

“Where Is God in This Story?”
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
August 13, 2017

I realize it may seem like a strange question to ask about a biblical text, but when I read the narrative of Genesis 37, I have to wonder – where is God in this story? I say this partly because God is not mentioned anywhere, but mostly because when I examine the details of the story, it is difficult to imagine how the God of love and justice revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus could possibly be involved.

For this is a story about family conflict and violence. This is a story about dysfunctions being passed down from one generation to the next. This is a story about a family where a father plays favorites, wives compete for affection based upon the number of children they can bear, and brothers try to kill one brother and eventually sell him into slavery.

It starts with Jacob favoring Joseph which is almost unimaginable. If anyone should have known the dangers of favoritism, Jacob should have. But the sins of one generation are passed on to the next. As is often the case with family issues, Jacob shares the gift of sibling rivalry with his children. He singles out Joseph as his favorite, even gives him a special coat, and Joseph doesn't help matters by giving a bad report on his brothers and telling them about his dreams in which they bow down to him. In the end, they decide to do away with Joseph altogether!

We have tried to make this story into a cute little children's tale about a boy with a pretty coat, a tale that has a happy ending. But if we pay attention to the story, especially this part of it, we realize this is not a children's tale. It is a text of violence. It is a story about a family hell-bent upon doing harm. Thus, I ask - where is God in this story?

Of course, it is the same question we often ask of our stories. Where is God when a loved one suffers with cancer, struggles with the devastating effects of the disease and its treatments? Where is God when someone we care about dies unexpectedly after having lived a

good but incomplete life? Where is God when we try to do our best, pray about a decision and act on what we believe to be God's desire only to find ourselves struggling yet again? Where is God in a world where millions suffer in poverty, natural disasters wipe out masses of people, terrorists kill without remorse and the leaders of nations don't seem to have a clue how to address the underlying problems?

We don't expect a bed of roses for ourselves or perfection in the world. We realize that God does not shield us from all harm and that faith does not guarantee an easy path. But what difference does faith make? And where is God in the midst of the struggles we face?

Observing atrocities in a Nazi prison camp more grotesque than any horror movie scene, Simon Wiesenthal suggested that perhaps there are times when God is on leave. He watched fellow captives lined up naked before a ditch and shot so as to fall into the ditch for burial. He heard a guard brag about killing two inmates with one bullet. He concluded that God must be on leave. If there is a God, and he wanted to cling to that belief, God is not here. God must be on leave.

So it often seems in our lives and world, and so it often seems in the biblical story as well. When we read about what happens to Joseph, we wonder – where is God, where is God?

Yet, upon closer examination, perhaps God is in this story. It is the perspective of the biblical writer that God is involved, perhaps working behind the scenes or underneath the surface, working to shape it toward a redemptive conclusion. Joseph is sold into slavery, but he ends up in Egypt and this allows him to rise to a position that later helps his family.

Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann makes this observation. "As one might expect, the theological claims of the narrator are subdued and mostly implicit. Nonetheless, the narrative has an identifiable and singular intention. It urges that in the contingencies of history, the purposes of God are at work in hidden and unnoticed ways. But the ways of God are nonetheless reliable and will come to fruition (*Genesis*, p. 289)."

The purposes of God are at work in hidden ways, yet these ways are nonetheless reliable. This much seems to apply to Joseph's story,

but even if it does, what does it mean? Precisely how, hidden or not, is God at work in this story? Though we may not be able to answer this question definitively, there are some things we can and must say.

For one thing, God does not cause or intend the family violence that leads to Joseph being thrown in a pit and later sold into slavery. These are the specific contingencies Brueggemann refers to, the details of human experience that are a function of human action, not divine. Some argue that God directly causes everything that takes place, but this is difficult to square with scripture or life.

In his book *The Will of God*, a collection of sermons written during the Second World War, English minister Leslie Weatherhead tells the story of a friend in India whose son died of cholera and who apparently bought into this thinking - God causes everything; so, this must have been God's will. Weatherhead asked the friend what he would think if a man smeared cholera germs all over his daughter and she later died. "What would I think?" the man replied, "If I caught him, I would kill him with as little compunction as I would a snake..." How then, Weatherhead wondered, could he accuse God of doing such a thing? God does not in any way cause or intend suffering and violence.

