

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“The Hand of God”

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45 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, ‘Send everyone away from me.’ So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come closer to me.’ And they came closer. He said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.’ ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Many years ago there was a farmer who had one son and a horse. One day the horse broke out of the corral and fled to the freedom of the nearby hills. “Your horse got out? What bad luck!” the neighbors said. The farmer asked, “Why do you say that? How do you know it is bad luck?”

Sure enough, the next night the horse came back to his familiar corral for his usual feeding and watering, leading twelve wild horses behind him. The farmer’s son saw the horses in the corral, slipped out a side door, and locked the gate behind the horses. Suddenly the farmer and his son had thirteen horses instead of none. The

neighbors heard the good news and rushed to the farmer's house. "Thirteen horses," they said. "What good fortune you have!" The farmer responded simply, "How do you know that it is good fortune?"

Some days later the farmer's strong son was trying to ride one of the wild horses. He was thrown off and broke his leg. The neighbors returned that night and passed off to the farmer another hasty judgment. "Your son broke his leg. What bad luck!" Again the farmer responded calmly, "How do you know it is bad luck?"

Sure enough, a few days later a warlord came through the town and conscripted every able-bodied young man, taking them off to war, never to return to their home again. But the farmer's son was spared- because of his broken leg.

Luck? Choice? Or was it the hand of God?

Have you ever thought about the circumstances or forces that led you to the places and events of your life? Think about something as simple as what led you to this place this morning. You moved to this area. You were looking for a church. You were looking for a Congregational church. Or maybe you simply grew up in this area and chose to follow in your parent's footsteps, attending this kind of church. Some people are here today because they have made a choice. Choices in life can be illustrated like a supermarket. You get the things that happen because you choose them.

But perhaps there are some of you that are here by chance. This church

happens to be closest to your home. You weren't considering attending this church but someone invited you. You did not consider yourself to be a religious person but then suddenly there was a difficult period in your life raising issues that moved you to question, and to church. Or perhaps you are here because a loved one has dragged you here. You ended up here not necessarily because you deliberately chose to attend but more because of fate. It was chance, luck. The illustration is a roulette wheel. It doesn't matter who you are or what you do. When your number comes around, and then it is your turn.

But what if there were another explanation? What would you say if I told you that I believe you are here today because God meant you to be here? What would you say if I told you that God has plans, purposes, direction, things being worked out in your life that are being moved along simply by your being here today?

It was a long and complicated story, this story of Joseph and his brothers. Today we heard the tail end of the story. Joseph was a young man with dreams, dreams that his brothers did not care for at all. They sold him into slavery into Egypt. While in Egypt he continued to dream and earned his way into the household of one of Pharaoh's officers. There he was tempted by the officer's wife and thrown into jail on trumped up charges. Joseph languished there for years. While in prison he became known for interpreting dreams. Pharaoh was so impressed with this skill that he released Joseph from prison and put him in charge of the Egyptian welfare program. And who would show up in

Egypt looking for food during the famine? Joseph's brothers. And they didn't recognize the powerful, government official sitting before them. When Joseph revealed himself to them, they feared for the worst. This was his chance to pay them back for the horrible thing they had done to him. They were ready for the pit, for slavery, for prison.

Joseph's response was this, "Fear not. You meant evil against me but God meant it for good, so that many should live." Joseph believed that his brothers' efforts to get rid of him had actually been used by God to keep the family alive. They meant to do evil. God turned it into good.

It was truly a long a complicated story. I suppose that if we have time to reflect upon our own stories, they might be equally long and complicated. I like to tell the story of how Laura and I first met. We were at Harper Hospital in Detroit- a place neither one of us were supposed to be or wanted to be. She was to be in Arizona but had to settle for Detroit. I was to be in Ann Arbor, close to a woman I was dating, but was transferred to Detroit. Our paths crossed at a hospital chapel service, the only time I was leading chapel that summer and the only time that Laura had attended.

Our stories won't make the pages of Scripture. We probably will never see our lives acted out on a Broadway stage. But our stories are full of twists and turns: relocation and planned moves that never developed, relationships started and ended, marriages and divorces, births and death, jobs we sought only to be denied, jobs we quit to fit work elsewhere. In

our lives there have been victories and setbacks, laughter and tears, love and anger, comfort and fear. There has been resentment and betrayal, acceptance and affirmation.

We are so accustomed to thinking that the stories of our life are either choice or chance. Choice- life is what we decide to do. Chance- life is dealing with our fate. But if life is simply left to our choices, we know enough about ourselves and our brothers and sisters on this planet to know that we are doomed. If the world is left only to my doing, or to your doing, it does seem a bit hopeless. On the other hand, if we believe in chance, we are stuck being pawns or puppets. There is nothing we can do to change anything so it is pointless to try. It is a Woody Allen once about modern day alternatives, "Humanity stands at the crossroads. On one hand is the way to terrible difficult, trial, and heartache. On the other hand is the way to total oblivion."

Then there is the way this story of Joseph supports. Can we see something in our stories, something working behind the action, some hand greater than the actors and the deeds? Is there something that allows us to make decisions and choices yet offers us a plan to weigh the choices and furnishes us with the wisdom and courage to make the decision? In the Joseph story, the hero wasn't a brother who conspired to kill the dream. The hero wasn't Pharaoh who released the dreamer from prison. The hero wasn't the bratty little brother who had the dream in the first place. No, the hero was the one who makes this story worth telling. The hero was the author of the story, a plan hidden but certain and true.

At the end of the story Joseph discovered the hero when he said, "Fear not, what you meant for evil, God meant for good!" God's plan will triumph. We are not told how. We may not even see it come to be. But we live in the confidence that it will happen.

Look upon your life. Is it choice? Is it chance? Or is it something else? Could it be the hand of God? To believe this we must believe that life is more than one darn thing after another. To believe this we must trust that we are not in this thing alone. Life is not left merely up to us. God graciously and mysteriously intrudes. We cannot be certain until at some later moment when we look back and see how the pieces somehow fit together for our good.

This is a difficult thing to comprehend. It is a difficult thing for me to wrap my arms around. I do not believe in predestination. I don't believe that all things happen because God ordains them to be. The hair on my neck raises when some athlete attributes his or her victory to God's will. I have to bite my tongue when someone explains a death away by saying that God had set the appointed time. It isn't logical. It goes against what I believe God to be. Yet I know I can manage the Detroit Tigers to victory very easily the day after the game. And I can see God's hand in my life more clearly when I look backwards in faith. It is amazing how it all fits together, as if there were a hand, an overriding purpose, and a divine intent.

St. Augustine once said that our lives are like a chicken yard full of random tracks. There are chicken tracks in the mud, going this way and that way in total confusion. Seen through the eyes

of faith, straining to see God's purposes, our lives take on a pattern, coherence, and form. We discover a certain design, a direction as if led by an unseen hand.

That is the way it is with God. We don't know for sure that God was mixed up in the human madness until later, mostly in a backward glance. Only then are we able to say that those events that we chalked up to our own greatness or to mere happenstance were actually the workings of a loving and living God. Like our brother Joseph discovered, and like the apostle Paul once wrote, "In everything God works for good with those who love him, those who are called according to his purpose."