***“One Darn Thing After Another”***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 10, 2023*

*based on Genesis 37:1-4,12-28*

The Bible stands high among the richest literature in the world. But more times than not, I think, we miss the most remarkable things in its pages. These jewels are right there, in plain sight, but we’re looking for something else, high theology maybe, or high drama, and so we miss the subtle moves and details that make it as powerful as it is.

At its best, the Bible does what Shakespeare is noted for doing – it holds a mirror up to nature in a way that challenges the reader to ask, “Could this be me?” Those who are self-aware get an eye-full. The rest walk on, blind.

Now, there are two amazing instances of this in this morning’s fascinating story from the book of Genesis.

First, we are told that the sons of Jacob, ten of Joseph’s eleven brothers, put Joseph, the brother they are terribly jealous of, in a pit, and then it says . . . they sit down and eat dinner. Did you get that on the first reading?

They do this completely unspeakable thing and then sit down to dinner while their brother Joseph is lying there, ten yards away, stunned, waiting to become dinner for some creature who makes the rounds of holes like this one after dark.

They sit down in a familiar circle, and one of them says to another, “Reuben, would you please pass me the pita and a few of mom’s pickled peppers?”

Well, this happens all the time. I got an email this week from *Sojourners* magazine. The title was, “Who Would Jesus Cut from Medicaid.” 5.6 million people have been removed from the rolls since February due to votes by mostly Christian state legislators. Many of the removed are children. The total this year will likely reach 15 million. I’m guessing that most, if not all of those legislators sat down that evening to a first class dinner.

And, you know, they went to church the next Sunday, bowed their heads in prayer and gave no thought to the people whose lives they work so hard to crush. It’s appalling. Of course, they consider themselves pro-life, except in the case of the lives of children who happen to have been born.

Now, the second part of the Joseph story I want to highlight is also something you can easily pass over too quickly. It’s something that seems tangential, until you read the whole saga of Joseph a second time and realize what an important hinge it is in the flow of events.

It will seem a small thing, when isolated. Joseph is on an errand for his father. He is sent out by his father to locate his brothers – make sure they are okay. And he is about to go back home, because he can’t find them, when a nameless man happens along and tells him that he overheard his brothers say that they were on their way to a place called Dothan.

That’s it. That’s the piece of the puzzle I want you to note. It’s pretty small, almost inconsequential. But in reality it makes all the difference in the world.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner put me onto this years ago at a seminar I attended in Portland.

Kushner made a lot of the unnamed man in the story. He said, “You know, without him there would be no Joseph story, Joseph would not be thrown into the pit and then sold into slavery in Egypt. He would not have ended up in prison there. He would not have come to the attention of the Pharaoh.

He would not have risen to a position of authority there where he would be able to rescue his people (and the Egyptian people too) from starvation during the famine he saw coming. Without that unnamed man telling Joseph his brothers were over in Dothan, there would not have been any Jews left alive in Egypt.

Because of that there would have been no Exodus, no Moses, no Israel, no King David, no Jerusalem, no Jesus, no Protestant Reformation, no Southminster Presbyterian Church, no Welcome Back Sunday. Nothing.

All because of one nameless man who said, “Oh, I think they went over to Dothan.”

Okay, that’s literature – that’s Biblical “history.” But think about it for a minute -- so many of the people who make the most profound difference to us in our lives walk onto the stage of our life for only a moment or an hour and then walk off it a minute later never to be seen again.

Then, days weeks, months, years, maybe decades later, we look back, realizing how important a part they played in our story, and we remark,

“I didn’t even catch her name.”

Only recently, I saw how similar Joseph’s story is to my own family’s story.

I had never put this together before.

My own great great grandmother, Catherine McGee, was born in 1834 in “Derry,” Northern Ireland. She married a man named, William Boyd, and together they immigrated to Pennsylvania. When gold fever struck her husband, he headed west, promising not to forget her. He promised also that he would eventually send for her.

Well, I know he wrote her at least one letter, because in it he enclosed a check for $50, drawn on a bank In San Francisco. But she couldn’t cash it. I know this because I have the un-cancelled check in my collection of family memorabilia.

Well, at some point she made her way with her only son, Charlie, to New York where she boarded a ship, and sailed down to the isthmus of Panama which the two crossed on mule back, dodging Typhus along the way. They took another ship to San Francisco, and then rode out to Grass Valley where she spoke to a man who had heard a rumor that her husband was now prospecting up near a town called, Igo, west of Redding.

He was just like the nameless man in the Joseph story who said, “I think they’re up in Dothan.” Well she caught up to her husband, Bill, and then and there they picked up where they left off and expanded their family.

I was charmed by the story when I first heard it, and then, recently, I was struck by the realization that, but for her tenacity, I wouldn’t even be here this morning. My great grandfather, their next son, was the result of her finding her husband.

Because this little woman would not accept abandonment and life in exile, but went alone to a new world, riding a donkey, I am here. That is my heritage and, you know, it is also the heritage of every one of us.

Somewhere behind everybody is a Catherine McGee who would not allow life to steamroll her, and also, let‘s not forget, the nameless person who pointed her somewhere when she came to a dead end.

