

Introduction to Scripture:

Joseph, who is the great grandson of Abraham, grew up in Canaan and had a difficult childhood as the 11th of 12 sons. Because he was his father's favorite, his brothers sold him into slavery and he ended up in Egypt. Well, he was smart and proved himself a devoted subject of Pharaoh and eventually, Pharaoh made him his business manager.

Then, drought and famine strike Canaan, and Joseph's brothers and their father (who had been told that Joseph had died), go to Pharaoh's court to plead for food, and who do they encounter? Joseph. And while his brothers are afraid that he will strike out with revenge against them, instead he is full of compassion and forgiveness rather than bitterness and revenge. So the whole family moves to Egypt, and Joseph and Pharaoh are generous with his family. Just before Joseph's father, Israel, dies, he (Israel) gives blessings to his children and grandchildren (at the time there were 70 in his family!). The blessing is that they may become great nations.

After Israel dies, again the brothers are afraid that with their father gone, the buffer between them and the retribution they deserve is removed, and Joseph will finally enact his revenge. But Joseph understands the whole thing differently - believing that because he was taken to Egypt, God was able to work through the situation to provide for Joseph's family. He comforts them, and again they are reconciled.

Joseph continues as Pharaoh's business manager - wise, compassionate, generous, finding ways to conserve and distribute food equitably so that the people thrive, even during the grueling years of drought and famine. And after the desolate years, there were indeed good years: Joseph's leadership and management had brought blessing to the people of Egypt. And through it all, his family was indeed multiplying as God had promised. By the time Joseph dies he had lived to see his great-grandchildren.

So our reading picks up the story just after Joseph has died.

Exodus 1:8-21

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a

boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

Sermon: *Knowing God / Seeing God*

And there arose a king who knew not Joseph.

All of history – turns on that one sentence which begins our reading for today.

In fact, the people of Israel trace their history to this moment when a king came to power in Egypt who did not know Joseph, and his family, and more importantly his God.

And there arose a king who knew not Joseph.

And everything changed. This new king feared the growing population of Israelites, feared that they might join up with his enemies and turn against him, and so he made their lives miserable.

But as you heard in our reading – even under hardship, they thrived and grew! In fact they grew so much that the king turns to murder to control the population. All male children are to be killed by the midwives who bring them into the world.

But the midwives were also afraid. However they feared God and not the king – and history turns again! The midwives are literally bringers of life who follow after God’s ways and not the ways of the murderous king, and so they let the little boys live.

And a direct consequence of this, what comes next is the dramatic soap-opera-esque story of how one of those Israelite babies makes it to the palace of the king to be raised as royalty when he should have been killed - MOSES, who would deliver the enslaved Israelites to freedom.

And again history turns.

All because a king did not know Joseph and because the midwives did know God.

Did you notice that God seems to have had very little to do in the story? He’s only mentioned 3 times. The midwives fear Him in verse 17; and then in verses 20 & 21 God blesses the midwives with families.

But just because He is not named or explicitly visible in this story, doesn’t mean that God is not at work in these events. Is it all coincidence or can we see God’s hand?

You’ve heard similar stories. Here’s one:

On the front porch of his little country store in Illinois, a small businessman stood with his partner. The business was failing, and the partner asked, "How much longer can we keep this going?" The owner answered, "It looks as if our business has just about dried up."

Then he continued, "You know, I wouldn't mind so much if I could just do what I want to do. I really want to study law. If only we could sell everything we've got, pay all our bills and have just enough left over to buy one book – Blackstone's Commentary on English Law, but that's not going to happen."

At that moment a strange-looking wagon came up the road. The driver drove it up close to the store porch, looked at the owner and said, "I'm trying to move my family out west, and I'm out of money. I've got a good barrel here that I could sell for fifty cents." The businessman's eyes went along the wagon and saw the wife looking at him pleadingly, her face thin.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and took out the last fifty cents he had and said, "I guess I could use a good barrel." All day long the barrel sat on the porch of that store. His partner kept teasing him about it until late in the evening he walked out and looked down into the barrel. He saw something in the bottom of it, papers that he hadn't noticed before.

