

7th Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 2.23.25

Genesis 35:3-11, 15

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. 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. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 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. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 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. 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. 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. 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." And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Psalm 37: 1-11, 39-40

Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.

Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.

Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.
For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.
But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight in abundant prosperity.

The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
he is their refuge in the time of trouble.
The LORD helps them and rescues them;
he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them,
because they take refuge in him. (509)

I don't preach on the psalms much. In fact, I wonder if I ever have. I guess I don't know what I'd say.

We don't know much about the psalms except in general. They are notoriously difficult to place as to when they were written and also why, in response to what event whether historical or personal.

They are, in most cases, considered "Davidic" by tradition, poems and songs that King David wrote. This would have them composed about 900 BCE, which is when David is believed to have lived. That said, few scholars actually believe David really wrote them, though it's entirely unclear who all did.

They can each (the psalms) be classified as one of five different types: hymns, laments whether communal or individual, royal psalms that seem to be about kings or coronations, and psalms of thanksgiving. That said, these types often change within one psalm, a lament giving way to thanksgiving for example. Or a psalm might bear characteristics of more than one type so not easily classified, making the whole project of classification questionable as to purpose.

As for how they're arranged in the Bible, there seems to be five sections, each one closing with a doxology. These divisions were probably introduced by the final editors in the mid-1st century to imitate the five-fold character of the Torah, comprised of five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. This is to say there seems to be no internal reason why they should be arranged as they are or sectioned off as they are. Some people arrange their bookshelves so the colors of the books make a rainbow. Others hate this choice because it takes into account nothing of the books' contents. The psalms feel like this: 150 poems arranged just so but an arrangement that has nothing to do with the text or context or source or purpose.

One more thing about the psalms: they were likely composed over a five-century period, the earliest one (Psalm 29) likely dating to the 10th century BCE and others deemed "post-exilic," meaning from after the exile, which ended in 536 BCE. That said, the canon for the collection of psalms closed in the 1st century of the common era so some might have been later still, making this book span in time about a millennium.

All this taken together means, of any given psalm, the questions of whence and why meet with this answer: “We don’t know.” But then also, does it matter? Would we understand a psalm more if we knew who exactly composed and exactly why? Or might knowing that foreclose on us seeing if the psalm might be ours, might be something fit for our occasion, fit for your purpose or mine or some situation you or I might find ourselves in?

“Do not fret because of the wicked...” Maybe someone fretted because of the wicked back when Babylon was coming, was about to exile the people into circumstances they really didn’t want. Maybe someone fretted because of the wicked when return to the land seemed newly possible but there might be some thwarting, or some hardship suffered along the way. Maybe David fretted because of the wickedness of the Philistines who were taunting the people with capture and with desecrating their holy ark of the covenant. Or maybe this could be simply brought to you: have you fretted ever at all, and maybe even this very week, because of the wicked, which though you might hesitate to call wicked? It’s such an old-fashioned word. A broad brush. A broad strike.

I have. Watching the world’s richest man play with his prop chainsaw at the promise of cutting free school lunches and veterans’ benefits, I’ve fretted.

I’ve also, as might be expected, spent some time with this psalm, about which I might or might not have preached. And it’s been helpful to pray this portion of the psalm, that they will fade like the grass and wither like the green herb, so I might rather trust in the Lord and do good, that we might take delight in God who gives us the desires of our hearts.

Also, this week I’ve been reading a book loaned to me, Tim Alberta’s *The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory*. Subtitled *American Evangelicals in the Age of Extremism*, this is reporting from many congregations across the country. Alberta is himself an evangelical Christian, the son of an evangelical pastor, and he begins his journalistic journey in his home church in Brighton, Michigan.

This is where his father had spent his most fruitful years in ministry, beloved as a pastor. He’d started at the Cornerstone Church when it was itself a new church start, and he walked with the people there in all the ways a pastor can, engaged with things profound and mundane, births, deaths, potluck dinners in between. But in the years between his retirement and his death in 2019, the church had traveled the same road so many like it had—to acrimony, political extremism, and internet-based lies taking the place of gospel truth. Covid did it. Trump did it. Tucker Carlson, so much more a presence in people’s homes than their pastor could ever be: he did it.

Alberta returned to this church for his father's funeral and was met with cruelty and accusation, long-time members of this otherwise familiar and appreciating congregation now castigating him for his strong public critiques of the Trump phenomenon. Clearly, the cruelty stung Alberta, and having it so brazenly deployed at his father's funeral was beyond the pale.

But once he'd recovered from it, he decided take it on as a matter for journalism, to trace the path that that had brought Cornerstone and so many others like it to this terrible place of politics over gospel; what indeed had brought a dominant aspect of Christianity in America to this, what might be called a wicked place of fighting over the kingdoms of this world and giving up entirely on the reign of God.

