

Bloom Where You're Quarantined
The Best Thing About a
Pandemic
May 3, 2020

Hey everybody, as Shannon said, we're coming to the end of this series ...

And, before I begin, I want to say "thank you" to everyone who has let me know how helpful the messages *and the music* in this series have been.

That means a lot to me because ...

- I'm not just a pastor
- I'm not just a guy standing up here talking

- I'm not just a message-dispensing machine.

I'm a *person*, too.

And I have had more than a few days where I have felt down and depressed and discouraged over this whole coronavirus situation. And everything I've talked to you about over the past seven weeks has been something that *I, myself*, have needed to hear.

Basically, I've been preaching to myself and letting you all listen in ... which is why it helps me to know that what we're doing is helping someone else *besides me*.

So, thank you for letting me know.

Also, before I begin today's message, I want to tell you about our *next* series, which begins

next Sunday.

As you know, people everywhere are beginning to get back to work and/or back to some semblance of normal.

However, sadly ... unsurprisingly ... typically ... there is a great deal of tension between ...

- Those who are saying things like “we need to hurry this up because businesses aren’t going to make it”
- And those who are saying things like “we need to be very careful or lots more people will die.”

Actually, if you’ve been watching the news and the interactions on social media, “tension” is probably too soft of a word. Judgementalism, hatefulness, and condemnation is more like it.

Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about because you've been on the *receiving* end of that. And some of you know because you've been on the *giving* end.

I suppose that kind of behavior is to be expected in the world-at-large but what's heartbreaking is that this state of affairs also exists between followers of Jesus.

And I understand why any of us might get sucked into that. There's a lot of emotion these days because, as I've said the past two weeks, *what we're going through isn't normal*. Humans are made for productivity and community and both of those have been taken from us in a never-before-seen way.

But that doesn't change the fact that we – those of us who are Christians – are called to a higher standard than judgementalism,

hatefulness, and condemnation of people we don't agree with.

And that's what our next series is about.

I'm calling it "We Survived: now, if we can just keep from killing each other."

If we have your email address, you'll get more details on that this week. And I hope you'll join us for all four messages and invite someone else to tune in with you.

Not a Curse

Ok, now, let's get into the topic for today which is "The Best Thing About a Pandemic."

And I know that sounds kind of goofy because ...

- How can there be anything *good* about

something so *bad* as a pandemic?

- How can there be anything *positive* about something so *negative* as being locked down for two months (and maybe longer)?
- How can there be anything *hopeful* about something so *scary* as a life-threatening contagion?

And, since we're starting out with a somewhat goofy premise, I'm going to show you a very brief clip from one of my all-time favorite goofy movies, *Groundhog Day*.

If you've seen it, you know that it's about a guy – Phil Connors – who, for some reason, is forced to relive the same day over and over again. Phil is literally trapped. He's quarantined not in a specific place but *in time*.

This scene we're going to watch comes near the end of the movie where Phil is explaining to Rita (the woman he's in love with) what his life is like.

Check it out.

(B) Phil: "Be the hat. Come on, go ..."

(E) Phil: "Gosh, you're an upbeat lady."

"I don't know Phil. Maybe it's not a curse. Just depends on how you look at it."

Or, to put it in the phrasing of our series, "I don't know, Phil. Maybe you really can bloom where you're quarantined. Maybe there's something good and positive and hopeful about what's happening to you."

Or *not* happening because, in the movie, Phil's life is put on hold ... like yours and mine

these days. It never advances.

Or, so it seems ... because even though it appears to Phil that nothing is happening, something quite amazing is taking place. Having his life put "on hold" is creating an opportunity for him to grow and change in ways that would otherwise have never happened ...

... which meant that what *felt* like a *curse* was actually a *blessing*.

Of course, that's just a goofy movie, right?

Wrong.

If you're a follower of Jesus, God is trying to do that same thing in your life right now.

In this unpleasant, undesired, uncomfortable time ...

- ... of having to wait for whatever is next
...
- ... of having to deal with the same limitations and the same restrictions day after day after day ...
- ... of wondering if your life will ever get back to normal ...

