ultimately what providence is about. Our only responsibility with regard to providence is to acknowledge God's work after the fact. We aren't to predict what God will do, or to try to guess why God is doing something, or to ascribe motives to God where things aren't clear. We aren't to assume that every bad situation has a good meaning, or a good purpose. Providence means recognizing that our stories are part of God's story. And it means saying that. And giving testimony to that fact. It means that we don't claim all our success on our own, because they're not our own. And it means living in hope for something good to come out of our struggles and our failures.

Providence is not about easy platitudes like, "Every cloud has a silver lining." Providence does not tell us that God causes evil to happen to us, because there is a greater good. God doesn't go around doing bad stuff to us for good purposes. But God is able to bring some kind of good out of a bad situation.

Providence also means that there are some situations that may seem bad, but that may not, in fact, be bad. Have you ever lost a job, and then found one and your new job was so much better? Or been depressed about a break-up, only to then meet your spouse? Or not gotten into the college of your dreams, only to find that your second or third choice was a perfect fit for you?

Providence has everything to do with how we look at our lives. It tells us several things. Sometimes that means acknowledging that we aren't as self-made as we think we are. When we consider our successes, that there are certain advantages that we are given by virtue of our birth: our social class, our race, good parents, where we were born, when we were born, our intellect, good genes, whatever it is. And that we ought not be like Nebuchadnezzar, surveying a kingdom we didn't build on our own and praising ourselves.

And when we find ourselves struggling, when it seems like the world is working against us, providence can give us hope that we haven't yet seen it all.

One final thing that must be emphasized is that providence is a backward-looking doctrine. That's the only way we can see what God has done. We can only understand providence in reverse. We can't guess what God is going to do. God is predictably unpredictable. Or maybe unpredictably predictable. We can't be in the midst of difficulty and see God's hand at work. And we certainly can't look at someone's else's struggle and tell them God is working through it—that might be the worst thing we could say. But after. Days after. Weeks after. Sometimes years after. And sometimes we may never get to see it. But after. We can look backwards and see that God has taken what is wrong and fashioned out of it something good. That grace always has the last word. That love always wins. That evil will be overcome by good. This is what we trust, and what we believe. And this is what we believe when we say we believe in the providence of God. That God is working God's purpose out. And that includes God's care for the whole universe. And that includes each one of us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.