

For Good

delivered by Shannon Rye Wall, 18 May, 2008

This Bible--
My grandmother gave me this Bible when I was six.
It has my name on it
in gold letters.

This Bible--
This Bible got me through Divinity School.
It taught me volumes,
back when I didn't even know there *was* a Letter to the Colossians.

This Bible--
This Bible comforted a patient on a lock-down psych ward.
They had shut down I-95 for five hours when he threatened to jump off an overpass,
and he thought that God could never, ever forgive that.
Ever.

And this Bible
belongs to this church—
a gathered community since 1737.
It graces us in this Meeting House.
I give thanks to God for this Bible, and for this church, and for this world.

I love the Bible.
I love the Bible.
I want to preach it, teach it,
walk it, taste it, respect it,
weep it, dance it, delight it,
hold it up to the bright light of day, and show it off to the world.

See what we have? See what we're given?
See how lovely? See how odd?
See how divine? See how God-awful?
See how human we can be?
See how God is still God?

How the Bible speaks to each one of us today
is to a good extent about what's in our minds and hearts and souls today.
What it has to say to us is what we have to say to ourselves, but we don't quite know it,
or what we have to say to one another and to God, but we can't quite put it into words.

So, like a child who is creeping in from the garden
with a wanting-to-show-you smile, ready to reveal her latest discovery,
here is my favorite Bible story (for today):

It's at the end of the beginning—at the end of Genesis.
It's at the end of a long, long narrative about Joseph and his brothers,
who became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.
About Joseph, now the right-hand man to the Pharaoh of Egypt;
Joseph had saved the Egyptian people and his own family by listening to God and by
forestalling famines—several times.

His brothers had once, long ago, driven a wedge into their relationship with Joseph.
(Joseph was, of course, Dad's favorite son, with the "coat of many colors," or the coat
with the long sleeves, depending on the translation you fancy). His brothers had once,
long ago, put a slight strain on their relationship by first deciding to kill Joseph, and then
leaving him in a pit, and instead selling him into slavery in a foreign land. So, they were
understandably somewhat apprehensive about how their brother Joseph would ultimately
deal with them after their father's death. Joseph--whom they had wronged, and who,
frankly, had wronged them back a few times since their reunion.

So, toward the end of the beginning, here's my favorite Bible passage (for today):

*Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also
wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your
slaves."*

*But Joseph said to them, "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, in order to preserve a numerous people,
as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for
you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them,
speaking kindly to them.*

I love this passage. I love it because it reminds me of how I got to this point and to the
extraordinary privilege of standing right here, talking with you today on the 18th of May.
Of how God took the harm and the pain and the despair and the loss in my life, and how
God used it for good.

And it shows how we might learn to deal with loss and harm and pain.

In my 261 days with you since September 1, I have been privileged to share some of your losses. You have may confided in me about the loss of a parent, a child, a minister, a friend. Maybe the loss happened this year, maybe long ago. We may have talked about the loss of health or independence or childhood or a love or a dream of a different life.

Maybe you and I haven't talked so much. I hope we will.

Some of these losses have been the result of our own actions. Some have been caused primarily by others. Some have just happened. Many losses are an incomprehensible, un-sort-able swirl of all of the above.

We know the fear, loss, and sorrow that Joseph and his brothers felt. They may or may not have been equally "guilty" at the beginning of the story, but, by the end, they all wept.

I work toward being able to ask, as Joseph did: "Am I in the place of God?" We are not. We are tempted to put ourselves in that role, judging who has been wronged, and who has done the wronging, and what the "truth" is. Am I in the place of God? I am not.

Then, Joseph said to his brothers, "Even though you intended it for harm..."

And the fact is this: in human life, in life on this earth, harm is done.

Yes, there is harm. Yes, there is pain. Yes.

And yet.

And yet.

Joseph also said, "God intended it for good." God can use—and has used, in the life of this church, and in your lives, and in my life—God has used even the seemingly most devastating things for good. If we remain open to those good intents and purposes of God, we can tap into the good. We can be part of the good.

"God intended it for good." This congregation this year has taught me so much about how God uses events—and us—for good. A child's departure for college, which is so sad for her parents, deepens a marriage. A grown son's inability to continue to work because of his own poor health allows him to minister to his mother. A need for help with shopping or a ride to church sparks a friendship. A serious diagnosis leads to a deeper questioning—and to a deeper faith. We thought it was Good Friday. And Easter Sunday dawned.

"God intended it for good." We're not always certain what God intends, but we do know that adversity often leads to good. I do not believe that God causes harm to us to teach us a lesson or to punish us or even to draw us closer to God. I do not believe that God causes harm to us. I do believe that, no matter what happens, God can use it for good.

And then, there is, of course, the joy! The joy that Joseph and his brothers felt. The joy that we have shared, you and I. The worship, the hymns of adoration, the baptisms, the new members, the lighting of the candles, the blessing of the children, the Lord's Supper, the Easter sunrise, and balloons, and confirmation, and glorious singing, and the sunlight streaming in the windows, and the love. The joy, the greetings, the laughter, the friendship, the reconciliation, the building up of faith and hope and love—all that, I have learned from and felt and loved about you and this church.

So, what do you think?
Shall we travel this book together? Shall we feel what they felt?
What Joseph and his brothers felt so long ago
with Joseph's forgiveness,
by God's unending grace,
taking *whatever*
And using it for good?

Shall we travel this book and this world together?
Do we dare? Do we dare to feel what the disciples felt?
The joy and the fear and the confusion and the purpose that the disciples felt when they
saw Jesus, alive again, risen, resurrected before their very eyes?

Shall we discover how Sarah laughed, how Mary pondered, how Deborah judged, how
Chloe worked, how Leah suffered 'cause Rachel had lovely eyes, and how so many,
many women and men were healed and saved and made whole by Jesus, their savior,
their friend?

Shall we love this book together? Love it enough to read it? Wrestle it? Argue with it?
Untangle it?
Say to the Bible, "I don't know what you're trying to say. God, help me to understand."
Say to the Bible, to God, and to one another, "You matter to me."
Say, "I want to know you better."
Say, "Speak to me."
Say, "I'm listening."
Say, "I don't understand."
Say, "I think I understand."
Say, "I'm sorry."
Say, "I love you."
Say, "I love God."
Say, "May God bless you."
Say, "Amen."