Jacob “loved Joseph more than any other of his children,” says Genesis, “because he was the son of his old age; and [Jacob] made him a long robe with sleeves,” sometimes called “a coat of many colors” (Genesis 37:3). Of course, Joseph’s brothers resented their father’s blatant favoritism: “they hated [Joseph] and could not speak peaceably to him” (v. 4). If we could go back in time and change history, we might say to Jacob, “Don’t play favorites. This won’t end well for Joseph.”

To make matters worse, Joseph was a dreamer, and one of his dreams showed his brothers bowing down before him. When the brothers heard this, “they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words” (v. 8). If we could go back in time and change history, we might say to Joseph: “Don’t antagonize your brothers! Don’t upset the family system.”

One day Joseph watching his father’s flock with his brothers. Four of them misbehaved, so “Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father” (v. 2). Joseph ratted out Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. If we could travel back in time, we might say to Joseph: “Don’t be a snitch! Your brothers are going to terminate you!”

Sure enough, Joseph’s brothers said to one another, “Here comes the dreamer. Let’s kill him and throw him into a pit. We’ll say a wild animal ate him, then we’ll see what becomes of his dreams’” (vv. 19-20 paraphrased). If you could employ a Harry Potter “time turner,” you might say to the brothers: “Don’t do it! You’ll never get away with murder!”

Fortunately, the eldest brother Reuben talked some sense into his brothers. Instead of killing Joseph, they sold him to traders for 20 pieces of silver who took Joseph away to Egypt (vv. 23-28). If you could be an Avenger and do time travel, you might say to the brothers: “Glad you didn’t kill him. But selling him into slavery? Is that a good Endgame?”

The story of Joseph feels like a train wreck: Jacob, Joseph, and the brothers make one mistake after another. Things quickly go from bad to worse to disastrous. We want to go back in time and fix this comedy of errors, but we cannot, and we should not, because God is working through these flawed human beings toward a surprising conclusion. God is always working out God’s purpose, even when humans are acting in horrible ways.

The story of Joseph has more twists and turns than a roller coaster. Joseph is sold to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials (37:36). That’s bad. But God helped Joseph to win over Potiphar, who put Joseph in charge of his household (39:4). That’s good. Then Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce Joseph. (39:7). That’s bad. But God gave Joseph the strength to refuse her advances (39:8). That’s good. Potiphar’s wife accuses Joseph of misconduct and imprisons him (39:20). That’s bad. But God stayed with Joseph, helping him to gain favor with the chief jailer who put Joseph in charge of the other prisoners (39:21). That’s good.

Bad, good, bad, good, bad, good. God is clearly involved, directing the outcome of this story. So, it is probably better that we cannot go back in time and change history: we might disrupt the work that God is doing in the world.

In prison, God helped Joseph interpret dreams for Pharaoh’s officials. When Pharaoh needed a dream-interpreter, the officials recommended Joseph who decoded Pharaoh’s dream of an impending famine. Released from prison, Joseph rose to power in Egypt, as second-in-command to Pharaoh in charge of stockpiling food. When famine struck, people from many countries came to buy food in Egypt.

Among the hungry people were Joseph’s brothers. At first, Joseph hid his identity and treated his brothers harshly. Eventually, he agreed to help them as God wanted him to do. “You intended to do harm to me,” said Joseph, naming clearly that his brothers did a great evil to him. But knowing that God is always working toward a surprising conclusion, Joseph also said, “God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people (Genesis 50:20).”

In every time and place and situation, God is working out God’s purposes. Sometimes we cooperate with these purposes, and sometimes we do not; but nothing deters God in the work of redeeming people and reclaiming creation.

God is not responsible for the evil that people do, but scripture shows that God can turn bad into good. God did it with Joseph, getting him to Egypt and in a position of power to save God’s people Israel. God did it with Jesus on the cross to save us from our sins, and in the tomb for the resurrection to new and eternal life. God did it with Paul, moving him from persecuting the church to founding new churches. Nothing, no act good or bad, is wasted with God.

Which is a good thing for us to remember, especially with all that is going on in the world today. Coronavirus. Racial tension. Famine. Natural disasters. Economic unrest. We might be forgiven for wondering what God is doing through all of this! Just how is God working through all these calamities? How can God possibly turn this “yuck” into “yeah”?

We cannot know God’s mind or God’s purpose, other than to remember what God said through the prophet Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). Whatever God is doing, God intends it for our ultimate good.

Each one of our history’s is littered with sins committed, defeats suffered, and mistakes made. We might want to jump in a time machine and change the past. But remember: God is always at work in your life, turning “yuck” into “yeah.” Since nothing is wasted with God, there is no point in trying to change history. Instead, trust God to transform your future.

Prayer: Loving God, You are our hope and our strength, our ever-present help in times of trouble. We know that You hold the future in the palm of Your hands: we trust You. We know that no matter how difficult things become, You promised never to leave us or forsake us. We pray that You will help us to face whatever comes our way. Your grace is sufficient for our needs. Help us to rely on You no matter what the future holds, for our hope is in You. Amen.

**Sources:**

* Orf, Darren. “The 30 Best Time Travel Movies.” Popular Mechanics, November 19, 2019, www.popularmechanics.com.
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**Changing History**

Sunday, August 9, 2020 Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Summer is the time for Hollywood blockbuster films, and a favorite movie theme is time-travel. Time and mind-bending movies explore what would happen if we could go back in time and change the course of history.

Marty McFly escaped Back to the Future in a car-shaped time machine to enter and alter the world of his parents when they were teenagers. Arnold Schwarzenegger was The Terminator, a robot sent from the future to kill the mother of the man who would go on to challenge the robot overlords of the future. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Harry and Hermione use a “time turner” to save Hogwarts. The superheroes of Avengers: Endgame use time travel to save the universe from a big, purple monster-man.

If you could go back in time and change one thing, what would it be? The Atlantic magazine asked this question of some university professors. Sandy Darity (Duke University) says, “I wish that Radical Reconstruction had been made a reality after the end of the Civil War.” Had this happened, she argues, former slaves would have enjoyed full political participation, control over the schooling of their children, protection by the Union Army, and land grants of 40 acres for farming.

Marina Warner (University of London) would ask Ferdinand and Isabella to tear up the Alhambra Decree which drove the Jews out of Spain. “History would look very different,” she says, “if the coexistence of Jews, Muslims, and Christians had continued in 1492.”

Samantha Kelly (Rutgers) wishes that agriculture had never been invented. Yes, agriculture! There would be “far less environmental degradation and income inequality,” she says. “A world without industrial agriculture would pretty much be the Eden of the Bible.”

Our text today provides multiple occasions where we would be tempted to go back in time and change history. A man named Jacob settled in the land of Canaan. He had 12 sons, one of them named Joseph.