



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Where Is God These Days?  
Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 67

This past week might have been a good time to have been living in a yurt in Mongolia, cut off from all communication with the rest of the world. The news has not been good. Ongoing conflict in Syria, Ukraine, and Iraq reminds us how dangerous the world can be. Several temporary cease-fires between Israel and Hamas have offered hope for peace, but rockets still fly to and from Gaza in the interim. Closer to home, in Jefferson, Missouri, the shooting of a teenager by a policeman resulted in protests and riots, bringing further violence to that tension-filled town. The ongoing Ebola epidemic brings death to African nations and anxiety to the rest of the world. Wildfires, storms, floods, and other natural disasters wreak havoc far and wide. Two Amish girls were abducted from their family's roadside stand. The death of Robin Williams felt like a kick in the stomach to all of us, and a murder across the street from the church last week was a sad reminder of the prevalence of domestic violence in our culture.

It would have been a good week to have been far away, untouched by it all. Obviously we cannot and should not run and hide from the problems of the world, but some days it feels like a nice option. And when you consider that these bad things happen in the midst of a great deal of prayer for different outcomes, you might wonder if God hasn't just taken up residence in a yurt in Mongolia or perhaps in a galaxy far, far away. Sometimes it feels like God is missing in action.

Last week in the Discussion Class, a question was raised as to how involved God is in our daily lives. Affirming that God surely oversees the broad scope of life, the question picked at whether or not God has anything to do with the day-to-day, nuts and bolts, operation of life on Planet Earth.

Our—or at least my—immediate reaction is to recoil and say, “Of course God is involved in what happens to us.” Yet, if I am—if we are—honest, it has to be admitted that the question passes through my mind at least once a day—on a good day.

The Psalmist wondered about God's activity in our lives. Psalm 10 is a prayer for deliverance from enemies:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—

let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart,

those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.

In the pride of their countenance the wicked say,

'God will not seek it out';

all their thoughts are, 'There is no God.'

Their ways prosper at all times;

your judgements are on high, out of their sight;

as for their foes, they scoff at them.

They think in their heart, 'We shall not be moved;

throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity.'

Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;

under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.

They sit in ambush in the villages;

in hiding-places they murder the innocent.

Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;

they lurk in secret like a lion in its covert;

they lurk that they may seize the poor;

they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.

They stoop, they crouch,

and the helpless fall by their might.

They think in their heart, 'God has forgotten,

he has hidden his face, he will never see it.'

Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;

do not forget the oppressed.

Why do the wicked renounce God,

and say in their hearts, 'You will not call us to account'?

Psalm 10:1-13

Job's friends, even his wife, believed God was either punishing Job for some unknown sin or absent altogether. Once they found themselves in the desert, the children of Israel protested to Moses that they would rather be slaves under Pharaoh in Egypt than free with God in the wilderness. And who knew the injustices of life better than Joseph. At seventeen years of age, a young man just coming into his own, Joseph's brothers threw him into a pit in the wilderness, faked his death, and sold him into slavery. He landed in the household of Potiphar, captain of the guards for Pharaoh, but Potiphar's wife took a shine to Joseph. When he refused her advances, she cried foul and accused him of assaulting her. He landed in prison where he met Pharaoh's chief butler and baker. Each of the men had troubling dreams which Joseph correctly interpreted. He asked the butler, who was restored to his former position with Pharaoh, to remember him, but the butler did not and the young Hebrew remained in prison another two years.

Throughout his ordeal, Joseph continued to trust God and yet, there were no theophanies, no appearances of God to Joseph as his father and grandfather and great-grandfather had enjoyed. God did not appear to Joseph or even speak directly to him. Surely Joseph wondered from time to time whether God had forgotten him as had his family.

I suspect that if you walked outside after dark any evening last week and looked up into the sky, you saw that beautiful, full moon and, in the stillness and beauty of the moment, appreciated the wonder of God. And if you woke early in the morning and stepped outside to get the paper or take a walk, you felt the cool, crisp air wrap around you, heard the birds singing their morning songs, and you felt the nearness of God in the beginning of a new day. But when you opened the paper or turned on the news and practically every prayer you had uttered the day before was contradicted, you might have wondered, "Where is God these days?"

Joseph might have a suggestion. As I mentioned last week, Bruce Dahlburg suggests that Joseph is in some ways an answer to the dilemmas which arise in the earlier stories in the book of Genesis. In the Garden, the man and the woman are tempted to eat of the fruit which will give them knowledge of good and evil. Joseph points out to his brothers that God acts in such a way as to transform evil into good (Genesis 50:19-20). Humans are given the responsibility of caring for the earth but it is Joseph who finally discerns how to manage the earth in order to provide food during the famine. The first family experiences immediate tragedy when jealousy compels one brother to kill another, but Joseph offers forgiveness to his brothers and

brings the family back together. God's ultimate promise to the Patriarchs is that they will become a great nation through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. The promise finally has its fulfillment in Joseph who makes it possible for the Israelites to settle and grow into an enormous people group. The earlier struggles of Genesis find their resolution in Joseph who becomes an archetype of the true Hebrew.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the hardships, the challenges, and the tragedies that befall Joseph, we sense a sturdy reliance upon God and a steady sense of God's presence and involvement in whatever Joseph is doing. Listen to how he explains his situation to his brothers:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer.

