

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

The Rev'd Warren E. Shaw, Rector

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Verse of the thirty-seventh Chapter of the First Book of Moses, called Genesis.¹

“... Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours. And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.

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“And his brethren went to feed their father’s flock in Shechem [**SHECK-um**]. And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem [**SHECK-um**]? come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here am I. And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem [**SHECK-um**].

“And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, What seekest thou? And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed their flocks. And the man said, They are departed hence; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan [**DOE-thun**]. And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan [**DOE-thun**]. And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams. And Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands; and

said, Let us not kill him. And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again.

“And it came to pass when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stripped Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt. And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content. Then there passed by Midianites, merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

“And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child is not; and I, whither shall I go? And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; And they sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no. And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

¹ Genesis 37:3-4, 12-35 (KJV).

² James 1:1-15 (KJV).

thorities, as well as the cowardice of the Roman governor, to “*condemn sin in the flesh*”, as St. Paul says, by sending Jesus to the Cross as the Lamb of God, who took upon Himself, at His baptism, the sins of the whole world. On Easter, God forever broke the grip of death and raised His Son to everlasting glory together with all who put their trust in Him.

It must have been difficult for the disciples of Jesus to understand how they would ultimately benefit from the death of their Master. They did everything they could to try to prevent it.

It must have been difficult for Joseph to understand how his sufferings as a slave and a prisoner in Egypt would ultimately benefit him and his whole family.

It is difficult for us, when we seem to be abandoned by God and suffering in ways we do not deserve, to believe that God still loves us and will ultimately bring good out of the evil with which we are afflicted. Human logic does not help us in dealing with those situations and the bitter feelings that they engender. Only faith can keep us from rejecting either the belief that God is all good or the belief that God is all powerful.

It should be easier for us than it was for Joseph to believe that evil is a tool that God uses to bring about good. Joseph did not have Good Friday and Easter to look back on. We do. So when you ask us clergy for an explanation of why you are suffering and why it is that evil is so rampant in the world, what we tell you, is to look at the Cross.

The Cross is the central symbol of our faith because it reminds us of how God uses evil to accomplish good. He makes His enemies serve Him. That’s what the Bible teaches us about the problem of evil.

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The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the General Epistle of James.²

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting. My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways. Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The problem of evil has troubled theologians and philosophers for centuries. The reason it is so troubling is that it refuses to yield to human logic.

The problem consists of three propositions that cannot all be true. Any two of them can be true, but one of them must be false. The three propositions are these:

1. God is good and kind and loving and entirely benevolent.
2. God is all-powerful and there is nothing He cannot do.
3. There is evil in the world, and it is destructive.

Human logic demands that we must decide which two of those propositions we will believe, and which one we will reject. If we want to believe that God is completely good, we must either conclude that He is not all-powerful, or else that evil does not exist. If we want to believe that evil does exist, we have to conclude either that God is not all good or that He is not all powerful.

Different people make different decisions about which of the three propositions to reject, but most of us don't want to reject any of them. We want to believe that God is all good, and we want to believe that God is all-powerful, but we cannot deny that evil exists and is often visited upon people who do not deserve to suffer. So we solve the problem in the only way possible. We reject it.

We simply refuse to try to understand God in terms of human logic. We retreat into faith, which is not the result of a logical thought process. We embrace the idea that God is not logical. He is beyond logic. He "moves in mysterious ways" as the old hymn says. And that, I believe, is the proper approach. We just have to trust Him.

There are verses in the Bible that talk about how God makes use of evil to accomplish His purposes. He wants to replace Saul with David as king of Israel. So He sends an evil

spirit to trouble Saul and induce him to bring young David into his court as a musician.

In the Exodus story, God intends to demonstrate His power over the gods of Egypt. So He hardens the heart of the Pharaoh [**FAY-row**] who refuses to listen to Moses and set the Israelites free. One of the gods in whom the Pharaoh [**FAY-row**] trusted is the sun god, which God blocks out with a deep darkness that lasts for days. The Nile is also considered a god by the Egyptians, so God renders it unfit to sustain life by turning it into blood. Finally God sends the angel of death to claim the firstborn of all the land, because the firstborn is His by right, as Abraham acknowledged when he went to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.

In today's lesson from the Old Testament, the older brothers of Joseph plot to kill him because they are tired of hearing about his dreams of being in a position of authority over them. But God uses their greed to get them to sell him as a slave instead of killing him. That gets Joseph to Egypt, which is where God wants him to be.

Years later, when Joseph has been placed in charge of the food program in Egypt, his brothers come to him asking for food because their own land is experiencing famine. Joseph gives it to them. Then he reminds them of how they sold him into slavery, and he says, "You meant it for evil but God meant it for good." In other words, God made use of evil to accomplish good.

God does that a lot. He is the ultimate master of the ancient Japanese art of jujitsu, which redirects an enemy's own strength and turns it against him.

The best example of that is the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, which are the very heart of the Gospel. God made use of the evil that lurked in the hearts of the Jewish au-