“Divine Design”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 39:19-33

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One of the great things about the Old Testament portion of *The Story* is that it lays out, in great detail, the life stories of some people such as Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Joseph. We can see many of the ups and downs of their messy lives. In our lives, it is so easy to be caught up in the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows of the present moment. We may never realize that every moment fits into the flow of our whole life story and God is present in every one of those moments. Today, we look at the flow of the life of Joseph, which is considered one of the great short-stories in the history of the world.

We meet Joseph when he was seventeen and is tattling on his brothers, getting them in trouble and annoying them. His brothers all knew that he was their dad’s favorite: “Now Israel [that’s Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe (of many colors) with sleeves” (Genesis 37:3). So Joseph gets preferential treatment; he’s daddy’s boy. “I love you, honey. Here is your Hybrid SUV, your 72-inch HDTV for your bedroom and your new Apple iPhone 6. Your brothers can take the bus, watch TV in the basement and use their old flip phones.” “But when his brothers saw that their father loved him [Joseph] more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:4).

Joseph piled it on by telling his brothers about two dreams, in which his brothers are his servants. They can hardly wait to get rid of this little snot. When the brothers get the chance, they sell Joseph as a slave to a passing band of traders, who take him into Egypt and sell him to a man named Potiphar, who happens to be the captain of the Pharaoh’s bodyguards. It would be like being in the house of the head of our Secret Service. It’s not looking good for Joseph, yet Genesis reports, “The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands” (Genesis 39:3-4). So Potiphar, who would have had a large household and many fields, puts Joseph in charge of everything. The only thing Potiphar had to think about was what he was going to eat! Things are going great!
Joseph was a good-looking guy and Potiphar’s wife, Mrs. Potiphar, tries repeatedly to seduce him. She grabs his garment, perhaps a scarf and he cries, “How then could I do this great wickedness and sin against God” (Genesis 39:9), as he runs from the room leaving his garment behind. Mrs. Potiphar immediately runs to Potiphar and frames Joseph, unjustly accusing him of trying to seduce her and the enraged Potiphar has Joseph thrown in jail. Remember, Potiphar was Captain of the Pharaoh’s bodyguards. There was no due process to defend Joseph. This was a life sentence. Again it’s not looking good for Joseph yet Genesis reports, “But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer” (Genesis 39:21). The chief jailer put Joseph in charge of the entire high security prison where all of the Pharaoh’s personal enemies were kept. My guess is the chief jailer, having nothing else to do, took up Egyptian golf. Joseph went from learning to manage the complex household of Potiphar to the much more complex task of running a high security prison—how to administrate a large staff, how to discipline men, how to regulate the guard, how to care for food and sanitation.

Finally, the Pharaoh has two weird dreams of seven fat cows being eaten up by seven bony, ugly cows and seven plump ears of corn swallowed up by seven thin and sickly ears of corn. Joseph interprets the dreams to mean seven years of hard famine are coming after seven years of plenty, and the Pharaoh said, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house” (Genesis 41:39-40). Joseph saves all of Egypt from starvation. He saves and is reunited with his brothers and his dear father.

In one of the greatest statements in the whole Bible, he said to his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20). It teaches us that God is not the author of evil but God will use evil for good. No matter how deeply wounding and difficult your situation may be or may have been, our God is in the middle of it working to bend it to the good. As you can see in the story of Joseph, that bending to the good took much of Joseph’s life to accomplish. You and I may not even see the good that God will bring out of an evil or desperately wounding moment in our lives. Yet, we can trust that our God is at work. As the Apostle Paul put it, “We know that all things work together for
good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). And don’t forget, all means all!

When you look at Joseph’s life as a whole, you can see God’s divine design on his life—how God used the most difficult moments in Joseph’s life to prepare him for what was coming next. In the beginning, an immature young man, a parent’s favorite, untested, proud. He learns humility working in Potiphar’s household. He was a slave. He learns how to run the largest organization he has ever seen up to that point. Thrown unjustly into jail, God blesses him and he is put in charge of an even larger organization, a maximum-security prison. When Pharaoh asked him to oversee the government of Egypt’s preparation for the coming famine and essentially made Joseph the vice-pharaoh over all of Egypt, Joseph had been prepared for the senior leadership of a very large organization. You can clearly see God’s handiwork, God’s divine design in Joseph’s life.

If you think about the story of your own life, you know there have been moments of blessing and joy, moments in which you have conducted yourself well, moments when you behaved abominably and moments in which you suffered great loss, disappointment and frustration. The Lord who loves you more than you love your own next breath, loves you so much that he will bend every single moment of the story of your life in the direction of good, whether you can see it now or not.

Corrie Ten Boom was a wonderful Christian woman who survived the horrors of the World War II concentration camps. She wrote the book, The Hiding Place, to tell her story. When speaking to audiences she used to hold up the back side of an embroidered piece of cloth. People assumed she was showing them the wrong side since it was a jumble of hundreds of crisscrossing threads going in every direction, all interlocked and mixed together. It was a mess. No picture could be made out of what she showed you. She would say, “This is how our lives feel to us here on earth—confused, often muddled and uncertain, a mess. Corrie would point out that in this life we only see our side of our story—muddled and messy. That was certainly how Joseph must have felt many times.
Then Corrie Ten Boom would triumphantly flip the canvas over to show an elaborately embroidered crown, symbolizing our crown of eternal life. She would say, “This is how our Lord Jesus Christ sees your life. This is your destiny if your trust Jesus Christ who loves you dearly. If you follow him.”

