

## *Not A Controlling God*

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Ancient Witness: Genesis 45:1-15

You've heard me talk about fundamentalism recently, and I mentioned that it is a worldview found in all religions that not only has a literal view of the scriptures, but the defining characteristic is the need and desire to control. In a world that sometimes appears to be careening out of control, it attempts to put on the brakes by establishing certain truths that are immutable and unshakeable. And anyone who threatens these rock-solid truths only contributes to the chaos, and so fundamentalism is about dealing with these threats and controlling other people. It is about silencing individuals' expression of thought and faith.

It is not surprising, then, that fundamentalism, which seeks to control society, control scientific teaching and control the lives and bodies of others, would worship a controlling God. And this morning my message is simple. Our image of God is important. It is said that our image of God creates us. So a God who controls will produce people who control others. A violent, killer God will produce violent killers.

Yesterday, there was a Pride event for gay, lesbian, transgender and gender nonconforming people. It was a beautiful event of gentle, loving people. But it was reported that right-wing extremist, Christian nationalists targeted this event with violence and intimidation. Police arrested 31 Patriot Front members to stop a violent clash with peaceful Pride event participants. There were also other extremists in full military gear with assault weapons who walked through the crowd of families and children at the event. Clearly the intent was to terrify, intimidate and threaten the people at the gathering. The intent is to control. There is nothing Christian about these violent extremists, but they appeal to a violent, vengeful, controlling God of their own making.

George Bernard Shaw once quipped, "In the beginning God created humankind, and we've been returning the favor ever since." We often project onto God our needs and insecurities. So, if we want to dominate and control others because of our own fear and insecurity, then we will create a dominating and controlling God. As Anne Lamott said, "If God hates all the same people you do, you can safely assume that you've created God in your own image.

So there are those who pray to a God who is "in control," who can change anything at anytime. Most of the time this God does not act, but simply allows things to happen. Therefore, everything that happens is God's will. God either makes it happen or lets it happen. Everything. From genocide to starvation to warfare to mass shootings of children—God is at the controls. The miraculous action of God is only occasional and appears arbitrary. This God will intervene once in a while and overrule the natural course of things. And so prayers to this God often express this kind of hope for a swift, decisive rescue.

There's something very natural about expressions of this kind of God. The Bible is full of them. I suspect that at one time or another we all have cried out for God to step in and take control. And how many of us have observed that rare, unexplainable event and have attributed it to God's omnipotent hand?

And yet, these human pleas to a God who is “in control” are just that—human expressions and wishful thinking. Even in the Bible, I believe that these kind of attributions of God reflect more the desires of the people than the true nature of God. Even though it is comforting to have a God who is “in control,” there is always a counter-voice to this image in the ancient stories.

What’s amazing to me is that this counter-voice survives at all and make its way into the sacred text, overcoming the impetus toward control.

The ultimate counter-voice, one could say, is the person of Jesus. Not the warrior Messiah that reflected the hopeful dreams of ancient Judaism or the violent Christ reflected in the emotional desperation of the writer of Revelation. But the actual, living Jesus.

The image and nature of God, which is reflected in all human beings, is uniquely and vividly reflected in Jesus, so many of us believe. And that image is not one of power and control and sheer force, but one of gentleness and vulnerability.

And so the God that I pray to is much different from the God who is “in control.” I see God’s miraculous action as continuous and consistent. There is no place where God is not present and active. This action is not controlling and decisive with immediate results; rather it is patient and persistent.

Simone Weil once said, “I would like to achieve the kind of radiance that can bring about nonviolently what other people might have to do violently.” It seems to me that God works this way—with a “kind of radiance,” not with controlling force, coercion or violence. God’s way of nonviolence does not offer quick solutions, but it is not a hopeless position. Gandhi once said, “When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible. But in the end they always fall.” As Rabbi Harold Kushner once wrote:

*God gives us hope in a way that no human agent can. Among humans, Murphy’s law operates: Anything that can go wrong will. But at the divine level, there is another, opposite law: Anything that should be set right sooner or later will.*

Sometimes things happen in our lives that sneak up on us. We might find ourselves in a position that we never expected and we say, “How did this happen?” In retrospect, we can look back and have the feeling that an unseen and hidden reality has been at work, at work in quiet and surprising ways.

I’m reminded of a story that I read where a psychologist was talking about humor as a necessary part of parenting. One of his patients told him this story.

A mother is making phone calls in the family room. Her four-year-old daughter is playing nearby with her four-month-old brother. The two children play together for hours on end. The daughter is a wonderful little mom and the baby loves the attention she gives him. So the phoning mom is not keeping close tabs on the children. Suddenly she realizes they are not in the room.

A moment of panic is soon relieved. The children are playing contentedly in her daughter’s bedroom. “Annie,” mother says to her daughter rather sharply, “you know you are not to carry Jeffrey. You are not big enough to carry him safely. He could have been seriously injured.”

“But mommy,” says her daughter, “I didn’t carry him.” “How did he get down the hall into your room?” “I rolled him.”

Sometimes things happen, and we’re not sure how they happened. Quietly, mysteriously, they happen. Suddenly we are suspicious that something is different, and we become aware that certain forces—four-year-olds and God—have been silently at work.