What God does is work within the context of human contingencies to bring good out of whatever occurs. It is the same basic concept we explored a couple of weeks ago while reflecting on the best translation of Romans 8:28, "In all things God works for good with those who love God." We might envision God as a great tapestry maker, taking the various colors of thread we bring, taking the uneven mixture of fabrics life throws our way, and then weaving it all into a magnificent design. God doesn't choose every thread, but God weaves it all into a beautiful work of art, very much like our new green stoles.

God works for good in the midst of a violent, dysfunctional family like Joseph's and God works for good in the midst of the dysfunctions of our families and violence of our world. God does not cause the struggles we face, struggles of marriage, family and work, but God does work in the midst of the struggles, seeking to bring good out of whatever we face. God does not cause cancer, AIDS or any other disease, nor do the illnesses themselves bring about good, but God does work in the

midst of these struggles with those who are sick. In the view of scholars like Marcus Borg, God does not cause the suffering of Jesus on a cross, but God works even through this tragic, violent event to bring hope and healing (*The Heart of Christianity*). In *all* things God works for good.

Of course, it is often difficult to discern this activity. As the prophet Elijah discovers, God speaks not in the earthquake, wind or fire, but in the still, small voice. Every now and then someone may walk on water, as Jesus does in today's Gospel reading, but most of the time God speaks and acts in subtle ways that are difficult to perceive. So, discernment is critical.

Yet how God works in the Joseph story is instructive. What stops Joseph from being killed before he can serve any noble purpose? One person speaks up on his behalf. Often that is all it takes. Often this is how God works, through one solitary voice, one simple act of courage and compassion. Often this is who we are called to be, what we are called to do, how we are called to participate in God's reign.

It requires a shift of focus from wondering why something has happened and whether God has caused it to considering how God will respond and what we might be called to do. But it is a healthy and needful shift. Rather than becoming obsessed with the question *why*, for which we may never find an adequate answer this side of eternity, what might happen if we were to ask how God might use us in some small way to make a difference in the life of someone who is hurting?

I think of how CBF field personnel, Cindy and Eddy Ruble, responded to the tsunami in the Indian Ocean that took a quarter of a million lives in 2004. Many were asking why this happened, where God was. It was a devastating tragedy. The Rubles, who were working in Indonesia at the time, said they had no answer for those questions. All they could do was focus on what could be done now to help people and where God was now, active in every response of compassion.

It was a helpful shift in thinking. It mobilized people to act and created space for a healthy theological perspective. It is often difficult to discern where God is, and we have no adequate answers for some horrific circumstances. We can't say why God allows certain things to happen. But we do know God is always working for good.

In his book *All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten* Robert Fulghum tells a story about a time he watched children playing hide-and-seek. He noticed one child hiding so well under leaves that he might never be found. So, he screamed out his window, “GET FOUND, KID!” It scared him so badly that he started crying and ran inside to tell his mother about his mean neighbor. “It’s hard to know how to be helpful sometimes,” the author laments.

But then he reveals his purpose in telling this story. He describes the ways we often hide from one another, hide, for example, the feared diagnosis so as to protect loved ones yet also keep our feelings to ourselves. Further, he notes that medieval theologians described God in hide-and-seek terms, *Deus Absconditus*, the One who seems hidden from human eyes. So it often seems. God may be in the world, but God is hiding, hiding too well, hiding deep beneath the leaves of the world’s struggles.

Yet Fulghum suggests that, if God is hiding, the game is more like Sardines than hide-and-seek. It is a game where a person hides but when others find him/her, they stay together like puppies in a pile or sardines in a can until eventually someone starts laughing and then everyone is found. Fulghum says he thinks God is a Sardine player and will be found the same way everybody gets found in Sardines – by the sound of laughter of those heaped together at the end.

I like this image. God does seem hidden in this life, not because God plays games, but because this is how God works. Yet God can be found and when God is, there is laughter and joy, and some tears too, and in the end, everyone is included. That’s how it works in the Joseph story and in ours. May God help us to see where God is and how we might be used to help others join in the laughter!