

each other's keepers, in a positive and healthy way. God is here, leading us deeper into relationships, helping us figure out a way forward, especially when things are hard. As Jacqueline Laplsey, one of my professors who is now the President of Union Theological Seminary writes, "the spirit of God is... at work in a world that is shaped by human actions. God is present in the story through the actions of others, of Joseph, of pharaoh, of all those who move Joseph's story along toward its positive conclusion. There is thus a strongly incarnational element in the way God is at work in the story; incarnational theology is found not only in the New Testament [with Jesus], but in the Old as well."⁴

It might seem startling to say that God was incarnate in a popular singer who prevented a tragedy on a bridge in Nashville. But our God is willing to be present in human bodies to work for goodness, to preserve life, to care for those in need. And so it is not such a stretch to say of that encounter on the bridge, "there was God!" God was incarnate in Joseph, an imperfect yet willing servant of the Lord, throughout his life and especially when he preserved the lives of his brothers. God is incarnate in David and Noah as they minister to people sorrowing at tragedies that never should have happened. There is God, hard at work. So let us stay attuned to how God is at work in the bodies of people around us, who are offering care and love in the midst of hurt, especially when they don't have to. And then let us remind one another, let us confidently point to what we see, declaring, "there is God!"

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.



September 22, 2024

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"There is God"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21

Last week, rock singer Jon Bon Jovi was in Nashville, Tennessee filming a music video. But one afternoon, instead of filming, he ended up ministering to someone deeply in need. He and his team were on top of a pedestrian bridge spanning the Cumberland River, getting their equipment set up. Security cameras on the bridge recorded the moving events that happened next. A short distance away from the musician, a woman stood outside the railing on the ledge of the bridge, precariously overlooking the river. Noticing that the woman was in distress, Bon Jovi and a production assistant from his team walked toward her. The singer greeted her with a wave, which she noticed and returned. Though the video had no sound, you can see Bon Jovi talking to the woman. He easily leaned on the rail, as if he was having the most relaxed chat in the world. They exchanged conversation for a few minutes, and then, the production assistant put her hand on the woman's back and helped her turn around so she was facing the railing. They talked a bit more, and then Bon Jovi and his assistant each took one of her arms and helped hoist the woman back over the rail. The woman and Bon Jovi hugged, and then the two walked off the bridge together. For a scene that could have ended so differently, this was a powerful example of community members stepping up to care for one another. The Metro Nashville Police Department praised Bon Jovi for helping the woman. Chief John Drake said, "It takes all of us to help keep each other safe."¹

Joseph committed to preserving life just the way Bon Jovi did. His story takes us to the end of the book of Genesis. It's the end of the beginning, so to speak; the end of the very first book in the Bible. Joseph's long and circuitous tale emphasizes this major theme throughout Genesis: God's commitment to care for and preserve life. Specifically, life lived in community. Starting at creation, God intended for the plants and animals, the people and creatures to live together in harmony and in peace. God's

1 "Jon Bon Jovi praised for talking woman off bridge," BBC, September 12, 2024.
2 Collin Cornell, "Commentary on Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21," *Working Preacher*, September 22, 2024, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/god-works-through-joseph/commentary-on-genesis-373-8-17b-22-26-34-5015-21-2>
3 Lakshmi Singh, "2 artists make flower altars for grieving communities after mass shootings," NPR, September 11, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/11/nx-s1-5106375/2-artists-make-flower-altars-for-grieving-communities-after-mass-shootings>
4 Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Commentary on Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21" *Working Preacher*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/god-works-through-joseph/47473>

call to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants was about preserving the life of a beloved community.

