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A Sermon Preached by
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“Making Sense of It All” Genesis 45:3-9 (Common English Bible)



Listen for God's Word:

“You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it.”
Genesis 50:20a

Cheese is weird. There are certain foods out there, cheese is one, that make you wonder how in the world did we first discover they were edible? What was going on inside the head of that first person who watched milk go from bad to worse, who watched it turn rancid and chunky and curdled and solidified and moldy; what was going on inside the head of the first person who decided to ingest *that*? How confused, how idiotic, how hungry, do you think that first person had to be?

So I did some cheese research. I know, this is what you come to church for. It turns out cheese was discovered completely by accident. Our ancestors used to transport things in animal hides. Cheese experts believe someone was transporting milk in these hides and the milk went bad and the hides had the right enzymes to create the first forms of cheese. And 10,000 years later, we're still reaping the benefits.

Cheeses are delicious, a delicacy even, served on everything from little charcuterie platters to tacos to pizza. Cheese is so good it could kill you if you eat too much of it, and yet we still eat too much of it. It's incredible. But every cheese, no matter how delicious, no matter how fine, no matter how expensive, every cheese has, at its roots, an animal hide full of rotten, spoiled, disgusting, rancid, curdled milk. Every cheese has a history. And that history is not always pretty.

In today's scripture reading, Joseph is cheese. He's good. He's essentially the vice president of Egypt. He's second in command only to the Pharaoh, and the Pharaoh trusts Joseph a great deal. Like cheese, Joseph is desirable, powerful, he's able to feed his family. Okay, that's probably taking the cheese analogy a bit too far, but he is able to feed his family and a great many other families because of his faith, and because he's gone through times in his life where he felt like a bottle of rancid milk.

Joseph's story begins with a vision. He's a dreamer, and he's already his father's favorite son, and he gets this dream that one day he will rule over his brothers. Now if I were Joseph, I wouldn't be too keen on sharing that vision, but Joseph does share his vision and his brothers don't take it well. They get upset and they plot against him. They throw him in a pit, sell him as a slave for 20 silver, and they take his torn clothes, slaughter a goat, dip the robes in goat blood, and present the blood-soaked robes to their father. He presumes Joseph is dead.

So Joseph is far away now, a slave in Egypt. He's faithful to God. And Joseph goes from being a slave to being in charge of his master's household. Then, through no fault of his own, he gets thrown in jail.

Then Pharaoh has a dream. In his dream, there are seven fat cows and seven thin cows grazing, and the seven fat cows walk up to the thin cows and eat them whole. Pharaoh goes around and searches for someone to interpret the dream, only no one can. That is, until someone suggests he speak to that

strange Hebrew boy from the prisons.

And so Joseph interprets the dream. He says the land will go through seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. And he tells Pharaoh to find a wise man and appoint him authority over all the land of Egypt. He tells Pharaoh the wise man, whoever it is, needs to store the grain during the seven good years. That way, when the seven bad years come, they can feed the people. And after some deliberation, Pharaoh says: That wise man is you.

Pharaoh grants Joseph authority over all of Egypt, and the seven good years happen and Joseph saves; and the seven bad years happen and Joseph distributes. And that's when he sees them. His family. His brothers. The ones who sold him into slavery. They don't recognize Joseph, but Joseph recognizes them.

"It's me, your brother", Joseph says. "Don't be upset, don't be angry, or full of shame. It's okay. Life was hard for me, but I have a purpose. Life was rancid, and rotten, and God used me anyway. God sent me here to save lives. Yours and many, many others."

See, Joseph's brothers did something bad, but God used it for good. Joseph's life was rotten milk, but God made it cheese.

*I imagine many of us,
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I imagine we all have had moments where life was like spoiled milk. Just rotten. I imagine many of us, if not all of us, walk through life carrying with us cartons of spoiled milk. Over here's a bottle of curdled credit card debt. Here's a carton of sour marital issues. Here's a carton of loneliness. Anxiety. Grief. This here is from when I lost my job. Here's a real big carton, a whole gallon of declining health.

We walk through life carrying these things. I don't know why we carry them. I can't explain where they come from, these things that weigh us down and make life rotten. I can only say that they're here, and that we've all got them, and that they stink.

The story ends with good, always.

Friends the good news of the Gospel is this: the story doesn't stop there. The story doesn't end with rotten milk. The story doesn't end with pain or with death or with anything bad. No, the story ends with good, always. Even the ugliest and most rotten situations, even the heaviest, most curdled, disgusting milk, God can repurpose and use for God's good purposes.

Back when I was a chaplain at a detox and mental health facility, I would lead a weekly spirituality group. There were six wings at the facility, and each day, I'd travel to at least one of the different wings to lead a spirituality group. Some of the wings were more challenging than others, but wing 1 was pretty good. It was one of my better groups.

