

Joseph's whole story (Genesis 45:3-11, 15)

To preach on only a portion of this passage is to do it a disservice.

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To preach on a portion of the story of Joseph is to do it a disservice.

First of all, it's not a safe assumption that people will know the larger context. Moreover, this finale only arrives with due power if you've followed every twist, trick, and turn, riding the mounting drama while imagining what it must have felt like to be any one of these pressed-upon characters—envious, frightened, heartbroken, menaced, tempted at the pinnacle of power but choosing instead to act in grace.

You also might miss the strange absence of God at work. God, though spoken of a fair amount and assumed as real and faithful throughout the story, is never mentioned as a character in the story. God never addresses any of the characters. God never is seen to act except in retrospect. Joseph recognizes that God has been at work, but the story doesn't narrate that in real time.

This, it seems to me, makes it an important story for people these days to know. Many of the people who sit in the pews where we preach might assume real faith means feeling God as vocal and active every moment of every day—a thing they don't feel, thus making them anxious their faith isn't what it ought to be. God is there to advise you about the littlest things, if only you only have faith to listen. God is there to direct you about the biggest things, if only you have the faith to obey. Many people seem to believe that "God has a plan" for them and that their central

task in life is to figure out that plan ahead of time.

But that's not how I experience God at work in my life, and I suspect that's the same for lots of people, though they might be ashamed to admit it.

Matt Skinner has a new book out on Acts, subtitled *Catching Up with the Spirit*. In it he makes a helpful remark regarding what he thinks is often an assumption at play, "that God's 'activity' in the world is like a puppeteer pulling strings." It's different for him, it seems. "It's easier for me," he notes, "to look back on situations, after the fact, and wonder. With the help of hindsight, I might perceive ways in which I was open or closed to God's presence."

This is the power of Joseph's final confession: that though none of what has happened to him over the course of his life is what he'd have chosen it to be, he can yet now see that God has set him up to preserve life.

Joseph has every reason in the world to act mercilessly toward his brothers, as mercilessly as they behaved toward him. How does he muster such resolve not to? I suspect such amazing grace can only come from the faithful conviction that he suddenly comes to: "God sent me before you to preserve life. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant."

Preaching this story whole cloth invites the congregation to reflect on their own lives, to wonder where God has opened a way that turned out to be the true way, where God might have used a narrowing of options in life to set up a chance for grace.

Time is one of the hardest qualities to capture when we consider scripture. All the stories of the Bible take time, more time than we moderns might realize. In fact, I think one of the greatest errors people of faith commit in considering how God works in the world is to bring our immense impatience to the question. We expect God to work on our schedule. We even demand that God work within our framework of what constitutes a long time, which is actually not very long. But God is slow, patient—so time can be a gift.

It might benefit those for whom we preach to demonstrate this in some real, felt way. That might mean letting this whole story in to take over much of the service of worship, reassuring the people once worship is complete that, though God might be slow, he is faithful to his purpose.