Early on in the book of Genesis, the breakdown of life in community was evident. We talked about the fall into sin and how we continue to experience it today. There's another story, about some of the first brothers—Cain and Abel. There was rivalry between those brothers, just like in Joseph's family. Eventually, Cain killed Abel. And when God came looking for Abel, Cain said, "Why are you coming to *me* to find *him*? Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain meant to answer that question in the negative: "no, I'm not supposed to care for my brother. I'm not his keeper." But scripture shows that God would have us answer that question differently. God would have us answer it more like Joseph did. Even though Joseph's brothers had mistreated him, even though it would have seemed reasonable if he'd written them off, Joseph still indicated that he was his brothers' keeper. That he had an opportunity to preserve life and to preserve God's beloved community. So he did. Both the story from Nashville and the story of Joseph remind us that, no matter who we are or how powerful we may be, we are called to care for each other's lives. And when we do, we find, *there is* God, working through us.

Joseph's response to his brothers was amazing. When we account for his brothers throwing him into the pit, their blatant attempts to kill him and sell him off, and then pretending that he *had* been killed to save their own hides—it's all pretty awful. We would understand if he had wanted nothing to do with them, or had refused to even speak with them when they showed up in Egypt. Especially since his dreams of rising to power over them really did come true. So the way Joseph negotiated that meeting was astonishing. He did not exactly forgive his brothers. At least, he never used those words. But he told them that they did not have to be afraid of him. That he would care for them, provide for them, destitute as they were. And he declared that, in the midst of their family's long, awful, messy story, God had still been at work. God never wanted Joseph, or anyone else, to suffer. Yet in the midst of the brokenness of their lives, where suffering was a reality, God was still there, bringing goodness out of it. God is still here now, using regular people, to care for and preserve life in all its goodness.

On the surface, Joseph's action to care for those who had harmed him looks miraculous. Or it might just look like him being nice; being a really 'good person.' But when we look at his story, we can point our finger and say with certainty, "there is God." There was God, working through Joseph. There was God, working through Jon Bon Jovi. As Collin Cornell writes,

"God will find representatives. God will work, even in hidden ways, through God's agents and deputies in order to preserve life."²

Sometimes we can celebrate that God is working in us, when we are able to live out that care for others. Other times, it is just as important to notice what those around us are doing to preserve life; especially in the face of terrible circumstances, especially when their actions seem hidden. And then for us to say out loud, "there is God. God is working in those people." Noticing the action of God matters. Proclaiming the work of God, in the midst of a hostile world, is an act of faith. Realizing that people are out there caring for the lives of others, preserving the lives of people different from them, fosters hope.

Two weeks ago, two artists from Los Angeles showed up in rural Georgia. They visited big box stores to buy two-by-fours, wire, and hundreds of white silk flowers. David Maldonado and Noah Reich first went on this same shopping trip in Orlando in 2016. It was after the Pulse Nightclub shooting that they first felt paralyzed, like their community was broken. But quietly, it must have been God moving in their lives. They learned to create displays from wood and wire and flowers. They now have a non-profit that helps communities build these flower altars in places where people's lives have been senselessly stolen. So David and Noah have traveled to Las Vegas, Uvalde, Nashville, and now Winder, Georgia at Appalachian High School. There, like in each other city, they create the display, framing photos of each victim with white silk roses. Members of the community arrive to grieve, to cry, to be together, bringing cards and more flowers and remembrances. David says, "A lot of the time we only hear about the victims when the news cycle is actively covering it. So to be able to give the community a little bit of a longer time to sit in that grief and to sit in that healing is something that we find incredibly important."³ Though they have no prior relationship with the communities, though they never knew the victims, David and Noah keep showing up in places where there is hurt. They keep working to preserve life and love where pain runs deep. They keep on caring for those who are hurting, demonstrating that goodness still exists, that the lives lost matter and the lives of those who remain do too. There is God, at work in the hands and hearts of David and Noah, twisting flowers into a space for love and grief to mingle.

It's easy to read Joseph's story and wonder why God didn't show up the way we'd expect in some of the worst parts of it. We often wonder, "where is God?" when we see tragedy. It's easy to think that the world is just falling apart all on our own. But God is there—always—working to care, to comfort, to preserve and protect. God is here, helping us to be