

Keeping It Together
Genesis 50:15-21

How are you holding up? I think it has been a while since I've asked you that. How are you doing overall? In the midst of a pandemic. In the midst of COVID restrictions. In the midst of e-learning. In the midst of unemployment or underemployment. In the midst of cities burning and protestors marching. In the midst of an endless election cycle. In the midst of your own personal tragedies and battles. How are you handling it? There's a popular meme that has made its way around the internet that explains the same sentiment in a few different pictures. The caption typically reads something like "Me trying to hold it together". The pictures I've seen accompanying these words are funny but hit close to home. A telephone pole that is broken and close to falling over but held together by a ridiculous amount of duct tape. A cardboard box busting at the seams, tattered and worn, but all held together with an obscene amount of packing tape. That's the way many of us are living. So close to falling down, falling over. So close to just blowing apart from how much we hold inside. So close to coming apart from the weight of all that we are carrying. We are barely holding it together. How? Why?

How? I'm not sure. We rely on our own strength to get us through. We lean on our own intelligence. We bind ourselves up after deep wounds and keep marching forward. We put on a great face, we stiffen our upper lip and keep moving forward. Why? Because so many depend on us. So much is placed on our shoulders. We have people that need us. We do this for our own survival. If I can't keep going then what will happen? If I go down then everyone else does to. If I come apart then my whole life unravels. I have to keep it together because if I don't then no one will. There's a lot of pressure to keep it all together. One thing after another comes down the line and adds to the stress, picks at our weaknesses, and we wonder how much further we can go. Sometimes it is just a litany of health problems, family issues, financial scares that comes. Wave after wave pounding you while you try to hold on and outlast it. Can you keep it together? Can you withstand the barrage that comes at you?

Our main character today knows what it is like to have life descend into chaos without much say in the matter. He knows what it feels like to be barely hanging on. He can certainly relate to pictures of just barely keeping it together. Our reading takes us to the very end of Genesis, chapter 50, but we can't understand all that this scene means for us without first knowing what led up to it. You are probably very familiar with the story of Joseph but in case you aren't, here is a summary. Jacob had twelve sons by two wives. Leah had ten of the sons and Rachel had two. Jacob favored Rachel over Leah and that favoritism made its way down to Rachel's oldest boy, Joseph. It's hard enough when there's a clear favorite child but to know that your mom isn't the favorite either probably heightens the animosity. In response to their brother's special treatment, the eleven decide to sell Joseph into slavery. They convince their father that Joseph is dead while Joseph travels with a caravan to Egypt. There Joseph becomes a house slave and is wrongfully accused of rape by his master's wife. He is thrown in prison and held there until he makes a name for himself interpreting dreams. He eventually earns favor with the pharaoh and becomes second in command over all of Egypt.

When you read the story of Joseph you realize that he didn't ask for any of this. It's not his fault he was his father's favorite. He didn't ask for fancy clothes or special treatment. He couldn't control the family dynamics and certainly couldn't change the hearts of his jealous brothers. He didn't ask to be enslaved. He didn't ask to be sexually harassed by his master's wife. He did everything he could to avoid temptation and still was falsely accused. It was one bad thing after another. It was misfortune after misfortune. Yet, in the midst of it he kept it all together. At least outwardly he did. He kept his faith in God and kept moving forward. I wonder how he would have answered that question. How are you holding up? He might have been just as dishonest as we usually are. Oh, I'm doing pretty well. All things considered, I'm keeping it together. Yet, as we hear Joseph speak today to his brothers he gives us a little more insight into his life and thinking. Joseph stands on the other side of all that has happened to him and says something very powerful. His brothers are afraid that he'll take vengeance on them now that their father has died. They are fearful that Joseph was saving his wrath and revenge for

after Jacob was no longer around to see it. They tremble at his feet, hoping and praying that his forgiveness was real. Joseph replies to these brothers who sold him out only to later beg him for their survival. He boldly and humbly proclaims, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

Joseph gives us a perspective that helps us understand the difficulties we are going through right now. As we see Joseph standing on the other side of the roller coaster ride that is his life, he shows us that he didn't survive by his strength, planning, or ability to keep it together. None of this happened because of the evils of those inflicting it on him either. He doesn't even blame God for the bad that has happened in his life. Instead, he looks at his brothers, the ones who started this journey by their jealousy, and he says, "what you meant for evil, God meant for good." God used the things that I have gone through to accomplish something greater. It was used to save many lives, to spare Joseph's long lost family, and to continue the lineage of Abraham that will eventually give birth to the promised messiah. It wasn't about me holding it all together, it was God holding me together. It was God holding my life in his hands. It was God keeping everything together. What I thought was my story was actually God's story, written and played out for the benefit of many. It was God who did it.

