

**KNOWN IN THE UNKNOWN Sermon Series: God Intended it For Good, (Genesis 50:15-21)**

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**WATCH/LISTEN:** <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/god-intended-it-for-good/>

Today is the final sermon in our *Known in the Unknown* series. A lot has happened in the last five weeks. Inauguration day. Several of you have been able to receive a Covid vaccine. Winter showed up here in the last week. I encourage you to check on your friends who have young children after a week of snow days.

A lot has changed in the last five weeks. Your work life, your health, your important relationships may have changed. Some of you have welcomed babies or watched your little ones do new things for the first time; others have buried loved ones. As we come to the end of this sermon series, our congregation is mindful of those who are no longer with us. We have lost dear saints in these last five weeks.

Among those we've lost is our beloved Doyle—our pastor, our friend. When we began our *Known in the Unknown* series, Doyle was alive. As we end it, he is not. The end of this series feels like crossing a threshold into a deeper unknown. If I'm honest, I'm not entirely ready to cross that threshold as if I want to hold on a little longer to this span of time in which Doyle was with us. I know this grief is fresh for you too. We're not sure what it looks like to move forward without Doyle.

Joseph and his brothers find themselves in a similar situation in today's story. Jacob has died. The patriarch, the glue of the family, is no longer there. They face a great unknown. We can understand the uncertainty that comes with losing a parent or a grandparent, how it can leave us feeling upended and make the world feel like a very different place. In Joseph's time, the patriarch was responsible for holding together and ruling all the family. The circumstances of Jacob's death created great unknown for his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Death in the family brings up old wounds and family drama. That's what happens for Joseph's brothers. Joseph played nice while Jacob was alive, they think. Joseph allowed us to settle in Egypt, kept us alive during this famine while dad was alive. But now that their dad is dead, they think it's only a matter of time before Joseph will make sure they're dead.

We probably can't go so far as to call it a lie. But Joseph's brothers hatch a plan. They come to Joseph and say "Dad really wanted you to forgive us for the terrible thing we did to you." We can't necessarily say this isn't true. But we can say Jacob doesn't say this in all his final words as recorded in Genesis, so it comes across as a manipulation.

In their little scheme, Joseph's brothers appeal to Joseph's love for his father and then they do two other things to try and secure their future. First, they get down on their knees and bow to Joseph. The Bible goes out of its way to include this detail. Reminding us of the beginning of

Joseph's story when he dreamed that one day his brothers would bow down to him. Second, they offer themselves as slaves, which is a way of saying, as a repayment for the sin of selling you into slavery, we will be slaves of Egypt. Please don't kill us.

The end of Joseph's story reminds me a little bit of the end of the Prodigal Son parable in Luke's Gospel. Jesus tells a story about a man who had two sons—the older brother and the younger brother. The younger brother tells his dad, I wish you were dead, but since you're not yet, give me my inheritance. He goes off on his own, loses all his money, really messes up. Then he comes home and his dad welcomes him back and reinstates him to the family even though he doesn't deserve it. The older son stays and does the right thing, cannot believe his father would reinstate his brother to the family, cannot believe part of his inheritance will be used for his loser brother.

What Jesus does in this parable is turn the tables and raise questions about who in the story is really lost—at first we think it's the younger brother, but by the end of the story, we see it's the older brother. Jesus ends the parable without telling us whether the elder brother experiences a true change of heart. We don't know if the lost older brother will come home and be saved. Jesus helps us wonder the same thing about ourselves.

As I read the end of Joseph's story, I hear it the same way. The story helps us realize it is now Joseph's brothers who are lost, which is different than how it all began. The story shifts our attention to the brothers inviting us to see ourselves in their place.

In our sermon series, as we've learned the course of Joseph's life, we see his conversion and redemption, how he becomes a person who fears God and values helping others more than helping himself. But we haven't seen it all come full circle for the brothers. Joseph trusts God. The text doesn't tell us if the brothers do. Joseph wants to secure the future of others by providing in time of famine. The brothers are still focused on securing their own future. Will Joseph's brothers move into their unknown future trusting God and caring for others? This story asks us, do we trust God? Are focused on securing our own future or the future of others? Will we move into the unknown trusting God and caring for others?