I appreciate Alberta's reporting, and it's good to spend time with evangelical thinking of the serious sort, which I nonetheless largely can't get with. I do think his is a valid overarching conclusion, that where so much of this wing of the church has gone wrong is in letting politics take precedence over the winning of souls for Christ—for this is what has been confessed as core to the mission of the church in evangelical circles, winning souls for Christ.

For what it's worth, this is one way that evangelicals differ from the mainline. We of the mainline I think would claim as core to our mission the doing of God's will here on earth as it's done in heaven. Ours is less a focus on personal piety and the salvation of souls and more a building up of the kingdom of God here and now, to the degree that we can, provisional, provisional.

That said, I do think Alberta's overriding conclusion is true as far as it goes. I just don't think it goes as far as it might, as deep as it should. I think there's much going on in the megachurch and free church scene that is more subtle than that, more of subtext and not simply text, more of mode rather than just of content or of spirit and not merely of declaration. I think where evangelicalism has gone wrong is in fretting too much over the wicked rather at the expense of contemplation of the good. It has become far too organized in reaction to a perceived enemy rather than organized around a faith-inspired good—a reactionary confession rather than a centering faith which centers Christ.

But here's the thing: if you think that, then you have think that very carefully because when your thinking goes to what's wrong with someone else, you find yourself in Satan's playground, literally, *satan* being Hebrew for accuser or a spirit of accusation—and it doesn't take much for that spirit, once let in, to take over until before you know it you're the thing you're

accusing that other one of being—an accusatory reactionary rather than resting assured that the Lord is good and eternal and here among us.

Satan is sticky.

My pastor recently died. An old man, he lived a long life, died a good death, and will meet with an eternity every bit as gracious as was his manner in life, gracious as a man, gracious as minister. I am blessed to have known him and to have been formed in the faith by him.

When I was a girl, I became very worried about evil. Would it get me? Would it get the world? I brought my worries to my parents, and they recommended I bring them to Mr. McConnell.

I joined him in his kitchen one Saturday morning when he was making bread as he was wont to do. The conversation was long and friendly, but it could be summed up thus: If you're worried about evil, don't. Evil will enjoy every ounce of attention you pay it. Wickedness will gain energy by your worrying of it. Think instead on what is good, what is excellent and true and honorable and just, what is pure and pleasing and commendable and excellent. That's Paul, the great apostle. Truly, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

As I remember it, impression more than detail, this must have been what Mr. McConnell—Bill—said.

Like, with Joseph here.

He found himself in a plum position. He'd been treated terribly by his brothers at every possible turn. There is really no better word for how his brothers had treated them than wicked. They had treated him wickedly.

The favorite son of the favorite wife, Joseph had always enjoyed his father Jacob's attention, affection, approval, privileging. Though there were twelve to love, Joseph enjoyed the bulk of that love—which didn't endear him to the other eleven. They decided to kill him. They chose instead to lower him into a pit and leave him there to die. But then they had an even better idea: if they sold him into slavery, they'd at least make some money off him. So that's what they did, and further faked his death, soaking his cloak in blood to show their father that their father might grieve and then, eventually, move on.

Joseph, however, found success in his new life just like in his old. His new masters were Egyptian, they brought him to Egypt where the Pharaoh was suffering vivid and ominous dreams. Joseph had always been gifted in the interpretation of dream, word of which made its way up the castles of the empire. So, Joseph was brought to Pharaoh and successfully interpreted the dreams of

the ruler. A drought was coming, and it would last years. Food supplies would diminish. Livestock would die. Pharaoh must fill the storehouses for the time of hardship to come. By this the people would be safe.

By this they would also become a regional resource. Peoples from all over the region would come to Egypt begging for provision, begging for help.

Joseph's brothers would be among them, and though they didn't recognize him, he recognized them.

He would toy with them. He would torment them, setting them up to seem like they'd stolen treasures from the palace and would surely and rightly suffer a death penalty.

But eventually he came to himself. He called his brothers back to Pharaoh's court and said to them from his (once again) place of privilege and power, dressed (once again) in rich clothes: "Come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 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. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God..." And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them.

It might not have been. Joseph might rather have continued to fret about the wicked, the wickedness of his brothers, which had been inarguably the case: they were wicked clear and plain. He could have organized his whole manner around this. He could have organized his adopted nation's whole foreign policy around this. He could righteously have done so.

He didn't.

He could have.

He didn't.

He *might* have.

He didn't.

We are in a maelstrom of a politics: a weird combination of vengeance and whimsy. There's no right or wrong response to the distress being let loose. You will be angry. You will be frightened. You be filled with resignation. You'll be curious as to maybe some of this will work, make improvements on what's always been an imperfect system. You'll put it out of mind because other aspects of your life play more immediately. You may also be centered in your faith that the

Lord is good and eternal and steadfast in faithfulness, never giving up on this beautiful, sinful, beloved creation. Draw from this wellspring and pour forth grace.

Thanks be to God.