

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
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I begin with the winding story of the youth leader in our Colorado church finding her way to seminary. As Demery finished college, she felt led to attend seminary. Indications pointed toward a California divinity school. As she visited them, she rated the grand tour. They liked her so much they offered a full-ride scholarship. She returned smiling about the future. She it was glad. But it was a seminary lukewarm about the Gospel and tentative in training pastors for the local church.

“Demery,” we said, “it would be prudent of you consider more than one school.” But she didn’t want prudent. She wanted to go to California. The other pastor and I ganged up on her by paying for her application and travel expenses to another. We were close to Demery. Aside from church work, she babysat Greta and Lise.

So Demery half-heartedly visited Duke U. a solid choice then and now. We linked Demery to meet with the most accomplished, but most difficult, of its faculty--an utterly no-nonsense type. You endure him in the moment, but later thank God to have crossed paths. She visited his study, spoke of her interests, and opportunities. He said, “Who told you that you’ve a mind worth making up by yourself.”

Demery left that encounter furious with this professor, determined *not* to attend Duke. But respecting us, she kept her remaining appointments. She next met the financial aid officer only to learn grants were small and her debt would be large.

That practically settled her on the West Coast divinity school. But the telephone rang as she sat across from the financial aid officer. Demery couldn’t help but overhear the call was from a student at her very favorite California divinity school trying to transfer to Duke Divinity, but having trouble transferring all her credits. As if that wasn’t enough, the name of California student was Greta Rosenberger.

Now that student’s name could have been, I don’t know, Emma Stone, Bill Gates, or Kanye West. The point was Demery felt like God was shaking her to get her attention to reconsider something she’d written off. “This student is trying to get into a school I could enter free and clear, without retracing any of my steps,” she thought. She began seeing and rethinking everything differently. Not only did Demery finish at Duke Divinity School three years later. She married a graduate student under that surly Duke professor. The professor preached at her wedding.

Although saying this strikes at the very heart of everything sacred in America, the best moves we can make are often not our own choices, but chosen for us. Life is more mysterious than mere coincidence. It certainly transcends idle chance. There is God’s gentle, strong, and hidden hand that would direct our way. Does aligning our will with God’s purpose matter more than our power to choose? Yes.

We can bewitch ourselves with our understanding and analysis. We can imagine we see life's possibilities in their entirety and can discern our life course alone. Sometimes we seduce ourselves with our illusions of logical certainty until we become stridently fixed on our way. But in the midst of our carefully choreographed certainty, a hidden, inscrutable, playful part of being human tells us there is more. It warns us against always locking down so hard. It challenges our pretense of control. This hidden, inscrutable, playful dimension is where God is at work in us. Someone described the faithful finding our way as like receiving an envelope with our destiny inside and we must discern its contents without tearing the envelope.

Providence is the word for this veiled power we can't afford to ignore. Providence means God is real and personal in life, no mere phantom at a distance. Proverbs 16 says, "The human mind plans the way but the Lord directs the steps." Providence means sometimes God has us undertaking initiatives contrary to our instinct and preference. Faithfulness is to hear and heed this hidden, divine voice.

As Pope John II observed, in the designs of providence, there is no coincidence.

As we heard at the end of the Joseph saga, we were talking about providence without using the word. It means that God intends certain things for us—not always easy or pleasant things—as opposed to other things. God is working out his purposes, plans, directions for the world one person at a time, in you and me.

We find this more clearly in Joseph's case than in sorting out the stuff of our own experience. His is a long, complicated story. Today's lesson falls at the very end. After resenting their brother, after almost killing him and selling him into slavery, Joseph resists lavish imperial seductions and rises to a place of power in Egypt. He is Secretary of Agriculture and his brothers have come pleading for grain during a famine. When Joseph is not only alive, but looming over them, they fear he will want to pay them back for the nasty things they did. "Fear not," Joseph puts their fears at ease. "You meant it as evil against me; God meant it for good."

A story that began with resentment and betrayal turns out to be a story about God preserving his people. Sometimes a story is much more than it seems, isn't it? Your story, my story, the story of God's hand weaving our way together. Sometimes it dawns on us that the drama of life is much greater than its actors.

Do you believe this? Do you believe in the amazing resilience of God's purposes working through us, provided we have faith enough to clear some room for them? I am not talking about strict Calvinistic predestination. Did you hear about the hard-core Presbyterian, steeped in the old school, who fell down a flight of stairs? He stood up, dusted himself off, and smiled, "Well, thank God that is over with?"

That is not what I believe. For not everything in the world happens because God intends it to. Surely not in a week when tens of thousands in Texas are homeless

and hapless. What I do believe is that looking back on life, its many twists and turns, it's incredible how the purpose of God's hand rests on us and works on us.

Forty-two years ago last March, I was camping off Lake Michigan, within sight of the Mackinac Bridge. The air was icy and a thick blanket of snow persisted. My fellow camper, a graduate of Outward Bound, was teaching me all about the joys of cold weather camping. Under his patient tutelage, I survived the frozen tundra.

Outwardly, everything seemed fine entering day three. Temperatures soared into the upper twenties. But inwardly, I felt restless and ill-at-ease. Something told me I didn't belong there. I felt the need to leave. I didn't know why. Somehow my camping friend understood, and let me abandon him. He had to hitchhike home.

I drove 150 miles back to college. I recall the relief in my girlfriend's voice when I called. The very earnest way she said she was very sick compelled me to drive very fast another 150 miles to Ann Arbor. She was gravely ill and was all alone. So I drove her to the emergency room. You say coincidence? I say providence. Now, I was no more a hero in this than Joseph was a hero in Egypt. Providence isn't so much about the actors as it is the Author of life, the Bestower of salvation.

St Augustine once observed that our lives are like a chicken yard full of random tracks, arbitrary scratching in the mud this way and that, sketching out confusion. Seen through the eyes of faith, seeking to discern the movement of God's Spirit, our lives take on pattern, form, coherence, meaning. We discover tracings of an unseen hand. All of a sudden, it comes to us, what Paul the Apostle meant in writing to the church in Rome, "in everything God works for God with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." Hear these words and live. Amen.