No matter what happens in your life, your ultimate destiny, your divine design is literally in God’s hands. His divine design for you will use every moment in your life, the good and the very painful moments of personal failure, difficulty and disappointments to weave for you your crown of glory.

When I was reading about Abraham and Sarah a couple of weeks ago in The Story, I was drawn to the story of Ishmael, born to Sarah’s slave Hagar when Sarah was impatient for a child. When Sarah’s own son, Isaac, was born, she wants Abraham to kick Hagar and Ishmael out of the family home, which sadly he does. And we read this comment: “God was with the boy” (Genesis 21:20). In other words, in the midst of his rough moments, his tough moments, our Lord never left Ishmael. In the rough moments and tough moments for Joseph, his Lord never left him. No matter how the story of your life is unfolding, you can know for sure that in every moment, including your rough moment, your tough moment, our Lord is always with you.

One of my sisters was living in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit and she found herself having to flee the city with only the clothes on her back and her beloved Labrador. She ended up in an apartment in Austin, Texas, with some borrowed furniture provided by a helpful church. One night, she was lying in bed well aware of the loss of her home and suffering from a very painful skin infection that the evacuation had stirred up. She was in a rough spot, a tough spot and she was praying, “O God, I am not well.” The doorbell rang at that very moment. She got up and opened the door. There were three nurses in nurses’ uniforms standing there. They said, “We are from the emergency room of the local hospital. We hear there are people in this apartment

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1 https://www.flickr.com/photos/corrietenboom/6011810436/
complex from New Orleans. We have come to ask if you need medical assistance!” She was overwhelmed with God’s goodness. Me, too! They took her to their ER and gave her the necessary antibiotics, all without charge. Our Lord never left her, was always with her. When you hit the rough moments, the tough moments such as Joseph experienced, you can know our Lord will never leave you, is always with you. God is writing the divine design of your life story so that His story of healing and redemption is revealed in your story.

A few years ago, Dan Allender spent a weekend with us here at VPC. He spoke about how healing and transformation can come to anyone who has experienced abuse, disappointment and pain—which, simply put, includes every single one of us. Dan explained it is very significant for you to know your own story in order to see God’s story working in your story, and that most of us do not really know our own stories. He said to know your story you have to tell it to a trusted person. In the very telling of your story, you will learn your story in new ways and see the hand of God in your story.²

Dan also offered a word to those who listen to the story of another person. He says, “To enter into another human being’s story you need to have a philosophy of taking your shoes off.” He said I want you to take your shoes off, because you are walking on holy ground where there’s a lot of heartache, maybe a lot of confusion, maybe a lot of anger. If you walk into my story, you’re walking into a mess. But you’re also walking onto holy ground where God continues to redeem me for the sake of revealing something about His story.” He went on to tell two such stories.

When Dan was in college, he went home to do some laundry and to get a picture of his family to fulfill an assignment from a professor. He knew of a box of photos in his mom’s closet. He said, “I found a picture of my mom looking young and holding me, a four-year-old boy, and there was the photo of another man I had never seen before. I went down to mom and said, “That’s you and me and who’s that?” “That’s your father,” she said. I said, “You mean my father upstairs?” “No, he is your step-father.” The man whom I always thought to be father all my life is my step-father, and this man, who I happened to find in a box, is my father. Dan said, “In an instant my life changed as I looked for ways to escape the agony.” That was holy ground in Dan’s life. This one was a place of pain in which God’s story of redemption was to be at work.

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKy__O67YnA  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qa52psdhIlI

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Dan then told of another day in school when his hair was wild, unkempt, uncombed. “One day in school a scrawny kid with frizzy hair tapped my shoulder and asked me for a comb [obviously joking]. I grabbed this kid and he began laughing. My experiences of abuse and the humiliation of laughter was so painful that when this scrawny little boy laughed in my face he was inches from getting his face pounded. But it was laughter like I had never heard before—it was guileless, kind laughter. Unafraid. I was undone by his face. I made the decision to let him go. After classes ended, there was another tap on my shoulder. Same boy—would you like to come to my house after school today. I had never been invited before. We became friends—two commitments made in 8th grade were Best Men in one another’s weddings and the second to die will dance on other’s grave.” That story is holy ground in Dan’s life. This one a place of joy. As Dan said, “My best friend of 45 years opened my life to the gospel and to Jesus Christ.” Then Dan concluded, “My story is your story. Your story is mine. Our story is God’s story. As we bring our joy and our pain to the living God we make note of his death and his resurrection.” That is the gift of God’s story in your story.

Joseph’s story of betrayals and redemption is holy ground. Dan Allender’s story of brokenness and redemption is holy ground. Your story—your every moment—is holy ground on which our Lord is revealing his story in your story. The Holy God who made you, the loving God who loves you, the Lord who thinks about you every waking and sleeping moment of your life is working in you. He has a divine design in mind for you and you can know He will take every moment in your life and bend to the good and to your ultimate joy. To God be the glory.