

“Anticipating Hindsight” (Genesis 50:19-20) Pentecost 14, August 17, 2008

It was the end of April 1981. In just hours, I was supposed to take our youth group down to Mexico on a mission trip. As always, there were last minute errands to run, but as I got in my car, I felt like things were going pretty well. Now, the traffic on S. Sunkist was heavy as usual, so I waited patiently for my chance to pull out of the parking lot. Then, a nice lady in a station wagon stopped and waved for me to go ahead of her, which I did. Unfortunately, the driver behind her was in a hurry, so he zipped around the station wagon...and smashed right into my car. I was okay. The car was another story. And to add insult to injury, the car was practically new; I had just gotten it two weeks before. To add even more insult to injury, one of our church members saw this happen...and came over to “comfort” me. Now, I was in no mood to be “comforted.” And I really was in no mood to hear any old clichés. So when he started saying, *“One thing’s for sure...”* – I thought: *Here it comes. What’s he going to tell me? That it could have been worse? That this will teach me a good lesson? That I’ll be a better person for going through this? He just better not tell me it was God’s will!* But he didn’t say any of those things. To my surprise, he said something that actually *did* comfort me a little: *“One thing’s for sure: someday this is going to make a great sermon illustration!”*

I’ll let you be the judges of that! For myself, looking back, I realize things could have been worse. And to be honest, I did learn some good lessons from this experience – at the very least, what not to say when something bad happens to someone. You know, like: *It could have been worse. This will teach you a good lesson. You’ll be a better person for going through this.* And definitely not: *It must have been God’s will.* No one likes to hear these old clichés. However well intentioned, they’re just not very helpful – at least, not coming from others.

But as you may have guessed from what I just said, it’s a whole different ball game when we say these things to ourselves. Isn’t it? I may not want to hear you tell me things could be worse, but there is some comfort in telling it to myself. I may not want to hear you tell me this will teach me a good lesson, but there is some value in figuring out the lessons for myself. I may not want to hear you tell me I’ll be a better person for going through this, but if I can come to that conclusion by myself – if, in fact, I can even see how God may have been **“working together for good”** in this situation – then that brings insight, and encouragement, maybe even some spiritual growth. Yes, it’s a whole different ball game when we can say these things to ourselves.

And that has always been the case. For instance, take the example of Joseph. In our text, we see him at the end of a long spiritual roller-coaster ride that has lasted at least 10-15 years. How different he is from smug, spoiled 17-year old he was at the outset! Now he has grown into a man – a wiser, stronger, humbler man – and a godlier man, too. For precisely when he meets his brothers again – the brothers who sold him into slavery; precisely when the tables are turned and

he can get even with them any way he wants, what does Joseph do? He not only forgives them, he helps them! And when they fear Joseph's attitude is too good to be true, he also reassures them: **"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as He is doing today."**

Now, that is some attitude! But where does such an attitude come from? Not from someone else telling Joseph, *"It could have been worse,"* or *"This will teach you a lesson,"* or *"You'll be a better person for going through this."* And definitely not from someone else telling him, *"What happened must have been God's will."* No, Joseph's attitude has to have come from within, from his own personal reflection. For instance, when he asks, **"Am I in the place of God?"** you just know he has to have chewed long and hard on this question before deciding what to do. Revenge would be so natural, so sweet! But somewhere along the line, he has realized what kind of person revenge would make him. Does he really want to surrender his soul to bitterness and hatred? Does he really want to "play God" the way his brothers did when they sold him? Does he really want to sink that low? Clearly, the only way to rise above these destructive emotions is by forgiving his brothers; by helping them. So that is what Joseph does. And what makes this easier for him – not easy, but *easier* – is seeing how God has been working in his life; not only how God has preserved him through the years but how God has used some awful experiences for a higher purpose. Joseph tells his brothers, **"Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as He is doing today."** Again, such a remarkable attitude has to have come from Joseph telling *himself* it could have been worse, telling himself there were good lessons to be learned, telling himself he was a better person for going through this, telling himself God has been working through it all. From *Joseph*. Telling *himself*. And looking at himself. Reflecting on himself. Deciding for himself how he will respond to all he has gone through. That's what finally enables him to see things in such a different light that he is able to tell his brothers, **"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as He is doing today."**

This response makes Joseph one of the most admirable figures in the Bible. But you know, he cannot have been so different from you and me. What makes him stand out is not his superior nature. In fact, feeling superior was one of the things he had to overcome! No, what makes him stand out is his willingness to really think things through in the light of his faith and then respond accordingly.

Earlier in his life, we see an example of this when the wife of Potiphar, his owner, comes on to Joseph. You know, it would have been so easy for him to just go to bed with her. Never mind the raging hormones at 17. Just feeling sorry for himself and feeling he had no other options might have made him think, *"Oh, why not?"* But instead, we see a whole different thought process. Joseph thinks about his master – how good and trusting he has been. Joseph also thinks about

morality; even a slave can have a sense of honor – which is why Joseph doesn't go along but tells Potiphar's wife, **“Look, my master has...put everything he has in my hand. He...has not kept anything back from me except you yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”** This is no snap reaction. This is Joseph really thinking things through in the light of his faith and responding accordingly.

