

The God Who Uses Evil for Good
Genesis 45:1-8a, 24; 46:1-4; 50:15-21
Romans 11:1-21, 29-32

“But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good....’”

We begin with the end of the beginning, this morning, with the last chapter of the Book of Genesis and with the words of Joseph to his brothers, the brothers who hated him and abandoned him in a pit when he was seventeen: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” This is a sentence that could only be spoken at the end of the beginning of these founding stories—the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abram and Sarai, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Rebekah and Leah, Joseph and his brothers. It could only be spoken at the end because this is the sort of sentence that invites you to trace the redemptive plot of the God who uses evil for good back over the stories that fill the first book of the Bible as well as forward over the stories we are living.

Therefore I invite you, as a character in God’s story, to think with me about what it means to say that God plots human history. Plot is one of those words whose meaning is deliciously layered. It can refer simply to the trajectory of a story. It can imply a malicious scheme for entrapping a victim. It can suggest the way in which a future is planned. According to everyone who put pen to papyrus and gave us what became the biblical narrative, human beings are participants in God’s plot and plotting. “Though ultimately not malicious,” Avivah Zornberg observes, “God’s intents are inexorable, and human beings are for the most part unconscious actors in [God’s] plot. How is the Author to get his characters down to Egypt? [God] achieves his plot-purposes, though a realistic technique of apparent freedoms—freedom to love, to hate, to kill, to sell into slavery....human beings feel and act—and [yet] may never themselves realize to what purposes they have been used.” “It is possible to be in a plot,” Thomas Mann wrote in *Joseph and His Brothers*, “and not understand it.”

We know this is so in our dealings with one another. We have in mind a certain outcome that is not known to the person who must act a certain way for the future to unfold as we hope. Perhaps this is the night we plan to pop the question of marriage and we devise ways to get the beloved to show up at the perfect place, to be in the right mood, to stumble over the rock on the path that is hiding a ring, to say, “Yes!” We achieve our plot-purposes through a realistic technique of apparent freedoms so that the beloved agrees to meet us, responds positively to our endearing words, takes our hand as we set off down what seems to be a never-before explored garden path, stumbles on a rock, uncovers a ring and agrees to marry us.

In the same way, says a midrash on the Joseph story, “God wanted to fulfill the decree of ‘Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs’ so He brought about the plot of all this narrative, so that Jacob should love Joseph, and his brothers should hate him, and sell him to the Ishmaelites, who would bring him down to Egypt... ‘Terrible to man are your plots,’” the midrash concludes.

The point is that as the omniscient, skillful Narrator, God’s plot rests, apparently without deception, “on the plausible motivations of His characters. And yet,” Zornberg adds, “there is a peculiar and subtle horror in such a perspective. For God not only fulfills His own intentions through the agency of human beings; He also makes them feel, through his [clever strategies], fully responsible.” That is to say, with the story we are living in mind, God’s plot uses the hatred and jealousy to which we are prone and for which we are responsible, to accomplish God’s purposes in the world. Yet notice throughout Genesis that hatred and jealousy are not only used by God but engendered by God’s choice of one over the other. God chooses Abel’s offering over Cain’s, knowing Cain will hate his brother and then says to Cain after his anger is kindled by God’s inexplicable choice: “Sin is lurking at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” God chooses Isaac over firstborn Ishmael, knowing the offspring of Ishmael will hate the offspring of Isaac to this day. God chooses the second-born Jacob over the first-born Esau, setting Edomites against

Israelites, chooses Joseph as Jacob's favorite, setting off a series of events that will land the Israelites in Egypt as slaves whom God will free.

In each case, God uses the conflict, the hatred, the evil to which we are prone for furthering the plot whose theme is the reconciliation of human beings to God and to one another. As my friend Tom Currie reminded me in his commentary on our text, it has been said that God has many ironies in the fire! "The irony in this particular fire," he observes, "has less to do with resignation in the face of the subtle workings of God's providence than it does with the comic relief caused by the God whose grace befuddles all *our* clever schemes in its shameless and unsinkable goodness....this [he says] is the way the Genesis narrative of creation and fall [must] end, with neither a bang nor a whimper, but with a family scarcely able to bear the burden of its own past, stumbling toward a future that has *outwitted* their deceits, *covered* their sins, and *provided* the means by which God intends to heal a broken world."