We all want to be Joseph when we grow up. We all want to be able to say "God works for good in all things, even though not all things are good,"<sup>1</sup> and actually believe it. Even if we are betrayed or abused, even if we are forced to leave our home or our family, even if we are wrongly accused, imprisoned, or stripped of a job we needed; when the opposite is true, when we find ourselves in places of privilege, power, and influence, we all want to be able to say *and* believe that, "God works for good in all things, even though not all things are good."

We want to love our neighbors more than ourselves, to do unto the least of these even as we would unto Jesus, to work not only to secure our own future, but to build a more secure future

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4 Season After Pentecost 2*, edited by Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville) 2011.

for others. We want this. We want to be so free and so sure of who we are in Christ that we don't worry about ourselves anymore, that we spend our time investing in others, loving others, praying for others, building God's future for others.

But today, we are not sure we have that much faith. We are battered by the pain and suffering and mistakes that are a part of life. We are living the truth that much of life is not in our control, there is so much we do not understand. We're not sure we know deep in our souls that "God works for good in all things, even though not all things are good." We're not sure we can do that much good.

This week I heard a news story about a 15 year-old named Tsedal.<sup>2</sup> Tsedal is a refugee from Eritrea who has been seeking asylum since she was eight years old. She's been on her own since she was 11 years old when her father died. She's lived in three countries in the last seven years and has experienced the ugliest side of refugee life. Tsedal almost died in the Mediterranean sea earlier this year when she lost her income due to the pandemic. Her friends paid a smuggler to get her out of Libya so she would not be kidnapped again. Twelve of her raft mates died in the Mediterranean.

There is much evil at work around Tsedal. The government who came after her family. The traffickers and smugglers who took advantage of her. The governments who, broke international law refusing to answer distress paying fishing boats to illegally push rafts back from their coastlines. The pandemic. Tsedal's life and so many other lives are examples of innocent suffering because of radical evil. People who never strutted or bragged before their siblings as did Joseph. People who have done nothing to deserve their life circumstances. Nothing.

There are people in Tsedal's life who have worked for good in the face of evil. People who liberated her from trafficking, helped her find life and work, and are now legally representing her and others to defend their legal rights, including the right to life.

There are 272 million people who are part of a great global migration, a reality that did not end with Joseph's family migrating to Egypt to seek asylum during a famine. There are 80 million forcibly displaced people in the world. 26 million of those are people who have been forced to leave their country, what we call refugees; half of the world's refugees are children.<sup>3</sup> The story of Joseph continues.

In our own country right now, a quarter of the population is experiencing food insecurity. One out of every four households. Of the 74 million children in the United States, we are nearing 18

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966498570/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-asylum-law-and-shut-out-refugees>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

million of those children living food insecure, not having enough to eat.<sup>4</sup> One out of every four children, not just in our country, right here in our community.

Hunger, housing insecurity, poverty, illness, these are realities not far away from us, but right here in our community among our literal neighbors. Just as people need help and need hope, people need to know that Jesus loves them. People need people in their lives who will act like Jesus.

Over the last five weeks, we've learned that we are not alone in the unknown, that God is with us, for us, at work in our lives, helping us take our next step in love. In whatever you are facing today hear me say that even in a world where there is evil and suffering too great for us to understand or overcome, the power of God is overcoming evil with good. When you cannot find God's good, you can be God's good to somebody else.

Like Joseph's brothers, we are forgiven people living in a land of plenty during a time of crisis. Like Joseph's brothers, we are charged with deciding how we move into the future. We do not know what the future holds, but First Baptist, but we do know that the power of God is a hopeful future, full of God's good for all. I am so grateful to be a part of a congregation deeply invested in working for God's good in the lives of people in our community and beyond.

As we decide how we move into the future, let us move more deeply into love, more deeply focused on building a secure future for our neighbors, let us proclaim the truth that we are not overcome with evil because through Christ, we are people who overcome evil with good.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Brief\\_Impact%20of%20Covid%20on%20Child%20Food%20Insecurity%204.22.20.pdf](https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Brief_Impact%20of%20Covid%20on%20Child%20Food%20Insecurity%204.22.20.pdf)