

## **A COAT, A CAPTIVE, AND A CRUCIFIXION**

**A Sermon Preached in the Duke University Chapel**

**by**

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

My father-in-law had a characteristic way of beginning his telephone conversations with us. When Margaret or I or one of the children would answer the phone when he called, he never identified himself first. He simply said, “Tell me some good news!” Then he waited – said no more- until we did – tell him some good news. He expected it. He requested it. And he waited for it!

I have come this morning to tell you some good news! It is contained in this magnificent story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. We heard only the beginning of the story – a few verses from the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis. The story actually goes on for 14 chapters. It is one of the richest stories in the Old Testament. Though thousands of years old, it still has the power to challenge us, teach us, inspire us, and encourage us! It is a story of good news – but it does not begin that way,.

It begins with a coat! Joseph, who is 17 years old when the story begins, is the favorite child of his father, Jacob. As a sign of his regard for Joseph, Jacob made him “a long robe with sleeves,” says the New Revised Standard Version. Most of us know that robe as the “coat of many colors,” as other translations describe it. It demonstrated the special place Joseph held in the heart of his father, Jacob. And, we are told, when Joseph’s brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more than he loved them, they “hated Joseph, and could not speak peaceably to him.”

So the brothers conspired against Joseph. They would have killed him had not one of them, Reuben, intervened. Instead they stripped him of his coat of many colors, threw him in a pit, and sold him to a group of traveling traders, who carried him to Egypt. Then they killed a goat, dipped the coat of many colors into the goat’s blood, and took the bloodied coat to Jacob, telling their father that they had found the blood-covered robe, then asking him whether it was Joseph’s robe. Jacob’s response was poignant: “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” And Jacob “mourned” and “bewailed” his son, Joseph.

Thus the story begins – the story of good news. It begins with cruelty, deception, a lie, and grief over a presumed death. The coat of many colors had been a symbol of favor and affection; but in this trickery it had become a symbol of deception and a sign of evil. So it would remain for Jacob for the next 20 years. It began with a coat.

Then it continued with a captive. When the traveling traders got to Egypt, They sold Joseph to a man named Potiphar, who was an official in Pharaoh’s court. Joseph rose to

a position of favor in Potiphar's household, and Potiphar made Joseph overseer of his house and lands. But when Joseph refused the advances of Potiphar's wife, she accused Joseph of trying to seduce her- and Potiphar put Joseph in prison, where he remained until he was 30 years old.

The favored son, sold into slavery, raised to position of favored overseer, was in prison. The story continued with a captive!

Then, after years in captivity, Joseph was released and made an overseer in Pharaoh's house because of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams – first the dreams of two fellow inmates, then the dreams of Pharaoh himself. The captive had again become an honored and favored overseer. The status of prisoner had been replaced with the status of honored leader. And Joseph, by virtue of the Pharaoh's favor, rose to a position of authority over all Egypt.

Over 7 years of plentiful harvest, Joseph led the Egyptians to store food. He had foretold the 7 years of plenty in interpreting one of Pharaoh's dreams. But he also saw in the dream 7 years of famine, so he led the Egyptians to prepare.

It was when the famine came that Joseph's brothers, who had sold him into slavery 20 years earlier, whom he had not seen in all those years – it was when the famine came that Joseph's brothers traveled from Canaan to Egypt in search of food.

When they got to Egypt, Joseph recognized his brothers, but he did not immediately let them know who he was. He treated them as strangers. He asked about their father. He developed a plan to require them to bring the youngest brother, Benjamin, back to Egypt. He detained Benjamin and wanted to send the brothers back to Canaan without Benjamin. But when the brothers pleaded with Joseph, begging that he let Benjamin return to Canaan with them, Joseph could stand it no longer. And in one of the most poignant scenes in biblical literature, Joseph told his brothers who he was.

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 will be five more years in which there will be neither plowing 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.'" (Genesis 45:4-9)

So Joseph's brothers went. They brought their father, Jacob, back to Egypt. Jacob and his family settled there, in the north of Egypt, the land of Goshen. And Jacob lived there the rest of his life.

After Jacob had died, Joseph's brothers went to Joseph saying that their father had told them, before he died, to beg Joseph to forgive them for the harm they had done to him in selling him to the traveling traders. But Joseph said to his brothers (we are now in the 50<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis), "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... So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." (Genesis 50:19-21)

And there the story concludes. It began with a coat – a symbol of favor that became a sign of deception and evil.

It continued with a captive – a status of slavery which became a position of honor and gracious leadership.

And at the end the evil that the brothers of Joseph intended had resulted in goodness that Joseph interpreted as the action of God. And that's the good news!

It's a timeless story. It's a story that we still need to tell and hear. We live in a world where many people simply do not experience or believe in good resulting from evil – whether intended or not. We live in a world where many people find themselves stuck in cycles of jealousy, rejection, deception, cruelty, or pain – and they see no way out. Nor do they find any comfort or hope in the midst of their difficulties. We live in a world where we find it easy to settle for cynicism, hopelessness, discouragement, or despair.

Personal difficulties seem overwhelming.  
People we respect disappoint us.  
Relationships we have valued turn sour.  
Principles we have held are challenged.  
Good and worthy ends are pursued through hurtful and insensitive means.

It is not difficult to give in to despair and a sense of futility in doing good.