And this response is not unique. It cannot have been. Each step of the way, had Joseph just acted the way he felt at the moment, his story would have turned out quite differently. It would have been a sleazy story of self-pity, bitterness, opportunism, and revenge. Instead, we see just the opposite in Joseph. He is a model of honor, integrity, faith, self-respect, and diligence no matter what his circumstances. This doesn't just happen. You don't just act this way automatically. It has to have been Joseph's *habit* to really think things through in the light of faith and then respond accordingly. It has to have been his *habit*, and that's what makes him such a valuable role model for us today.

I emphasize this because focusing just on the end of Joseph's story might make us think his actions were just the result of 20/20 hindsight. He looks back and sees clearly how God has been working in his life, he looks back and sees clearly how everything has **“worked together for good,”** so of course he decides to forgive his brothers; with this 20/20 hindsight he can afford to be gracious.

But that would be missing the point of the story. What is so amazing about Joseph is how he keeps going *without* seeing how the story will end. What's so amazing is how he sticks to his beliefs *without* seeing any reward – in fact, sticks to them even when it costs him dearly. That's what is really worth learning from Joseph! Not just the value of hindsight, but the habit of ***anticipating hindsight***. That is, the habit of trusting that God is at work in our lives, even when things are bad. The habit of trusting that our integrity will ultimately make a difference, however much it costs us short-term. The habit of trusting, without any evidence, that one day we will be able to look back and say, “Oh! So that's what was going on! Thank God I stuck to my beliefs!” This is what we want to learn from Joseph. Not just the value of hindsight, but the habit of ***anticipating hindsight***.

To see more clearly what this habit is like, let me tell you about a conversation I had while I was over in Germany. For the man I was talking to, life had been a roller-coaster ride, just as it was for Joseph. The losses he had suffered, the troubles he had been through – they were more than enough to make anyone ask, “Why me?” And when we first started to talk, I thought that's what I was going to hear. But I didn't. In fact, what this man told me was how he got past “Why me?” To explain what he said, though, I need to introduce you to two little German words – “warum” and “wozu.” Both *can* mean “why,” but for this man, what a difference it made deciding which one to use. He said that it's natural to ask “warum”– *why* in the sense of “why is this happening to me?” But instead, he

learned to ask “wozu”– which is more like “To what end is this happening, for what purpose?” The more he asked “Why me?”, the more it dragged him down into self-pity and despair – as if God were not involved in his life. But as a Christian, he had to believe that God was involved in his life. In fact, he had to believe that **“in all things God is working together for good for those who love Him.”** So this man figured: if God was **“working together for good,”** then there had to be more going on behind the scenes than he could see. What might that be? To what end, to what purpose might God be working? *Wozu?* And you know what? Even when he couldn’t figure out the answer, it helped just knowing that there was an answer; that there was a purpose, a *“wozu.”* That was enough to keep him going. It still is. At this stage of life, he has already seen the difference it makes sticking to his beliefs. Now when he’s faced with challenges, that’s all the more reason not let himself ask “warum” – why me? He makes a habit of asking “wozu” – why might God be allowing this situation? He asks: *Might this be a chance to show my children what a difference faith makes? Might this be a means of strengthening my Christian character? Who knows? But either God is in my life or He is not. And if He is, He is “working together for good.” Someday I’ll see the result. Maybe here, maybe in heaven. But I know God always has a purpose, and for now that’s enough to go on!*

My friends, that is **anticipating hindsight**. When you know in here that God has a purpose for your life, that more is going on than you can see, that one day all will be made clear, and that when it is, you’ll be so glad you stuck to your beliefs – that is **anticipating hindsight**. You don’t believe God causes the negative things in your life – any more than He caused Joseph’s brothers to sell him as a slave. You don’t believe it’s God’s will that negative things happen – any more than it was His will that Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph, then lied about it. No, you believe that in spite of how things are, in spite of how things seem, God is in your life **“working together for good,”** and that’s enough to keep you going until you do see the big picture. That is **anticipating hindsight**.

So specifically how does all this apply to your life right now? Heh, heh! That’s for you to decide. *I’m* not here to tell you that things could be worse, or that whatever you’re going through will teach you a lesson, or that you’ll be a better person for going through it, or that somehow it’s all God’s will. But what I am here to tell you is that if we learn anything from Joseph, it’s how important it is to think about these things ourselves – really think about them in the light of faith – and then respond accordingly.

That is the invitation before us. Anyone can just react to circumstances. Anyone can pick away at “why me?” As people of faith, we can do better. After all, God is in our lives. He is **“working together for good.”** There is more going on than what we can see. So let’s make a habit of living each day with this assurance in focus. One day we will look back with 20/20 hindsight, and then we’ll see clearly what God has been up to. But in the meantime, let’s make a habit of **anticipating hindsight**. Amen.

