



## WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Knoxville, TN

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The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Sermon: "To Preserve Life"

In our worship and preaching life together, we will be spending today and the next two Sundays in the early books of the Hebrew Bible. Today, we start in the middle of the story of Joseph in the 45<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis. Joseph is one of twelve children of Jacob, and Jacob is the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. As one of the youngest of the 12 brothers, Joseph is also the favorite of their father Jacob. Before our reading today, the brothers, out of jealousy, conspire to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt, and they tell their father Jacob that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. So, Jacob is in great grief, while Joseph loses his freedom.

But while in Egypt, through a series of twists and turns, Joseph rises through the ranks and becomes a chief advisor to Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. In this leadership position, Joseph helps Egypt survive and store up grain in the midst of a famine that lasts 7 years. Meanwhile, Joseph's father and brothers are starving because of the famine in the land, so they go down to Egypt to ask for grain. When they go to Egypt, they meet Pharaoh's chief advisor, who is their brother Joseph, but they do not recognize him.

And that catches us up to today's Scripture reading. Everyone good? Ok, let's listen together now for the word of God:

### **Genesis 45:1-15 (NRSV)**

45:1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

45:2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.

45:3 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.

45:4 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.

45:5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

45:6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest.

45:7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

45:8 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.

45:9 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.

45:10 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.

45:11 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.

45:12 And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you.

45:13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here."

45:14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck.

45:15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

### **“To Preserve Life”**

The Will of God; in theological terms, providence, or the sovereignty of God. So often, churches and preachers talk of God's will in ways that are not life-giving.

There was an occasional participant of my last church who had had a long career as a professor of Christian theology and ethics. He had written several well-regarded books; he was the fourth generation of ordained Presbyterian clergy in his family. His great grandfather, his grandfather, his father had all been Presbyterian ministers. In fact, his daughter became the fifth generation of Presbyterian clergy in the family, the first woman of the family to be ordained.

This man had started in church ministry in the 1960s, but early in his first - and what turned out to be his only - pastoral position, he and his wife lost a young daughter in the first year of her life to SIDS. It was sudden; it was devastating; there was no cause, no warning, no reason behind the loss.

In this aftermath, this man left the pastorate; not because of a lack of faith. Rather, the reason he left was because of the things church members said to him and his spouse following the loss: It was God's will. God called her home. God needed another angel in the choir.

I get it. - It's what people say, when they don't know what to say.  
It's what people say, when they want to find some meaning out of devastating loss.

But after hearing all that misguided comfort from the church, which caused so much pain, this man knew, he would never work in the church again.

Have you ever been told, have you ever thought, that your loss, your tragedy, your trauma, was the will of God?

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." To preserve life.

Joseph has lived in Egypt since he was 17 years old, when his brothers, out of jealousy, first conspired first to kill him, but then decided to sell him instead to slavery in Egypt. Fifteen years passed; the tables turned. Joseph rose in the court of pharaoh while his family began to starve. The one who was at the mercy of brothers now holds their lives in his hands, as they come before him, now a high official of the Empire of Egypt.

Holding the power of life or death over them, he says, "I am your brother, Joseph." He uses his family name rather than his official title in Pharaoh's court.

And also, “Is my father still alive?” Notice, he says ‘*my* father,’ not ‘*our* father.’ Joseph is willing to reveal himself as their brother, but he recognizes there is still a separation, a wound, present between them.

He does not erase the wound, but he breaks the cycle of harm. Instead of revenge upon his brothers, Joseph chooses grace; instead of heaping more grief upon his father, Joseph shows care and asks about him. In the scenes that follow, Joseph moves his family to the land of Egypt so they may survive the famine.

Commentators note that the Joseph narrative of Genesis depicts God differently than the earlier stories of the book. For example, in the Adam and Eve story; in the Abraham and Sarah narratives, God is present and clearly engaged, speaking directly to the other characters:

“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,” God tells Adam.

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you,” God commands Abraham.

Not so with Joseph. In the final chapters of Genesis, God has exited the stage. Joseph has dreams, perhaps of divine origin, that help him rise in Egypt, but God has no lines in these chapters.