His long arms went down into the barrel and, as he fumbled around, he hit something solid. He pulled out a book and stood dumbfounded: it was Blackstone's Commentary on English Law. And the Illinois store owner was Abraham Lincoln.

And again, history turned. Coincidence or God's hand?

The theological principle at work here is *providence*. Providence comes from the two Latin words *pro* and *video* – which mean to *see before* or to *see ahead*. One scholar describes providence as "the concept that you are blessedly unaware of the fact that God is aware of your needs." (Rolf Jacobson, *Crazy Talk*, p. 138)

The providential work of God is not always plain and clear to us. We may not even realize that it is God who is acting. Only later, at some future time, when we look back over our lives, and the truth is revealed, do we come to see the hand of God. And we say, "Oh yeah. Now I understand what that was all about!"

Coincidence may be God's way of acting anonymously in your life.

A young carpenter lays aside his father's tools to take up the call of an itinerant preacher. For three years he travels the hills and valleys of his native home. Though thousands would begin to follow him, they would all leave him in the end. He is scapegoated by the local religious and political powers, and arrested by the authorities. In the end he is tortured and put to death as a common criminal.

How could this be God at work?

Well, three days later the story begins to be told that he has been seen alive by his closest companions. On the next religious high holy day, they claim this man was the Messiah and that his death has fulfilled God's plan to grant mercy to sinners, and grace to those who believe. Grace.

Since the Reformation 500 years ago, the Protestant tradition has taught that the last word in every human situation is always the grace of God – God’s grace will have the final say. This means that God’s grace can be, and is, experienced in the ordinary affairs of our lives.

In other words: God takes all the various circumstances of our lives – even when they are far, far less than perfect; and, over time, fashions something good and useful out of them. When we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and come to know him as our Lord & Savior, we see more clearly that God IS at work in our lives, our world, and in its history.

As Paul says, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him." Everything. Not some things. Not just happy things. Everything – by providence and grace.

As Christians, we believe that God’s grace is the last word. In every human situation, whether it is an historical event that overwhelms us, or a personal event that derails us, God’s grace is there.

But this grace is not just a human attitude that helps us stoically face whatever happens to us. God’s grace is the personal activity of God in your life and mine that opens up for us new possibilities in every situation. And that gives us hope, hope that beyond every defeat, every set back, every disaster, every disappointment, God’s good purposes are working themselves out in our lives.

This does not mean that there are no difficult times. Of course, there are. And the pain, the isolation, the suffering is intense and very, very real. But, real as these are, they are not the last word. God has the last word, and it is always grace.

As that old favorite hymn says:

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come.

'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

The story of Joseph, the story of how Moses came to be born, the story of Jesus, even the story of Abraham Lincoln reveals God’s providence, the awesome working of God’s grace in very human lives. And these stories inspire us to look back through our own lives, to consider where we’ve come from, and how God’s hands have rested upon us.

I invite you to do that. Look back at your own life. Look back along the path that has brought you to where you are today – in your career, or in your family, or your friendships, or your schooling.

Where are the corners you turned deliberately, perhaps even painfully – but only later came to understand just why?

Or maybe that understanding hasn’t quite come yet.

How about the long, lazy curves you rounded almost imperceptibly – and only much later did you realize how the landscape had changed, and how permanently!

Do you see the patterns of the grace of God at work in your life? Can you see how, by God's grace, we live our lives not in quiet desperation, but in grace and power and peace, even as we face the challenges of today?

God's grace is sufficient for whatever comes our way. This is the heart of the Christian faith. The grace of God is at work for good, even if the road is rough and the journey difficult. Because remember, the Lord provides - sees ahead of us.

The cliché is true – it's not what you know that matters, but who you know.

And who we know, is the Lord who made us, who made the world

Who loves us, who loves the world.

Who is bringing to birth new life all the time, all around us, in us, and through us.

Amen.