In just such a world we people of biblical faith have good news to share. We have this witness of Joseph that God brings good in the midst of what appears meant only for evil.

And we Christians, people like us who worship in places like this week after week, have another symbol of this good news. We also have a cross – a crucifixion – a symbol of the most ignominious and cruel evil imaginable – but a profession at the same time of the enduring reality and power of goodness and hope, of beauty and life, of peace and light. We affirm that a death intended by many for evil was a gift intended by God for good! We affirm, because we affirm a crucified and resurrected lord, that in the long view of faith and life, God brings good out of evil. God causes light to shine in darkness. God has the power to bring hope out of despair. God is the giver of life even in the face of death.

Did you notice, when I read Joseph's words of forgiveness to his brothers – did you notice that twice in 3 verses he told them not to be afraid? He said to them, "Even though

you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” That’s in verse 20 of Genesis, chapter 50. But in verse 19 and in verse 21 Joseph said to his brothers: “Do not be afraid!” and “Have no fear.”

Throughout scripture that admonition is one of the most prevalent words of God or representatives of God.

When Moses gave the wandering Israelites the Ten Commandments God had given to him, he said, “Do not be afraid.” (Exodus 20:20)

When the angel appeared to another Joseph, telling him to take Mary as his wife, the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” (Matthew 1:20.)

When the angel appeared to Mary, telling her she would bear a child, the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” (Luke 1:30)

When the angel appeared to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus, the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” (Luke 2:10)

When Jesus came to the disciples in a storm walking on the water (in today’s gospel text), Jesus said, “Do not be afraid.” (Matthew 14:27)

When the angel appeared to the women at the empty tomb on Resurrection Morn, the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” (Matthew 28:5)

When the Risen Christ appeared to the women on that first Easter, he said to them, “Do not be afraid.” (Matthew 28:10)

The point? When it appears that evil and deception and suffering and pain are winning – when it seems that darkness and oppression and cruelty and jealousy are in control – the word of faith is spoken:

Do not be afraid.  
In what seems intended to result only in evil, God intends to bring good.  
Do not be afraid!

How often in this world, when it appears that evil is the only possible outcome, we are reminded of the goodness of God which transcends cruelty and brings hope and goodness out of darkness and despair!

The cover story in the July 21, 2008 issue of TIME magazine was about Nelson Mandela on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Written by the man who collaborated with Mandela on his autobiography, the article cited Mandela’s 8 lessons of leadership. Though all are instructive, the first is particularly appropriate: Lesson No. 1 – “Courage is not the absence of fear – it’s inspiring others to move beyond it.” Mandela referred to his 27 years of imprisonment: “Of course I was afraid,” he said. But he learned to appear

fearless. “Prisoners who were with him said watching Mandela walk across the courtyard, upright and proud, was enough to keep them going for days. He knew that he was a model for others, and that gave him the strength to triumph over his own fear.” Thus he emerged from prison as a leader for a new South Africa. What his captors had meant for evil, God had meant for good. And apartheid was ended; Mandela was elected President of South Africa; and a new South Africa was born.

“Do not be afraid! What others meant for evil, God meant for good. So have no fear.”

Most of us, however, are not Nelson Mandela. We do not live our lives on such a scale of history. Most of us live rather ordinary lives. Our struggles and captivities are more of an everyday, ordinary, garden-style variety. Yet they are not, for that reason, less significant. For us too, in our ordinary, everyday lives, what appears to be meant for evil can result in being meant by God for good.

A week ago yesterday I participated in a memorial service for my aunt, the last surviving sibling of my father, the last link with that generation of that side of our family. I listened as her three sons, my cousins, shared memories of their mother. She was not famous, not a celebrity, not a public figure – but she knew what it means for God to intend good out of apparent evil, struggle, difficulty. I listened as my cousins told of her being left alone as a single mother to raise three sons on a very restricted income. One is now a counselor on a college campus in the northeast, one a medical doctor in the southwest, and one an information technology specialist on a university campus in the southwest. I listened as they described her life-long struggle with depression – her juggling of bank accounts to pay the bills. I listened as they described her love of animals and plants. I listened as they told of her enrolling in nursing school in her mid-forties, and spending 20 years as a nurse, finding financial security for the first time in her adult life – and finding deep satisfaction in caring for others. I listened as they told of people she did not recognize approaching her at the grocery store in her later years to tell her what her nursing care had meant to them at particular times in their lives. I listened as they read excerpts of letters from some of her former patients.

I listened as they talked about what led her into nursing, out of financial insecurity, into meaningful work, and through her struggle with depression. It was, they said, her reliance on, her trust in, Psalm 46, verse 10: “Be still, and know that I am God!” That psalm begins with these words: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear....”

Do not be afraid! What seems meant for evil can be meant by God for good!

It began with a coat – a symbol of favor and affection became a symbol of deception and a sign of evil.

It continued with a captive. A status of slavery gave way to a position of useful favor and care for the welfare of others.

And, finally, it was confirmed by a cross – as God in God’s infinite and gracious wisdom showed us what is ultimately the business that God is about –

- to bring good out of evil;
- to bring light in the midst of darkness;
- to bring hope to the depths of despair;
- to bring love in the face of hatred and indifference;
- to bring life in the presence of death.

So that’s the word for the day –

Do not be afraid!  
God’s intention is to make good come out of evil.  
God has done it again and again – and will keep on doing it.  
So do not be afraid!

And that’s the good news!