... God is trying to grow and change you in a way that would otherwise never happen without this situation.

So, what feels like a curse – and don't hear what I'm not saying because COVID19 itself *is* a curse; it's not a good thing -- ...

What I'm saying is that what seems to be a *curse* in terms of how your current situation looks to you ... could actually be a *blessing*.

Now, it may not *feel* that way and it might even be hard to believe.

That's because most of us tend to evaluate God's activity in our lives by these two equations:

- If things are good, it's because God is happy with us and therefore blessing us.
- If things are bad, it's because God is unhappy with us and therefore *not* blessing us.

Have you ever had those thoughts? Are you maybe even thinking those thoughts right now?

That's the paradigm by which most of us interpret the things that happen to us and those we love. But it's a very different perspective from what we find in the

scriptures.

The Story of Joseph

Consider, for instance, the story of one of the most well-known individuals in the Old Testament: Joseph, the youngest of the 12 sons of Jacob (not the husband of Mary and the stepfather of Jesus – that's another Joseph).

In any case, if you've been around "church" for any length of time or seen the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, I'm sure you know at least part of it.

As a teenager, Joseph has a strange dream that he will one day rule over his brothers and even his father. It's his destiny, he says. And he's very excited about it, so he keeps talking about it.

Unfortunately, Joseph's brothers aren't nearly as jazzed about the idea. It's not how things "ought to be" in their culture, and they eventually get tired of hearing about it.

So, one day, while they're all out hunting ...

- They tie him up
 - Throw him in a pit
 - And sell him to a band of slave traders
- ...

... who happen to be passing through on their way to Egypt.

Upon arriving in Egypt, they promptly sell Joseph to a very wealthy and influential man by the name of Potiphar.

One day, while Joseph is working in Potiphar's house, Potiphar's wife puts a move

on him.

- Joseph resists
- She's unhappy and embarrassed about it
- So, she falsely accuses him of rape.

Being a lowly slave, Joseph is immediately imprisoned.

While in prison, one of Joseph's fellow prisoners has a strange dream which Joseph interprets to mean that the prisoner will soon be released. And when that happens, just as Joseph had said, the guy promises to plead Joseph's case to the Pharaoh – the King of Egypt.

But he doesn't. He forgets.

And for two long years, Joseph rots away in prison until the day when *the Pharaoh* has a

strange dream that needs interpreting ... which causes that former prisoner (who now happens to work for the Pharaoh) to remember Joseph.

- So, he tells the Pharaoh ...
- Who then summons Joseph ...
- Who then not only *interprets* the dream ...
- But tells the Pharaoh *what the dream* was before the Pharaoh tells him.

"The dream is a warning," Joseph says, "that a widespread famine is going to strike the entire Middle East in seven years. And it will last for seven years."

Because Joseph knows without being told what the dream was, Pharaoh realizes that God is speaking through him.

So, he releases Joseph from prison and

makes him second in command over all of Egypt with the responsibility to stockpile grain. And that's what Joseph does for the next seven years.

And seven years later, when the famine hits all over the Middle East (just as Joseph said it would), the country is prepared. No one goes hungry.

Meanwhile, back in Joseph's hometown, his brothers are starving. But they have heard (somehow), that there is an abundant supply of food down in Egypt.

So, they make their way south in hopes that some of that food might be for sale.

And when they arrive, in accordance with the custom of that day (and because they're pretty much beggars at this point), they *literally* bow down in front of the man who is

charge of Egypt's food supply.

- *Joseph*, the brother who had suffered through so many bad circumstances because of their petty jealousy.
- *Joseph*, the brother whom they had abused and mistreated so many years before.

Of course, because such a long time has passed since then (maybe 20 years), the brothers don't recognize that it's Joseph who they're dealing with.

More importantly, they don't realize that they have just *literally fulfilled that hated dream God had given him as a young boy*.

But Joseph does because *he recognizes them*.