Now, besides that nameless man or woman who played a key role in our birth or survival, there are also other nameless ones who came into our lives mid-course, just for a moment, and changed its trajectory. Here’s the story of one of those. Lynne in Illinois tells her own story of one such person –

*I’d left behind my boyfriend, John, in Boston, to go to graduate school in Illinois, but I wrote him every day, worried he’d find someone new in my absence. Though I missed him, I was enjoying the respite from all the parties and weekend trips and sporting events he’d dragged me to. I was spending more time on things that nourished me: walks in the woods, needlework, foreign films.*

*When the graduate program became overwhelming, I dropped out, but I stayed in the small college town for a while, reluctant to give up the picturesque life I had there. Finally, encouraged by John’s emotional pleas to come back to him, I decided to return to Boston.*

*I slid into a bus seat in St. Louis, feeling like a failure and not sure how I felt about John.*

*I loved his deep brown eyes, and playfulness, and his moral integrity. He had the courage to speak the truth when others were afraid. So why wasn’t I more eager to get back to him?*

*I changed buses in New York City, and a studious – looking boy sat down next to me. He was going to graduate school in Boston, he said, and so was his fiancée. They enjoyed the same movies, took long walks in the woods together, and told each other everything.*

*My relationship with John seemed inadequate by comparison. I told the boy about my confusion, and he advised me to pay attention to how I felt the moment I saw John in the bus station.*

*When I got off the bus in Boston, John was waiting on a bench, looking tired and sloppy. His hair was too long, his shirt tails hung out, and when he greeted me, he seemed awkward and unsure. I felt the same way.*

*At the apartment we argued: I wanted to wait tables for a while; John thought I should use my degree to become a professional (something he wasn’t doing himself). He was beginning to seem less moral and more judgmental.*

*In the days that followed, he watched sports and got together with his friends. I tagged along, but something was missing. The boy on the bus –*

*I didn’t even know his name – had taught me to pay attention to what I felt. A year later I moved back to Illinois alone.*

The nameless boy on the bus made all the difference in the world. How many people have we helped on a bus, or a train, or an airplane, or who knows where, and we’ll never know it?

Yes, and who did you meet when you were in a vulnerable place in your life – flailing about and unsure how to resolve something big you knew wasn’t right, but you couldn’t quite find the key you needed to get through a new door?

None of us is everything unto ourselves. There are invisible lines of connection between us and others running right through this church, and from here, all over this world. You hardly ever see these lines, but the air is thick with them.

Fate. Do you believe in it?

Some people believe that there are no chance encounters.

A fateful rendezvous occurs and how did it happen? Two people got up that morning with no expectations – no idea what might cross their path that day. But one of them was mightily in need of some guidance and the other was being readied to be a very special messenger.

As I said earlier, this story of Joseph isn’t just a story, it’s a saga. That is, it’s a series of stories strung together the way all our lives are composed of a series of strung together stories.

I mean, look -- if you sat down and wrote down a chronological account of your life and then read it back slowly and thoughtfully, you would,

I imagine, see how you might impose a kind of order to it. You would see definite chapters; you’d see clear beginnings and endings that have a certain logic to them, right? Trust me, you would.

Now here is something else you would see if you took the time to do this. You would see, as those who have read the story of Joseph see, that the further you go along in life, the less sure you might be about whether particular things that happen along the way are good things or bad things; whether they are the result of good luck or bad luck.

Well, of course, when tragic things happen, and they do sometimes, they are easy to identify as bad. But some transitions, job losses, career promotions or demotions, moving to a new town, the end of relationships – every one of those can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how it all plays out and what it leads to, or what it might teach you about life or yourself.

I want to close with a famous Chinese fable I imagine you have heard before. See if you remember it.

A farmer’s horse runs off. Neither he nor his son can catch him. His neighbor says, “How bad for you.” The farmer says, “I don’t know if it is a good thing or a bad thing.”

The next day the horse returns with a mate, a beautiful wild mare. The neighbor says, “Ah, how good for you. Now you have *two* fine horses. Again, the farmer says, “I don’t know if it is a good thing or a bad thing.”

Well, the next day the farmer’s son tries to tame the wild mare. In the process he is thrown and breaks his leg very badly. The neighbor’s response is: “How bad for you. Such sorrow.”

The farmer, with tears in his eyes this time ,says, “I don’t know if it is a good thing or a bad thing.” The next day the army comes through and conscripts the neighbor’s two sons against their will and leaves the farmer’s son who has the broken leg.

The neighbor, through his own tears says, “How lucky you are, you still have your son. The farmer says . . . . . . .“I don’t know if it is a good thing or a bad thing,” which he has to say, right?

This is a story without an ending, because our lives are infinitely complex.

But we don’t always act as if we know this. We look at the state of our life today and count up our regrets and blessings maybe a little too early. Some people are trapped by regret. “Oh, if only that one thing had worked out differently,” we might say. “If only I had made a different choice back when I was 21.”

It’s so much better when we are gentle with ourselves about such things. It’s so much better when we are patient about the unfolding of our own personal sagas.

Amen

**Response:** Think of something that happened in your life that at the time seemed to you to be the end of the world. Maybe it seemed that was because you were very young and life had yet to open up for you.

And yet if it hadn’t have played out the way it did, something else quite wonderful or at least more appropriate to you was given room to happen.

Think about that for a moment.

Now, think about something a little closer to you in time that you feel badly about. Is it possible that that thing might open a door you haven’t yet considered?