We talk all the time about how we need to keep it together for people, for our families, for our own survival. People depend on us. But is that really what is happening or is it that God is keeping all things together. Maybe that's how you've persisted through your current circumstances. Maybe that's why you are standing where you are today, on the other side of your tragedies. This had me thinking about another verse in scripture. Paul writes about Jesus in Colossians 1:17, "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." It goes on in verse 18 to say, "that in all things Christ may be preeminent." Paul is almost rewriting the words of Joseph. God was here in the beginning. He has kept this whole situation in his hands. Ultimately, it was done for his glory so that many would be saved.

If we didn't quite know the ending yet, we could look at Joseph's life and wonder where God is at. Just like we do in our own lives. We wonder where is God in the midst of my suffering. What is God doing as I try to keep it all together? Where is God in the midst of these cycles of illness and pain? But when we see the perspective of Joseph. When we hear the words of Paul we recognize that God is accomplishing something even in your darkest moments. He's not causing the persistent problems but he is using them to accomplish his purposes. And we know, just like Joseph, that we will stand tall at the end of it all. I just had a funeral this last week and at every graveside committal I like to read the words of Job. He says, "for I know my redeemer lives and at the end I will stand on the earth. Though my flesh be destroyed, this I know that with my eyes I will see God and not another. Oh, how my heart yearns within me!" You could stand on the other side of your sin or pains in this lifetime. You could be like Joseph and be able to have that perspective and say, "wow God carried me through a lot of things." Or, you could be like Job who knows that on the last day, on the day of the resurrection of all flesh, we will stand victorious and then have that perspective to see what God was doing in the midst of all of this mess. So either it happens now or it happens in eternity but we know that God is keeping all things together.

This is the same perspective we have as Christians. Of course, we stand on the other side of the crucifixion. But could you imagine standing at the foot of that cross and believing that God is still in charge? Could you imagine being a disciple of Jesus and seeing him arrested and beaten and unfairly tried by a system stacked against him. That as he's hanging, bleeding and dying. That as he's buried in a borrowed tom. Do you think that as they saw all of this they could confidently say that God is keeping everything together? Yet we know, because we've seen the mighty works of God, that Jesus stands on the other side of death, proclaiming his victory. He tells us who have lost confidence and begin to doubt that God was in control the whole time. He was never out of control. He had it all in his hands this entire time. Never once was I out of control. Never once did I wonder what would happen next. Never once did I think, "well let's see what happens now." God was even in control during the passion and

death of Jesus. The risen Jesus tells us what they meant for evil, God used to accomplish the salvation of the world.

So today we're given the perspective of Joseph. We are given that comforting reminder from Paul in Colossians. We hear these voices echoing throughout scripture, reminding us that God is in control even in the lowest of lows. That he has plans being accomplished even in the midst of your pain. That despite what is going on in the world, he is still managing it. That he still is accomplishing his purposes and sometimes he uses these things to bring glory to himself so that all may know that he is God. We have that perspective from Joseph and Paul and Job. We know that even if the pains we endure today overtake us and death has its way with us that in the end we shall stand on the earth. We will see God face to face and we will look back over our lives and over our world and realize that God has been and always will be in control. What is meant for evil, what appears evil, what seems so awful and dark in our world can still be used for good. To accomplish his purposes. To save many lives.

That's a word for each of us today as we look over the litany of disasters we face. As insurmountable as they may seem, recognize that nothing is too big, no cancer has metastasized too much, no medical mysteries going on in our body are too confounding for our God. He controls all things. What is meant for evil in this world, what appears so evil ultimately can be used to accomplish God's purposes. May you be comforted by that gospel truth. Seen in Jesus. Proclaimed by Joseph and Job and Paul. You don't have to keep it together. You don't have to be like that box busting at the seams, held together by tape and a prayer. You don't have to be like that telephone pole, held together by duct tape as you this close to tumbling over. You don't have to keep it together. Just trust that God is, because he is. He's keeping you together and one day he will make you whole. What appears so evil and awful now will one day be made to shine the light of Christ to a world that needs saving. Amen.