However, he doesn't let on at this point. Instead, Joseph decides to take his time and get to know them before revealing his identity.

The Bible doesn't tell us why he does that. Maybe he has to work through his anger issues. Maybe he's just trying to sort it all out.

In any case, after several months of interacting with them, the day comes when he can no longer keep his secret.

So, he announces ...

*"I am your brother Joseph, the
one you sold into Egypt!"
Genesis 45:4 (NIV)*

Apparently, that revelation causes them to be terrified for their lives (and rightfully so), because ...

The next thing Joseph says is ...

"Do not be distressed ..."

In other words, "even though I could have you killed because I am second in command only to the Pharaoh, I am not going to do that. So, relax. Don't freak out."

And ...

"... do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here because ..."

"... you know, after all, I was kind of a punk and you guys just got sick of me. And, even though it wasn't right, even though it felt like my entire life had been put on hold for many years, I understand why you did it."

No, that's not what Joseph says at all.

Instead, he says, "don't be angry with

yourselves for the terrible thing you did because ..."

And what he is going to say next is incredibly important because it is the grid through which Joseph has learned to interpret the events of his life ...

"Do not be angry with yourselves," he says, "because ..."

*"... it was to save lives that
God sent me ahead of you."
Genesis 45:5 (NIV)*

He continues:

*"For two years now there has
been famine in the land, and
for the next five years there
will not be plowing and
reaping." Genesis 45:6
(NIV)*

And then he says it again.

"But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."

Genesis 45:7 (NIV)

And just in case they didn't get it, he says it again:

"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God."

"He made me father to Pharaoh [apparently, Joseph was much older than the king], lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt." Genesis 45:8 (NIV)

Wow! That's incredible, isn't it?

Even more incredible is what Joseph says next.

"Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God

*has made me lord of all Egypt.
Come down to me; don't
delay."* Genesis 45:9 (NIV)

So, Joseph's brothers do as he says.

- They go get their dad, Jacob.
- The whole clan relocates to Egypt.
- And they all raise families who raise families who raise families in Egypt.
- And they all live happily ever after ... until ...

... the day that Jacob dies.

At this point, the brothers begin to worry that maybe Joseph has been hiding a grudge all these years and hasn't acted on it out of respect for their father.

But, now that he's gone, they think, maybe Joseph will finally get even for how they treated him so many years before. Maybe

he'll take revenge for all the time that he lost between the pit and Potiphar's house and the prison.

But that's not what happens.

Instead, when Joseph learns of their fears, he calls them all together ...

And reiterates the truth that has guided his life:

"You intended to harm me ...

"What you guys did to me and what happened to me in the years that followed looked bad, felt bad, was bad. It still hurts to think about it sometimes. It was evil. It was intended to harm me."

"But," he continues ...

God intended it for good to

*accomplish what is now
being done, the saving of
many lives."*

Genesis 50:20 (NIV)

... which included not only them and their families as well as the multitudes of Egyptian families for whom he was responsible. That was the *immediate* impact of his life that Joseph could see.

What he couldn't see and what he didn't know was that by saving one of his brothers, Judah, he was also preserving the line through which Jesus of Nazareth would be born centuries later ...

... which would lead to the saving of your life and my life not from a famine but from our sins.

Pretty amazing how that all worked out.

What's even more amazing is the Hebrew word which is translated "intended." It comes from a verb meaning "to weave."

So, in essence, Joseph was saying, "You wove evil. But God rewove what you did for good.ⁱ He was at work right smack in the middle of the bad, even in the darkest hours. He was at work in *all things*, not just the good things."

Or, to put it in terms of the song we sang a while ago, "In the crushing events of my life, in the pressing of my soul, God was making new wine out of me. God was making me into a vessel suitable for His purposes. He was making me into what He wanted me to be."

That's the paradigm through which Joseph interpreted the events of his life.

In All Things

And if you're a believer in and follower of Jesus, that's the paradigm through which you are invited to interpret the events of *your* life – including the events of the past seven weeks and for however long this coronavirus thing goes on.