So, when Joseph says that God sent him to Egypt, he is speaking out of faith, because God never spoke to him directly. Joseph had lived through turmoil and betrayal; and in faith, he says, “God sent me...to preserve life.” It’s a retrospective; Joseph discerns the faithfulness of the hidden God as he looks back through the years. This is confession of faith; not a simple a statement of fact

And most importantly, it is a confession made by one who has been wronged. Joseph, rather than the brothers, sees the hand of God upon him and beside him. Having lived through a decade and more of peril, slavery, and imprisonment, no one but Joseph has the right to speak that truth.

But Joseph, and those who suffer **like** him, have every right to look back and witness to the work of God upon his life. How different it would have been, how harmful and abusive, if the brothers, rather than Joseph, had been the ones to say God was the reason they sold him to slavery. If they had said, ‘It was not us, but

God, who did this to you Joseph,' their confession would have been empty, it would have furthered the harm they did to him.

Joseph says, "For God sent me before you to preserve life."

That is God's will, to preserve life.

God's will is not an abstraction or an excuse for harm.

It is not an instrument of shame or punishment.

It does not provide window dressing on top of tragedy.

If you hear 'God's will' being thrown about in a way that does not promote flourishing and life abundant, in words spoken to you or in your own thoughts, remember what Joseph said, "For God sent me before you to preserve life." To preserve life.

Like many of you, I've been thinking of the catastrophic loss in the fires on Maui; I've been seeing videos of the destruction, and videos of families as they fled in fear, many having to go into the ocean to escape the fires.

The New York Times Daily podcast on Monday published a long form interview with Anela Rosa, pastor of Waiola Church, in Lahaina.<sup>1</sup> Lahaina was once the royal capital of the kingdom of Hawaii, on the island of Maui. Her church had burned in the fires. The stone front and back of the church were still standing but everything in the middle, including the sanctuary was gone. There were still members of the congregation unaccounted for at the time of the interview.

Pastor Rosa is a member of the indigenous people of the Islands of Hawaii. She said that she originally didn't want to go to seminary, because, as a teenager, in her words, "I still wanted to do bad stuff." As she got older, she fell in love with the church but was saddened that the sermons were always led by white missionaries from the mainland. The voice of her community was absent, so in faith, she went to seminary, one of the few in her community able to do so.

In the interview, she spoke in joy and in grief of the life of her town Lahaina. She described how the elders used to gather in the town square, and the children who would enjoy shaved ice in the park. She spoke also of the nervousness and courage

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<sup>1</sup> The Daily, "What Lahaina Lost in Hawaii's Wildfires." *The New York Times*. August 14, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/14/podcasts/the-daily/hawaii-wildfires.html>

she found every time she preached in her community. So much was lost to the fire that decimated that town and island last week.

The final question of the interview struck me. I wasn't expecting it from a newspaper report. She asked Rosa, "Will you have a church service this Sunday?"

The pastor answered. These were her words:

"If I can get back home, I'll be there. If I get home and they allow me to go down to that area, I will show up. I won't have a service prepared, as I normally do, but if there's still shaded area, right at the edge between the graveyard and the church, we will probably sit around there. And do a prayer. And just hear from everyone and let everybody have their voice."

I heard that interview on Monday, and I was just struck, by the clear fact, that that was where the will of God is:

Not in the fires. Not causing the loss.

But in the pastor who had lost so much, still leading her community ahead. And in the congregation itself, gathered to mourn, to comfort, to pray. To preserve life.

Siblings in Christ, I think often about the transitions that this congregation has been through. I think over and again, about the stories that you carry – stories I am just learning – not only about this place, but also countless stories from your own lives, stories of hardships and transitions, joys and triumphs.

Remember where God's will is in our stories: not in punishment, not in shame, not the hidden cause of tragedy or trauma.

Rather, God is present, always, in the ways we learn to keep moving; the subtle and sometimes grand ways we find life, redemption, resurrection. We discern it by faith, and in faith, we find God...preserving life, life abundant.

Amen.

