

“Change of Forecast”

Genesis 46:20; 47:29–48:2,8-14,17-19
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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The summers of 1964 and 1965 I was eleven and twelve years old. I so much enjoyed playing youth league baseball that, during the afternoon of the days my team was scheduled to play in the evening, I would continually make trips outside the house. Our coaches had said for team members to rest, if possible, and not spend the afternoon in the summer sun. My trips outside the house, however, were to check the activity in the sky of the billowy cumulus clouds. The last development I wanted was a thunderstorm to develop and create a postponement.

(In 1997, when I was forty-something years old and the parent of an 11 year old player, I was serving as a youth league baseball coach. As a coach, I remember watching the cloud formations during the afternoons when we had games scheduled for the evening, but my perspective was different from what it had been when I was eleven and twelve. If the team I was coaching had certain skilled players out of town on vacation or at church or Boy Scout camp, I *wanted* the clouds to build into a thunderstorm! I wanted rain to create a postponement, so we'd have the benefit of a skilled player or players being in town when we played a particular opponent.)

One late June summer day when Lyndon Johnson was President, I made one of my 4:00 p.m. trips outside to examine the sky overhead. I had heard a television weatherman say at 10:15 the evening before that there would be a twenty percent chance of rain that afternoon. I noticed the clouds were building, and, at 4:30 p.m., a thunderstorm rolled in, raining out our evening game. I distinctly remember my mother saying at the time: “There is your twenty percent chance of rain.” She spoke matter-of-factly. A few years later in a high school English class, I would learn the definition of the word, “irony”: “An incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens.”

Someone who is strictly mathematically inclined might say that a drenching thunderstorm on a day when there is a twenty percent chance of rain is absolutely not “irony.” “It is simply statistics,” one could say. “It would happen one out of every five days that such weather conditions existed.” When the odds are four out of five in your favor, to many persons, saying, “There’s your twenty percent chance,” is irony!

In the story from Genesis we’ve read this morning, Joseph was considering no chance other than a standard blessing of his two sons by their grandfather, Jacob (whose other name was “Israel”). The older son would receive the blessing underneath Jacob-Israel’s right hand. The younger son would receive the blessing underneath Jacob-Israel’s left hand. When his father crossed his hands to put the right hand on the head of the younger and his left hand on the head of the older, Joseph first thought his aging father was confused. He wanted to uncross Jacob-Israel’s hands, but his father says, “No. I know what I am doing. Both are blessed; but the younger will have

descendants in leadership roles which are more noteworthy than the older one's descendants."

This story represents no twenty percent chance of rain with rain then developing. It does not even represent a five or two or one percent chance of rain with rain then developing. Here is outright irony! What Joseph expected as "the ordinary" is forecast otherwise by his father's actions. Jacob-Israel's cross-blessing of younger grandson Ephraim under the right hand and older grandson Manesseh under the left hand represents a change of forecast from what the boys' father, Joseph, anticipated!

We might say that "desire plus anticipation equals expectation." If you or I want something to work out a certain way ("desire"), and we calculate there are good odds that it might work out that way ("anticipation"), then we may genuinely expect "that something" to work out as we desire and anticipate. "Desire plus anticipation equals expectation."

The Scot poet, Robert Burns, wrote, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." In this morning's story, Joseph had his expectations which were traditional and customary. His aging father's hand-crossed blessing represents another dimension: ***God's involvement with God's people stirs the elements of life differently than we may desire, anticipate, expect, or forecast.***

This never means that God creates tragedy for this particular individual or group and blessing for a different individual or group. It never means that God, for reasons known only to God, is conditioning the character of those who suffer tragedy, so they will be stronger. This story simply reminds us how God is able and interested in working with people across the centuries in ways that do not follow strict human logic, custom, desire, anticipation, or expectation.

During the memorial service at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., last Thursday, which celebrated the life of political journalist Tim Russert, Maria Shriver commented: "Having lived through more than a few losses that defy understanding, I've learned that asking 'Why?' does not help."

Mr. Russert's twenty-two year old son, Luke, said of his dad: "He was determined every day he awoke to take full advantage of the good fortune he couldn't quite believe, and share it with everyone around him." Luke Russert also referred to a brief section from one of his dad's books: "The importance of faith and accepting and even celebrating death is something I continue to believe as a Catholic and a Christian. To accept faith we have to resign ourselves as mortals to the fact that we are but a small part of God's grand design."

Luke Russert was saying that he recognized how correct his dad was in this assessment. Who wants to die at 58 years? Who wants to die younger than that? Who wants to die older than 58 years? ***Yet whatever the change in forecast you and I and others experience from what we desire, anticipate, or expect, this story from Genesis suggests that God bumps our lives with love.*** When situations subvert and change what we desire, anticipate, or expect, God's love is present; God's grace is present.

Remember how the Apostle Paul taught and wrote about Jesus? Where

people anticipated God working with human strength, God instead worked through human vulnerability and weakness. Where people expected conventional and customary religious wisdom, God worked with what certain people thought was impurity and foolishness. Where people thought humiliating death by public crucifixion was the last word, God's next and lasting word was, "Resurrection!" (1st Corinthians 1:18 – 2:5)

When I think about my early life and what I should desire, anticipate, and expect if God worked and kept me comfortable with those *most* like me when I was so young, then, to this day, I would primarily and most appreciate Presbyterians and Republicans. Yet because God bumps into our lives with love and the unexpected, across the years, I have grown in my appreciation of other Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Unitarians, in my appreciation of Jews and Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics and those who say they are atheists, in my appreciation of Democrats, and others.

Once upon a time, Joseph thought he needed to change around his father's blessing hands. His dad said, "No. God will be bumping into your life as God has bumped into mine. What you desire, anticipate, and expect will not necessarily come to pass through the years ahead. Yet through constancy and change, welcome or not, God will still be bumping into your life with love."

Paraphrasing the Apostle Paul again, this time from the 13th chapter of the 1st Corinthian letter: "Faith from God, hope from God, and love from God exist and abide. The greatest of these is love from God, bumping into and shaping the life of each and every one, no matter how high or low the forecast of rain or sunshine. If the greatest of these is love from God, our forecasts can be changed, and still we shall be kept in that love."

– All honor and praise be to God.