Surely over the past week, if not over the past year and even over the past decade, we have become such a family: scarcely able to bear the burden of our own past, in particular our history of slavery, stumbling toward a future that may yet outwit our deceits, cover our sins and provide the means by which God intends to heal a broken world, though that future seems a very long way off. Nevertheless, with the lens of Joseph's words to help me understand the plot I am living and so to seek the hand of the God who is using evil for good, I read the newspaper every morning and watched the news each night this week.

Here is what I saw. When Susan Bro said at her daughter's funeral, "They tried to kill my child to shut her up. Well, guess what—you just magnified her," I thought of Joseph's words: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." So too, when I read the words of five of the Joint Chiefs of Staff representing the Navy, the Marines, the Army, the Air Force and the National Guard condemning hatred and neo-Nazis, saying that the extremist violence in Charlottesville went against the military's core values, I thought of Joseph's words: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." And when I read the words of Presidents George H.W. and George W. Bush affirming that American must always reject racial bigotry, anti-Semitism and hatred in all forms," I thought of Joseph's words: Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

But the most striking witness this week was the witness of a man named Christian Picciolini. Feeling himself abandoned in a pit by his family, at age fourteen Christian was "rescued" and given a new identity, a loyal community and a driving purpose by the first neo-Nazi skinhead gang in America. He has written the story of his life for such a time as this, a story I read this week in my effort to understand the plot we are all in. There is little in the book that can be decently quoted in a pulpit. Picciolini wrote in his skinhead voice, I think, so that people like us could stare into the heart of darkness, could begin to fathom the depth of hatred the human heart is capable of, and could do business with the evil that crouches at the door of our nation. But do business how? The airways have been thick with denunciations of Charlottesville, with one recurring exception that has given succor to the hatred.

Yet if God is advancing the plot through the apparent freedom of human beings—freedom to love, to hate, to kill, to sell into slavery--human beings who may never themselves realize to what purposes they have been used, then in Picciolini's story I think I see God's plotting. Even though Picciolini spent years intending to do harm to anyone who was not white, God intended it for good. Founder of Life after Hate, he has given his life to helping neo-Nazis, white supremacists, white nationalists, KKK members and neo-Confederates embrace life after hate. When asked on Radio Times about the reason young white males are so prone to hate (similar, in so many ways to young people who have been recruited by ISIS), he said that it was not ideology but rather the search for three things: identity, community and purpose that lead young people, whose lives are full of potholes as he puts it, to join hate groups. When asked why he got out, he said it was because he was undone by the compassion he received from people he thought he hated.

The God who uses evil for good, I thought, is the God who works in the hated a compassion, even for the haters who hate them, for the sake of God's redeeming purposes. This is not the false equivalency of politicians covering their, um base. Rather I say again, it is the hand of the God who advances the plot through the apparent freedom of human beings—the freedom to love, to hate, to kill, to sell into slavery—

through human beings who may never themselves realize to what purposes they have been used. In this maddeningly circuitous way, God “*creates a real newness, a Genesis, an unextrapolated freshness which negates the past, redefines the present, and opens futures*” [Brueggemann]. God uses the propensity for hate that is in us all, a hate inextricably bound to the kind of world God created, a world awash in variety and diversity, God uses hate for love, the love that is shorthand for death and resurrection.

Supremely, of course, God used the hate of God’s Son, God’s only Son, God’s beloved. Even though you meant it for evil, Jesus said from the cross, God intended your evil for good. “What if the way of the cross is precisely the way of the church,” my friend Tom asks at the end of his article, “the way of life in a dysfunctional family, [a family scarcely able to bear the burden of its own past, stumbling toward a God who is outwitting their deceits, covering their sins, and providing in them the means by which God intends to heal a broken world]? Then to be faithful would be...to [continue] the story that has claimed us as family and made us ever dependent” upon the plot that we rarely understand whose end is our beginning. Thanks be to God.