He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' And now your eyes and the eyes

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce T. Dahlburg, "Genesis: Commentary," in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, eds. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 116-117.

of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Genesis 45:1-15

In Joseph’s opinion, everything that had happened to him evidenced God’s hand at work. It was not that God engineered the horrible experiences he had endured; rather, when something bad happened, God thought, “What can be done to bring good out of this circumstance?” It was almost as if God said, “Joseph’s been sold into slavery. Ok, let him work in Pharaoh’s administration. He’s been thrown into jail. Ok, let’s help him interpret dreams. There is a famine. Ok, let’s reunite the family and get on with the project of creating a nation that will bring blessing to all the world.”

Do you remember that psalmist who complained that God seemed in absentia? Hear the rest of Psalm 10:

But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief,  
that you may take it into your hands;  
the helpless commit themselves to you;  
you have been the helper of the orphan.

Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers;  
seek out their wickedness until you find none.  
The Lord is king for ever and ever;  
the nations shall perish from his land.

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;  
you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear  
to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,  
so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

Psalm 10:14-18

Joseph’s story reveals that God does not move us around in life like pieces on a chessboard, but God does react to the circumstances in which we find ourselves and provides us with resources to do what is right. In other words, Joseph allowed God to work through him to bring good things out of bad situations. Joseph was God’s voice and hands and made clear to all

concerned that God was involved in life. We can also allow God to work through us to transform the evil of the world into the goodness of God's grace.

Chris Rosati has ALS, otherwise known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Although limited in mobility, he is not at all hampered in his compassion. You may remember that Chris, who lives in Durham, decided he would bring joy to other people by giving away 1000 Krispy Kreme doughnuts to people in nursing homes, cancer wards, and local parks. This year he created a program called BIGG—Big Ideas for the Greater Good. He challenged people to do something kind for someone else and to make a video of it. Some children responded to his challenge by creating a game that encouraged other people to do random acts of kindness. Another project brought adults and crayons back together again as a childhood pleasure was rediscovered. Two teenage boys treated a group of homeless women to a gourmet dinner. As Chris reminded everyone who participated in his project, "You have the ability to change the world with just an act of kindness."<sup>2</sup>

Look again at the news from this past week. Apart from the bad news, what else do you see? Do you remember that scientists are working hard to develop a serum to cure the Ebola virus? Did you see the dramatic rescue of people from the top of a mountain in Iraq which spared them from certain death at the hands of ISIS? Although Israel and Hamas are still antagonistic, they are talking about peace and working on strategies to resolve their differences. In Jefferson, Missouri, new law enforcement leadership and tactics have helped to bring a calmer attitude to the community as the work for justice continues. A compassionate man offered the two Amish girls safety and notified authorities. God is at work through people like us to transform evil into good.

Each of us can call a friend, write an encouraging note, and refuse to laugh at a joke told at the expense of someone else. This past week, someone's willingness to be an organ donor offered Courtney Moss new hope for life. Through our Communion Benevolence Fund, you helped someone with a bus ticket so they could leave the hospital and return home. You provided a motel room for a family in which both parents lost their jobs. You kept the lights on in homes around town. You provided medical care for individuals without insurance. You made a difference in numerous lives through the ministries of this congregation and your own acts of kindness.

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<sup>2</sup>Steve Hartman, "Durham Film Premiere Features Random Acts of Kindness," On the Road, WRAL-TV video, August 16, 2014; available online at: <http://www.wral.com/news/local/video/13899105/#vPLq5Lkf1W3zKHAY.99>

You prove that there are Josephs all over the world serving others on behalf of God.

Day by day we have abundant opportunities to demonstrate that God is alive and well and very much present with us. Remember that God came to live among us in the person of Jesus Christ who was known as Immanuel which means “God is with us.” It was Christ who gave a face to God, Christ who revealed the heart of God, and Christ who demonstrated the grace of God. When Christ departed this earth, God permeated the world with his Spirit so that we would never have to stand alone.

It is normal and understandable, especially in the face of evil acts that cause profound suffering in the world, to ask where God is these days. Since we know precisely where God is, the more appropriate questions are: Where are we? What are we doing? Are we, as people of faith, acting as God’s agents in the world? How are we—how am I—God’s hands and feet, God’s mind and heart, in the world today? Often, in simple acts of kindness as well as in extreme acts of mercy, we demonstrate to the world that God is still with us. Thanks be to God!

August 17, 2014

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We sing praises to you, O God, because we know that you are with us with each change of the seasons and each turn of the clock. We know that you stand beside us and walk with us through your Holy Spirit. And we know that you live within us for Christ has taken up residence in our hearts.

For your vigilant presence and gracious kindness, we offer our thanks. For the many ways you make yourself known to us and for all of the ways you are involved in our lives that we have not yet discovered, we thank you. May our lives become an offering of gratitude for all that you do for us.

We are mindful today of students who are beginning a new journey of life and of parents who might not yet be ready to let them go. Give courage where needed, sensitivity where important, and assurance of your watchcare for us all. Bless and guide us wherever your path takes us and protect us all, we pray.

We ask that you minister to all who seek your help, O God. We pray for people we love who are ill. We remember the difficult challenges facing so many people. We call to mind the dangerous places of the world where life often dangles timidly between life and death. And we remember each person who struggles to cope with the fear and darkness that threatens to overcome them. Provide help and wholeness to all, O Lord, and minister to our every need.

We pray for peace throughout our world, especially in those places where it seems so scarce. Open the minds and hearts of leaders to consider the cost of conflict and selfishness. Open the arms and souls of people who can provide refuge and hope. Open the world to the possibility that we can live together in harmony and enjoy all of the benefits of this wonderful world you have given us. Open us all to the work of your Spirit wherever faithful people are found. And transform us into your image; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.