That's why the Apostle Paul writes:

*God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things [not just "some things"] at all times [not just "some times"], having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2
Corinthians 9:8 (NIV)*

God is at work in all things. He's providing for us and sustaining us in all things, at all times, including the bad things and the bad times.

But He goes beyond just providing and sustaining.

Paul writes that ...

God causes all things [not just "some things"] to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28
(NASB77)

As I said earlier, most of us who are Christians tend to believe that God's blessing and purpose is only to be found in some things – those circumstances that we consider to be "good."

But the truth is that if we love God, if we belong to Christ (which is what it means to be "called according to His purpose"), then God is not only at work in *all* things – even those things that we consider to be bad or unfortunate – and He is actually *using those things for our benefit* and the benefit of

others.

That is why Paul encourages Christ-followers to

...

*... sing and make melody with
your heart to the Lord; always
giving thanks for all things in
the name of our Lord Jesus
Christ ... Ephesians 5:18-20
(NASB77)*

Give thanks for *all* things – not just some things.

And he tells us to ...

*Give thanks in all
circumstances, for this is
God's will for you in Christ
Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:18
(NIV)*

Bottom line, if you're a follower of Jesus, God wants you to ...

- Embrace *all things*
- Welcome *all things*
- Be open to *all things*

... because God's greatest purposes are accomplished in *all things*, not just those that feel good or seem good at the time.

“All things” become tools that God uses to make us into the people He wants us to be.

Now, at this point, we're going to take a very brief timeout. I'm going to be quiet for about 60 seconds.

And, during this time, I want you to think about the less-than-desirable side of “all things” in your life right now.

- Maybe it's a health problem or a financial problem or a relational problem.
- Maybe it's a dream or a business that has failed or the injustice of some situation.
- Maybe it's just the nagging inconvenience or irritation of this "quarantine" (so to speak).
- Maybe it's the loneliness from not being able to be close to others because of social distancing.

Whatever it is, in the next 60 seconds, just try to get a mental image of some of those things while we have silence.

Ok, here we go.

Now, while you have those things in mind ...

- What would happen if you began to believe that God could actually use that problem or situation or pain for your benefit?
- What would happen if you changed your perspective on those things and began to see them as tools in the hand of a good and loving and gracious God?
- What would happen if, instead of welcoming and embracing just *some* things in your life (the things that seem to be "good"), you – and I – embraced *all* things, even the stuff that's hard and painful and unpleasant?

"Now, wait a minute," I can hear some of you

thinking. "Are you saying that God wants me to think of things like delay, disease, denial, divorce and even death as *good*? That's just craziness."

You're right. That *is* crazy because God isn't asking us to call that which is evil "*good*."

What God is inviting us to do is to embrace the stress and the pain and the loss of those situations and experiences as tools that He can use for good.

Evil is never good. But God can reweave the fabric of events and bring good from that evil.

Survey Says

And, in fact, many of you have said that's exactly what God is doing in your life right now.

Now, you might not have *known* that's what you were saying, but when you answered the three questions in the online survey I asked you to complete after last week's message, you were actually describing how God was bringing good from not-so-good in your life.

For instance, in response to "what's the best thing that has happened to you during this time?" some of you answered ...

- Working from home and having more family time.
- Less overall busyness and running around.
- Appreciation of the simple things
- Being able to bless families from our church who have needs
- The opportunity to see our one-year-old reach many milestones we would have otherwise missed
- Found out my spouse and I really are

compatible

- My creativity has reawakened.
- Have felt more at peace and relaxed, able to think more clearly about what is really important.

In response to "what changes will you make as a result of this experience?"

- Try to make real connections with others and try not to be so busy.
- Be conscientious of the "things" I'm doing and make sure they're meaningful.
- Pray more for our country, that our land will be healed both physically and spiritually.
- Walk more; exercise more; cook at home more; give more hugs

In response to "How has this experience affected your relationship with God?"