Today’s story of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers is one of the most moving episodes in the entire Bible. You all know the background: Joseph’s brothers were jealous of all the attention that Joseph was getting from their father, Jacob. So in their youth and selfishness, they staged the younger brother’s death and then sold him as a slave to some traveling merchants. It was the brother, Judah, who said something like, “Let’s not kill him. What good is he to us dead? Let’s sell him, then at least we get something for him.”

Well, Joseph makes it big. He becomes something like a royal therapist, an interpreter of dreams for the Pharaoh. So then he is made a ruler over a large part of Egypt. This is a real rags-to-riches story. And because of Joseph’s talent and foresight, when there was a famine in that area, his country, Egypt, was the only one that had grain in its silos.

For twenty years, Joseph dreamed of the day when he would get even with his brothers. One moment he was living in luxury, safe and secure as his father’s favorite son, and the next moment he was sold into slavery, facing hardship and insecurity. Many a night he comforted himself with an image of his brothers begging and pleading for mercy before him, as they had made him do. And in his imagination, he loved every minute of it. He would get even for the injustice and the cruelty of his brothers if that was the last thing that he did.

Then it happened. There was a famine in the land of Canaan. Joseph, by this time, had been made the Pharaoh’s minister of agriculture, in charge of distributing the grain. And in come his brothers to ask for some help. This was the moment that Joseph was waiting for. Now he had them where he wanted them, now he would get even with them.

Now, let’s pause here. Where is God in this story? This is a question that many people have asked. All through this painful Joseph story, God seems conspicuously absent. In all the evil that is occurring, where is God?

When we turn back to our story, we find that Joseph begins to act out of his long-held resentment. He accuses them of being spies, and then he threatens to keep one of them, the youngest, as a slave. He seems to be deriving some pleasure from tormenting his brothers.

Then Judah, of all people, tells this great Egyptian ruler that if they go back this time without the youngest son, Benjamin, that his father Jacob would surely die. So Judah says, “Let me remain here as your slave instead, and let the boy go back with his brothers. I could not bear to see my father suffer again.”

Then something strange happened. Joseph found that he was not enjoying it as much as he thought he would. It felt so good in his dreams to hurt them, to get even with them. But now, when the time came, he couldn’t enjoy it. He did not like the person he was becoming. Joseph came to the realization that the human soul was not made for jealousy and revenge. He discovered that this was

against his true nature. And he became increasingly uncomfortable until finally he broke down and cried, and he told his brothers who he was.

And we are able to look back upon Joseph's story, which is fraught with evil and meanness, and we are able to see that unseen, silent force has been at work, gently from within, all along. Joseph himself sees this and is able to break with the past. He says to them: "Do not be afraid, do not be angry with yourselves... for God sent me before you to preserve life." Everything has fallen into place for Joseph, and he was able to see that God was working in his circumstances, even the evil ones, to bring about goodness and to preserve life. He was able to see signs of the hidden and mysterious presence of God. He understands now that the divine presence is embedded in the world and that God's work and human work cannot be separated. God's hidden purpose permeates our reality.

Rabbi Kushner has a couple great stories about how God works under our noses, toward that which is good. A certain factory had a problem with employee theft. Valuable items were being stolen every day. So they hired a security firm to search every employee as they left at the end of the day. Most of the workers willingly went along with emptying their pockets and having their lunch boxes checked. But one man would go through the gate every day at closing time with a wheelbarrow full of trash, and the exasperated security guard would have to spend a half-hour, when everyone else was on their way home, digging through the food wrappers, cigarette butts, and styrofoam cups to see if anything valuable as being smuggled out. He never found anything. Finally one day, the guard could no longer stand it. He said to the man, "Look, I know you're up to something but every day I check every last bit of trash in the wheelbarrow and I never find anything worth stealing. It's driving me crazy. Tell me what you're up to and I promise not to report you." The man shrugged and said, "It's simple. I'm stealing wheelbarrows."

In the same way, we look for God at work. We know God's up to something. It's right under our noses, amidst the trash and the garbage, if we only have eyes to see.

Kushner also recalled when the 21 year-old son of his friends was found to have bone cancer. His parents had to take him three thousand miles from home, to a hospital in Seattle, in a desperate attempt to have him treated with a new and experimental therapy. When word of their problem got out some astonishing things began to happen. Service clubs organized fund-raising drives to help pay their expenses. One of Seattle's finest hotels invited them to stay at no charge while the boy was in the hospital; restaurants served them and would not accept their money. The governor of Massachusetts intervened to direct their health insurance company to assume the cost of what some held to be an experimental form of treatment. Some might ask, "Why would God permit a 21 year-old to fall ill with cancer?" I am inclined to ask, writes Kushner, "What moves people to respond to tragedy with such generosity and compassion if not God?"

What moved Judah to change? What softened Joseph's heart? Are we able to see the wheelbarrow amidst the garbage?

Kushner said it so well:

*Having explained cruelty and crime, how do (the skeptic and agnostic) explain generosity, kindness, courage, and self-sacrifice, unless God is at work on us the way the sun affects the flower, making it grow and blossom and reveal its most beautiful inner self?*

How else, indeed, except for a hidden Presence that is not controlling yet is constantly at work.