

God is Good...(and bigger than bad)

Gen. 45:4-8, 50:15-21

Romans 8:18-30

This is an old Chinese parable.

There once was a poor farmer in a village who owned one horse. It helped him plow, and haul, and do much of his work. The horse ran away one day. His neighbors said "Oh, what bad luck." The farmer said, "Good luck, bad luck, who is to say."

The horse came back a few days later, followed by a small herd of wild horses, which the farmer welcomed into his corral. The neighbors said, "Oh what good luck!" The farmer said "Good luck, bad luck, who is to say."

The farmer's 15 year old son learned to break and ride the wild horses. One day the boy was thrown, and he broke his leg. He walked with a limp from then on. The neighbors said, "Oh what bad luck." The farmer said, "Good luck, bad luck, who is to say."

Bandits came through the town. Everyone was robbed. All the young men of the village were forced to go with them, except the injured son of the farmer. The neighbors said, "Oh what good luck." The farmer said, "Good luck, bad luck, who is to say."

In this Taoist parable, the wise farmer admits that one never knows what the future brings, or what circumstances will turn out to lead to something good.

Joseph at the end of his life says to his brothers, "What you intended for evil, God intended for good." Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." These are two amazing statements of faith. They are uttered in two very different situations, but point to our hope in God as the final arbiter of life's meaning and purpose.

You know Joseph's story. He was up, then down, then up, then down, then up again. He was his father's favorite, then his brothers' enemy, then Potiphar's trusted aid, then betrayed by the wife, then something of a help to those in prison, then he was Pharaoh's trusted aid. Through his roller coaster ride, Joseph grew in his awareness that he was ultimately in God's hands. He found God faithful. His chapter of the story ended pretty well. He was a hero--rich and famous. He saved his family. His statement of faith is clear, "What you intended for evil, God intended for good." Not just his good, but the good of many people. Joseph's suffering had a pay off within his own lifetime. His chapter of the story ended well and he lived happily ever after.

Let us call this a "silver lining" testimony. We have heard them, and we have experienced them ourselves. We know there are times when God works something good out of something bad.

I once served in an inner city congregation, in a very low income, high crime neighborhood. One weekend, someone stole all the choir robes from the closet in the sanctuary. Now what anybody would want with threadbare, Presbyterian choir robes I do not know! But they were gone. So that Sunday I stood up and explained to the congregation why the choir was in their "civilian" clothes.

A couple was visiting us from a Presbyterian church across town. They went home and talked this over. On Wednesday I got a call. They would like to buy us new choir robes.

We were to get a catalogue, pick them out, and send them the bill. So something good came out of something bad. A silver lining. We have all seen this.

A person gets fired from a dull, dead end job, then goes on to start a new business doing something she really loves; something she feels called to do. And it goes well. The new work is good for the entrepreneur and for the community. Both prosper because of her willingness to be open to God even in dark times. “All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” So there was a silver lining to the cloud of being fired.

Someone has it in for you. He slanders you, betrays your confidence, acts in a deceitful manner, spreads gossip. But you refuse to return evil for evil. You keep your eyes focused on what truly matters. You suffer through a period where others are not sure about you. Then, in the end, the one who carried lies is caught by those lies, and loses out. People come to see that you are the dependable one. What that one intended for evil, God intended for good.

We know these stories. We have seen them. We have been in them. Joseph is right. God often takes what is intended as harm, and turns it toward something good. Paul is right: people who love God, who seek God’s purpose in their own lives, often find the way cleared for them after a time of turmoil. There are silver linings. Good luck, bad luck, we are in God’s hands.

But not all our stories work out so clearly, even for those who love God. Many others do not get the Joseph ending to their story. Slandered, they are the ones who lose out. Divorced, they are the ones who suffer financial and emotional damage. Downsized in mid career, they don’t find a way back in. In places of tyranny around the world, they are arrested and “disappeared”. It is much harder in these situations to say that God is still at work for good.

Look at the Apostle Paul.

Paul was up, then down, then up, then down again. His story was also a roller coaster ride, like Joseph. But it did not end well.

He was a respected Pharisee, then an outcast for his new faith in Jesus as Messiah. Then he found himself standing next to Peter in Jerusalem before the whole council of elders of the church. They blessed his call to minister to the Gentiles. He became a traveling preacher and founder of churches. Sometimes he was welcomed with open arms, and sometimes he was beaten and thrown in jail. While in jail, some fellow Christians made fun of him, and undid much of the good work he had done.

With not much else to do, Paul wrote letters from prison to churches around the empire, many of them struggling under persecution as he was. He wrote by the candle light in a jail cell “I consider our present sufferings not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us” . Paul reflects on his own sin and weakness, then marvels at the help of the Holy Spirit, who can translate even our sighs and groans into prayers. The person who writes that has to know something about suffering. He knows something about lonely nights when he cannot find the words to speak to God.

Paul in prison becomes a great inspiration to those who love God, who are suffering, who look for God’s purpose to be fulfilled in this world and the world to come. He knew a lot about “ these present sufferings”.

But Paul’s chapter ended badly. Churches he founded collapsed; friends turned on him; he was taken to Rome in chains, tried and executed. There was no silver lining within his own lifetime. But his witness, and some of the churches he founded continued after his

death. And his letters were collected and became the major portion of our New Testament. The emperor who had Paul executed is now forgotten. Paul's words are still being read 2,000 years later. They inspire us in our dark and difficult times. What you intended for evil, God intended for good. All things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. But sometimes that purpose works out very slowly, far beyond a single lifetime.

Good luck, bad luck, who is to say. God has a say, that's who. Both Joseph and Paul declare that God is at work in all circumstances; that we are in God's hands, not in the hands of our enemies, not at the mercy of the economic forces beyond our control, not doomed by the old tapes of condemning voices left running in our heads. God is at work in all of these.

The story is always bigger than any one person's byline. God purpose is bigger than our one strand of the plot. Some parts of our story will go well, and other parts will not. But the final outcome is beyond our knowing. And so we seek to be people who love God, and who seek God's purpose, because that is where all the stories will find their true end. In the final analysis, we do not know which are the good chapters and which the bad ones – only God knows. So we commit ourselves to God's purposes, and then we trust.

Let me close with this quote from a theologian named Reinhold Niebuhr. I have it taped inside the cover of my journal, for those times when nothing I do seems to make any difference at all.

I would like you to read it silently in your bulletin. Then let's read it aloud.

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our life time, therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.”

Sometimes we see amazing things happen with those who love God. I do believe in lots of silver lining stories. But even more than that, I believe that God is at work far beyond what we see. Neither good luck, nor bad luck decide our outcome. We are in God's hands – that is the best place to be.

I ask you know to reflect silently on these two questions found in your bulletin.

Where do you see the “fingerprints” of God on your life in difficult times?

How do you express this faith to others?

Dr. Charlie Summers