- It has definitely drawn me closer to Him.
- I trust Him more for my daily well-being.
- I'm longing for the day Jesus returns.
- Caused me to be grateful that I know Him and increased my gratitude for this church.
- Started watching services
- Relying on God for the future, no matter what the future holds.
- Prayed for people we typically don't take the time to be grateful for.
- Prayed more for my friends, family, coworkers, and those who don't know him at all.
- Helped me realize how important church and God is in my life, so I enrolled in automatic, biweekly giving.
- Think of God more often during the day

Now, could those things have happened without what we've experienced over the past

seven weeks?

Could those things have happened without having to disconnect from community and productivity – two of the main purposes for which we were created?

Of course, they could have.

But, for some reason, they weren't happening.

Which means that the best thing about a pandemic (and, again, a pandemic is not good; it's evil – don't hear what I'm not saying) ...

The best thing about a pandemic (or any other evil) is that God can bring good from it that otherwise might not happen.

That's the point of this message. That's what I want you to take away from it.

Of course, some of you who are more skeptical are thinking, "well, Rick, I didn't answer your dumb survey because

- "I don't *have* anything good to report ...
- "I'm *not* going to make any changes ...
- "And my relationship with God hasn't been affected by this experience."

"Furthermore, Rick, that story about Joseph was interesting and inspiring but that's what happened to *him*. He was very fortunate. He got lucky. There's no reason to believe that could be a 'general principle' of life."

And I understand why you might think that.

In fact, I will agree with you that the best evidence that this principle is true isn't how

people answered the survey and it isn't what happened to Joseph.

The real reason why anyone should have this kind of confidence in God ...

The real reason why anyone should believe and trust that God can and will bring good from evil is the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

And I've talked on many occasions why it is reasonable to believe that actually happened, so I won't go into it again today.

But, as we say all the time around here, as Christians our faith is ultimately not rooted in Bible stories ... though they do give us great examples.

And, as we also say all the time around here, our faith is not rooted in our current circumstances because we simply do not have the right paradigm from which to

interpret them.

As we say all the time around here, our faith is rooted in the fact the God the Father raised God the Son from death on the first Easter Sunday morning.

And if God can do that – if He can literally bring life from death ... He can certainly take whatever evil you and I experience and bring good from it.

That's why you should believe it.

But the operative word is "can." It's not going to magically happen.

- You and I, in faith, have to come to the point where we embrace all things.
- You and I have to approach life with a patient expectation that God will do

what He promises to do.

- You and I have to approach life with the confidence that, in the hands of a good and loving God, even the bad things will be redeemed.
- And you and I have to get up every morning with this confidence and work hard to maintain it.

Parting Advice

And that brings me to the thought I want to leave with you; just one piece of advice going forward.

Focus on today – on what's in front of you right now – and leave tomorrow in the hands of God.

Again, think of Joseph.

Even though there were years when it must have felt to him that his life was going nowhere, that was simply untrue.

In spite of what it looked like, *what God had shown him as a young boy in that dream* was ...

- More real than the pit where his brothers had imprisoned him
- More real than the house of Potiphar where he was falsely accused
- And more real than the prison where he was left to rot.

But until that *big dream* came to pass, all he could do was to be faithful in the little things in those less than desirable circumstances.

And that's what he did. If you read the whole story, you see that Joseph repeatedly humbled himself and focused on what was

right in front of him. He did what he could with that and he left the future in God's hands.

So, as we close this morning ...

- I'm going to pray that God gives you and I the strength to do that.
- And then our band is going to do a song that puts this parting advice into very practical terms.
- Then I'll come back and tell you about a few things you need to know.

So, don't tune out just yet!

Let's pray.

1. Next series – We Survived ... now if we can just keep from killing each other ...

2. Giving – thanks for your support.
3. Very important for everyone watching to complete our survey whether you're an old-timer or a newcomer. We really need to know who is connected with us right now.

It's under the sign me up tab on our website and under the contact us tab on our app.

Endnotes

¹ From Max Lucado quoted @ <http://www.faithgateway.com/what-was-meant-for-evil-god-uses-for-good/#.WOmVcNLytnI>