

Hidden Blessings

Genesis 45:3-11, 15a
February 23, 2025

First Presbyterian Church
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Author Timothy Merrill tells about the time he and his wife were looking after their grandkids, two girls ages 3 and 5, who just loved to play hide-and-seek. As the girls ran and hid behind bushes and trees, Merrill began to count to 10. Then he opened his eyes and shouted, "Ready or not, here I come!"

The trouble is, 3- and 5-year-olds who play hide-and-seek just can't stay hidden. They don't want to stay hidden. So moments into the search, Merrill saw their heads bobbing up above a bush and from behind a tree. Quickly, the girls popped into plain view, shouting, "I'm here, I'm over here!"

God is like that, says Merrill. God may seem to hide from us sometimes, but God cannot stay hidden. God wants to be found! When we seek God with all our hearts, God says, "I will let you find me" (that's from Jeremiah 29:14).

In today's Old Testament lesson, Joseph's brothers have been playing a game of hide-and-seek with God. These sons of Jacob had the audacity to sell their brother Joseph into slavery, thinking God would not see what they were up to, or at least not care too much.

Problem was, God had plans for Joseph – to make him the heir to his covenant with Abraham, and thus all generations of Abraham's family, including us as his spiritual ancestors, brought into the covenant through our faith in Jesus Christ.

God had promised Abraham that from him shall come all the generations of the faithful, a promise the brothers would have jeopardized, just because they didn't like that Joseph was the favored one.

Had the brothers been left to their own devices, we would not be here today as followers of Christ. Had the famine not driven the brothers and their father into Egypt in search of food, they may never have survived. Had the blessing of God not been upon Joseph, he might not have been so gracious to them as to preserve their lives. All of these hidden blessings are revealed in hindsight as God works out his plan and purpose through their lives.

There are a lot of variables that had to fall into place for God's plan to proceed toward fulfillment – a lot of twists and turns that had to be straightened out. Thankfully, ours is a God who makes straight the crooked when it comes to fulfilling his plan and purpose.

We live in a time when a lot of variables need to fall into place and a lot of twists and turns need to be straightened out. Actually, we always have.

If you look back on your life, I bet you can see times when you made a decision to go this way or that and the outcome wasn't so great. And still, God saw you through it. God popped up and said, "Here I am. I'm over here."

Take Joseph and his brothers, for instance. You'd think that Joseph being sold into slavery was enough to derail God's plans for him. But God is able to turn even this terrible situation for the better.

There are several things that Joseph and his brothers lack in dealing with the situation at hand – things we wish we had during such uncertain times in our lives.

The first is control. Joseph had no control over his life when he was sold into slavery. The brothers have no control over the famine threatening their lives and the lives of everyone they know and love.

All they can do is keep moving forward and hope for the best.

The same is true for us when things get out of control. We have to keep moving forward, confident that God is out ahead preparing for us just what we need when we need it; hidden blessings that God will reveal to us.

It's like how God took control of the situation for Joseph, raising him up as Pharaoh's right-hand-man, and restoring for his brothers their relationship with Joseph. God is in control, even and especially when things seem to be really out of our control. You can trust in that.

The second thing we need during uncertain times is a sense of wellbeing, faith that everything will be OK.

Standing before Joseph, the brothers are not at all sure everything will be OK. So Joseph says to them, "... Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life, ... and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here," says Joseph, "but God...."

Joseph knows that God is not only in control but that God will look out for their wellbeing – for our wellbeing -, even in times of great need.

Take for instance, the Russian laborer working a state-owned farm in the former Soviet Union. One day during a particularly dry year, an officer of the Communist Party questions the farmer, "How was the crop this year, comrade?"

"Oh, we had a fantastic harvest," he said. "Many, many potatoes. So many potatoes, in fact, that if you piled them up to the sky, they would reach the foot of God!"

"There is no God," shouted the officer.

“There aren’t any potatoes either,” said the farmer.

Even and especially in uncertain, difficult times, we need to have faith that God is in control and that God is looking out for us, preparing for us a bountiful harvest of blessings.

Finally, when things seem out of control and the future is so uncertain, we need a sense of purpose and fulfillment. In Genesis, we read that the famine has devastated the land, so much so that “there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing or harvest.”

Ploughing and harvesting are what people did back then. It was an agrarian society, and without the land to cultivate, they had no sense of fulfillment, no purpose in life.

Well, thanks to Joseph’s faithfulness, he and his brothers now have a purpose, a future to fulfill. Joseph and his brothers and their families are to be God’s faithful remnant, in fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham and all his descendants, including us..

When things are out of our control and the future is uncertain, we still have a purpose in life – we are still called to be God’s faithful people. Had Joseph not been faithful to God, everything that he went through would have been for naught, no use to anyone.

But because Joseph trusted that God was in control, that God cared about his wellbeing, and that God still had a purpose for him to fulfill – because of Joseph’s faithfulness – he was instrumental in the fulfillment of God’s divine plan.

And so are we. Even though the future is uncertain, even though so many things seem out of our control, we can rest assured that God has this, that God is looking out for our wellbeing, and that we have a purpose to fulfill.

God promised to never give up on us, and as long as we don’t give up on God, this world will come to know and enjoy peace and prosperity, the peace and prosperity that God desires for all people. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, we don't always understand why things happen the way they do; why our plans and dreams fail and we find ourselves facing challenge after challenge, disappointment after disappointment.

Yet, we do believe that you are at work in our lives, and that you have a larger plan and purpose for each one of us.

Give us faith to trust in you no matter what challenges we face. Give us courage to place our dreams and ambitions in your hands, and then follow where you lead without hesitation, confident that your loving presence goes with us.

We pray the presence and comfort of your Spirit, O Lord, for those who grieve. We ask your healing touch for those dealing with medical issues. We pray all this in the name of the one who showed us the way, who reveals to us what a life of love and faithfulness looks like, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.