

“God has a plan.” I’m sure you’ve heard that before. Maybe you’ve said it, maybe someone’s said it to you. It often gets spoken in circumstances that are inexplicably tragic. “God has a plan.” Someone lost a limb. Someone finds a move difficult. Someone goes through a messy break-up. God has a plan. Much of the time we don’t know what that plan is—or where that plan is taking us. And often that plan seems painful.

This saying, I know it can’t not be true, but I also don’t know how helpful it is most of the time. Too often it comes across as a cliché, or as a statement to just brush someone’s pain and concern under the rug. People say it to be comforting, but the fact that God’s plan included whatever they’re going through, couldn’t that make them doubt God’s planning skills, rather than giving them comfort in the chaos? Ultimately, is it trite or truthful? Is it helpful or harmful?

As our Lenten journey with Joseph moves closer to its culmination tonight, a theme that’s emerged from this account is *God has a plan*. And that plan is often completely hidden from us. We see, hear, and experience one terrible thing, but in, with, and under that one terrible thing, God is doing his thing—which is wonderful. The jealousy and hatred of Joseph’s brothers led them to do something despicable. Selling their own flesh and blood into slavery in a foreign land was pure evil. But in, with, and under those very same evil circumstances, God was at work, preparing salvation not just for poor Joseph but for his people and ensuring the survival of Abraham’s descendants from which the Christ would one day be born.

Joseph’s brothers had unknowingly been a part of God’s plan. Tonight’s reading from Genesis tells of the reunion that those brothers never saw coming. And when it finally happens—when they hear the high-ranking Egyptian official say, “I am Joseph”—they are dismayed, terrified, they’re unable to speak because their jaws are on the floor. They no doubt expect the worst. But in one sentence Joseph expresses how God’s good plan and the evil plan of his brothers unfolded simultaneously: “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life” (v 5).

Joseph told his brothers: You sold me . . . but God sent me. Which is it? Did Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery or did God send Joseph down that path? Was Joseph a victim of evil or was he a chosen savior for the starving world? The most fitting answer to all of those questions is . . . yes. It’s not either/or; it’s both/and. It is indeed the wonderful, awesome plan of God.

God has a plan. And tonight's readings make clear that at the heart of God's plan is forgiveness. God's plan moves forward and succeeds because of forgiveness. Joseph's treatment of his brothers is a profound lesson on the power of reconciliation. This is what grace looks like in action. Joseph is now the most powerful man in the world. And before him are the brothers who betrayed him, down on their knees, guilty of great evil, deserving of death. But what does Joseph do? Through tear-filled eyes, he forgives them, speaks tenderly to them, comforts and kisses every last brother. Oh, and he also tells them the good news: God has a plan.

What if Joseph hadn't forgiven them? What if Joseph had done what comes so naturally to the sinful nature? What if Joseph had subscribed to the idea that revenge is fair play—that it's a dish best served cold? Or even what if he had spoken forgiveness to them but then sent them back home empty-handed to starve? What if he had imprisoned or enslaved them to make them earn their way back into his good graces?

If Joseph doesn't forgive his brothers, then God's plan is imperiled. God's plan to save the whole world, including you, is jeopardized. How will Abraham's seed secure salvation if the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah comes to a screeching halt because Joseph won't let go of the sins committed against him? If Joseph doesn't forgive, then the Passion of our Lord described by St. Luke tonight might never have come to pass.

The crucifixion scene sketched out by St. Luke is not unlike the scene of Joseph and his brothers. The most powerful man in the world, the Son of God, hangs from a Roman tool of torture, beaten and bloody, and fresh pain is felt with every breath. As Jesus looks down and surveys the scene, his disciples have abandoned him. His Father has forsaken him. He is surrounded solely by sinners who hate him, who mock him, who eagerly await his death. But Jesus submits himself to God's plan to save the world. He seeks not revenge on his enemies, but prays for them: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Jesus sheds his blood and submits to death for all of his brothers and sisters, including you. This is what forgiveness looks like. God has a plan—and this is it.

This plan of God for life and salvation had been underway since long before Joseph was born—ever since our first parents ushered sin and its wages into the world. God's plan in Christ was hidden. God's good plan was obscured by the evil plans of men like Pilate and Herod, the scribes and Pharisees, like Judas and all who wanted Jesus out of the way. Make no mistake, God had a plan, but our sin was the driving force behind the nails. Our sin was the reason for the crucifixion. Still, in, with, and under this terrible thing, God was doing his thing—which is wonderful. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor 5:19).

That is the best news you will ever hear. It means we don't get what we deserve. Like Joseph's brothers with their guilty consciences and their jaws on the floor, we don't get what we have coming because of our sin. Our Brother, Jesus, forgives us. He speaks tenderly to us through the preaching and proclamation of his promises. He comforts us with the cup of salvation. Our beloved Brother comes among us in flesh and blood to serve us and save us.

Flowing from this grand plan of salvation is God's plan for you. Yes, God has a plan for your life. Your life is not a random series of events—actions and reactions, causes and effects, that in the end are mostly meaning-less. Far from it! Your Baptism declares that God is determined to use you in this world . . . and what He's got in mind is always good! And while the details will be different from person to person, the when and the how and the what all unique, we who have been forgiven understand that God's plan also always involves our forgiveness and our forgiveness of others. A refusal on our part to forgive those who sin against us—well, that can hinder God's plan. We can get in the way and imperil God's work when we do not forgive as we have been forgiven. Better by far to let go of our neighbor's sin, forgive, so that God can do his wonderful work and his plan can proceed.

So it's not trite, but truthful, not a cliché, but a comfort: God has a plan for you—a plan that centers your life in the life of your Savior. The trials and travails of Joseph remind you not to worry when brothers betray you, or when temptation comes calling. When it seems as if much of your life is wasted and worthless, remember Joseph and his years in prison. When life feels torn apart by the brokenness of the world and sin, ours and others, know that it all wasn't necessarily set forth by God's plan, but none of it is a surprise to Him, throwing Him off track. We cannot know and we cannot see what God is doing or what he is planning. We can only believe. We can only trust that he is working all things for our eternal good, through the life, death, resurrection and eternal presence of our Lord, Jesus Christ. And that is everything. Amen.