# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Joseph”**

**Genesis 50:14-21**

 **June 11, 2023**

There are times when life feels out of control. A marriage is falling apart. A person close to us has died unexpectedly. Gossip harms us or our loved ones. Our plans for our wellbeing and happiness are not coming together as we had hoped. At such times life seems unpredictable and arbitrary. We realize that we are not in control.

It is especially when we feel out of control that we need a story like that of Joseph. Through Joseph’s story we are given insight into the God who exercises his control by guiding us and the world according to his power, his wisdom and his love. I invite you to turn with me to Genesis 50:14-21

After burying Jacob, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had accompanied him to his father’s burial. But now that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers became fearful. “Now Joseph will show his anger and pay us back for all the wrong we did to him,” they said. So they sent this message to Joseph: “Before your father died, he instructed us to say to you: ‘Please forgive your brothers for the great wrong they did to you—for their sin in treating you so cruelly.’ So we, the servants of the God of your father, beg you to forgive our sin.” When Joseph received the message, he broke down and wept. Then his brothers came and threw themselves down before Joseph. “Look, we are your slaves!” they said. But Joseph replied, “Don’t be afraid of me. Am I God, that I can punish you? You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. No, don’t be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children.” So he reassured them by speaking kindly to them.

The brothers of Joseph have been uncomfortable for a long time. Ever since they discovered he was a ruler in Egypt they have been concerned about Joseph wanting revenge for what they did to him. Back when Joseph was a young man, they had plotted against him, wanting him dead. They had thrown him into a well, there to die, but had then pulled him out and sold him into slavery. If they are capable of such evil, why not assume that Joseph is also? So, now that their father has died, they fear Joseph will pay them back for all the wrong they did to him.

Joseph receives the message from his brothers and it breaks his heart that they don’t believe that he loves them and has forgiven them. When next they meet, he says: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good.” Joseph knows that God has been in control all along. He looks back over his life and sees his father sending him to find his brothers, his brothers selling him into slavery, being purchased by Potiphar, falsely accused by Mrs. Potiphar, imprisoned with the Baker and the Cupbearer, and elevated by Pharaoh to second in all the empire because God has given him the gift of interpreting dreams. He sees and he understands that God has been guiding the events of his life.

But, what about those times when we have not yet reached the point of looking back and being able to make sense of it all? What about when we are in the midst of these events? I am sure that during his hardships Joseph asked, “Why, God?” It hurts that your brothers hate you so much that they want to kill you. It angers you to be falsely accused and thrown into prison. It is painful to wait in prison for someone to remember you. Has God forgotten me? Believing that God is in control and doing things his way does not mean that our lives will be easy.

Why does God allow bad things to happen? I believe the answer to that question lies in the tension between the will of God and the will of human beings. It was God’s decision from the beginning to allow us to act according to our will, thereby either accepting or rejecting his will. This was not due to any weakness of God’s part. No, in fact, it’s just the opposite. Because God’s will is *so* sovereign, *so* all-powerful, *so* in control, it has room for our freedom of will without negating his will. The crowning achievement of God’s will is that it allows us to exercise our will.

God does not force us to do his will. He did not force Joseph’s brothers to do his will with respect to Joseph. What they did was against the will of God – as Joseph himself says, “You meant it for evil.” And God let them. But, their freedom to do evil did not overcome the goodness of God. He used their evil for good, bringing Joseph to a position where he could save the lives of many people.

I wonder if Jeremiah was thinking of the Joseph story when he spoke these words: “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and give you a hope.” Was Paul reflecting on Joseph when he wrote to the Romans, “All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose”?

The message of the Joseph story is that a loving God is able to take human choices for evil and use them for his good plans. So, no matter what form of evil comes into our lives, know that God is in the business of bringing good out of that evil. Turn it over to him, and one day you and I, like Joseph, will be able to look back and see how God has been at work in our lives precisely because we used the free will he gave us to accept his Son as our Lord and Savior, and to study his Word by which we learned his will.

“Trust and obey for there’s [pause] no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” All of us want to be happy. What will do the better job of getting us there – following our will or following God’s will?