One of wing 1's other staff members, we'll call him Jim, was a tall man, maybe 6'6. He was older than me, but he was built like an ex-NFL player. Jim pulled me aside one day and volunteered to start attending these groups in wing 1. I was a bit hesitant. I wanted to say, "We've got a good thing going here, why don't you join us on wing 5 or 3?" But because I'm a chaplain, and because I'm gracious, and also because I know better than to get on the bad side of someone of Jim's size, I told Jim, "Yes. You're absolutely welcome to join as a silent participant."

So we're in the middle of spirituality group, and we're talking about the serenity prayer and it's going well. The group is a little shy and they're finally starting to open up, and then Jim hesitantly raises one of his big hands. "Chaplain, is it okay if I say

something?” I think to myself, “We talked about this Jim, you’re supposed to be a silent observer.” But what I say is, “sure, go ahead.”

Well, it turns out Jim wasn’t an ex-NFL player. He was an ex-cop who retired from the police force after a lengthy battle with alcoholism. And wing 1, it turns out, is a wing designated entirely for people who struggle with alcoholism. Jim shared with the group a little bit about his life and about his story. He shared about his struggles, his pain, and he talked about the way his disease absolutely ruined him. And he looked at the group and he said, “I’m eighteen years sober, and I could not have done this on my own. Let me tell you about the higher power who helped me along the way.”

What followed was the single best spirituality group I’d ever attended. And, friends, I hardly said another word. See, I had the cloth, but Jim had the experience.

Jim had been to the pit and back, he had seen dark days, darker than a young seminary student like me could ever imagine. He had something no amount of money or education could buy; he had experience. He had milk.

Jim had a pain he’d carried around his whole life. And, if you talked to Jim, he’d tell you he still carries that pain around. But because of who God is in his life, Jim is able every single day to use that pain he carries for good.

*There will come a day
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and uses it for good.*

Friends, whatever it is you carry with you, whatever it is that weighs you down, know this: There will come a day, maybe in the distant future, maybe today; there will come a day when God harnesses that bad and uses it for good. There will come a day when God takes hold of your burden and works it into a

blessing. Yes, there will come a day when God takes that pain and transforms it into healing.

Now the healing may not be for you. It may not take the pain away, or the regret, or the grief, it may not make everything better, it may not make it all worth it. But, make no mistake, God’s going to use you. All of you. Exactly as you are. Not just the pretty parts.

God works with ugly and beautiful, good and bad, and everything in-between. God’s good outweighs the bad in your life. God’s creativity overcomes even the most hopeless of circumstances. God’s grace can redeem even the most wretched of situations.

Friends, at this point it’s important to make a distinction between God creating good out of bad and the popular idea that everything happens for a reason. When a casket lowers into the ground, when the test results come back poorly, one of the worst and most damaging things we can say is everything happens for a reason. It’s not comforting, and it’s just not biblical. Everything doesn’t happen for a reason.

To show you what I mean, we’re going to look at the first and last chapters of Genesis. Stay with me here; we’re going quite literally into deep theological waters, but we’ll be better off for it.

In Genesis 1, when God creates the heavens and earth, before Adam and Eve, before “let there be light,” before any of that, the earth is described as without shape or form, and there’s already this mass of water. People in the Ancient Near East when Genesis was written, understood the waters as a stand-in for chaos. Picture the choppy waves and giant creatures that pop over the surface and all the mysteries that lie beneath. You get the idea. Water equals chaos.

So in the beginning, the world is a formless void, but already there’s chaos. Everything that follows: six days of creation

and one day of rest; six days of separation and ordering and growth, six days of “and it was good”; all of creation is an act of making order out of chaos. The chaos is never explained. It’s there, from the beginning. But God uses it and creates order and beauty, and mountains and valleys, and deserts and planets, and oranges and dogs and us. Chaos didn’t happen for a reason. Chaos is chaos: but God used it anyway.

That’s Genesis 1. If you jump ahead to Genesis 50, the end of this story with Joseph and his brothers. Joseph addresses what his brothers did to him, and he says this: “you meant it for bad, but God made good out of it.” Again: “YOU meant it for bad. You, you did this. But GOD, God made good out of it.” It was bad, it didn’t happen for a reason, but God used it for God’s good purposes.

God looks at the bad of this world and asks, “How can I make this good?” God looks at the ugliness that surrounds us and asks, “How can I make this beautiful?” God looks at the meaningless chaos all around us and asks, “How can I make this ordered?” God looks at sin within us and asks, “How can I make this redeemed and good and pure?”

Friends, isn’t that what the cross is all about? Isn’t that what this whole thing is about? God taking all that’s bad and curdled, and churning something good out of it. God looking at pain and disease and evil and addiction and isolation, loneliness and infidelity, death and debt and famine and milk, God looking at pain, real pain, and saying, “**no**. There has to be another way.”

There is another way.

“So, they stripped him.

And they beat him.

And they nailed him to the cross. “

And they meant it for bad. When they nailed Jesus to the cross, they meant it for bad. But God, God made it good.

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