

## EPIPHANY 7, Feb. 24, 2019, Year C

- It has been said that *God holds all of history 'between two hands.'* From our point of view, God holds *the past* in one hand, and in the other, God holds *the future*. And *between the two*, God holds *all* of history, from the beginning of Creation all the way to the end of time. And so, *we look back to God's gift of Creation* and of life, *and we also look forward to the fulfillment and completion of all God's work*, at the End.
- An insight from the pre-Christian philosopher, *Aristotle*, *helps us understand these ideas in a particular way*. It has to do with the word '*cause*,' which we often use rather *narrowly*. When we talk of the *cause* of this or that event, we usually have in mind *what set that event in motion*. For example, when we learn about a massive multi-car pile-up on a highway somewhere, we often find ourselves wondering what *caused* it to happen ~ in other words, what set that train of events in motion, bringing about a terrible result. Following Aristotle, many Christians have come to refer to this as the '*efficient cause*,' meaning *what prompted the sequence of things*. But Aristotle *also* teaches us to ask about the '*final cause*.' This is to ask about *the end or result toward which things are moving*, and have been brought to move. And so, when we wonder about *Creation*, we reflect on *the efficient or 'starting' cause* of all that we see and know. And when we wonder about the *End* of all things, the Eschaton, we reflect on *the final or 'result' cause* of everything.
- We can put this another way, especially in relation to God. To ask about *the efficient cause* of an event, we can think in terms of *how God, in the past, pushes things from behind to get them started*. And to ask about the *the final cause*, we can think in terms *how God simultaneously pulls us toward the future, toward the result where God wants us to head*. Though this is a "*both-and*," some things in life are *better* explained by referring to how God gets them going. While *other* things are *better* explained by referring to how the Spirit pulls them toward to God's intended *end-result* for them. And

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none of this overlooks or denies our freedom to *cooperate*, and our freedom to *refuse* God's prompting and leading.

- This image of God holding all of history between two hands, one *behind* and one *before* us, can help us to think about *particular events in between*. It can be very helpful as we think about biblical stories like the one from Genesis we hear this morning. It is about Joseph revealing himself to his brothers in Egypt years after they have sold him to strangers.
- As Joseph speaks to his surprised and dismayed brothers, he tries to overcome their great fear and embarrassment. *They are focused on the past*, on what happened before, and their own role in causing great misfortune to fall upon Joseph's head. *While Joseph is focused on the future*, and the purpose and end toward which God is surprisingly pulling things along.
- As we notice this difference between what Joseph and his brothers are looking at, we receive an insight. *Sometimes –maybe even often– we focus only on the efficient cause which got some bad things started. When we do, we overlook the greater importance of the final cause, the good result toward which God may be leading us. This is what Joseph wants his brothers to see.*
- And just as there is no single way to read a biblical story, there is no single way to 'read' a painting. This truism especially applies not only to the snippet of the Joseph cycle of stories that we hear from Genesis today. It applies equally to *James Tissot's painting* of the moment, *Joseph Makes Himself Known to His Brothers*. Joseph appears in the finery of an Egyptian prince, just as Moses may later have appeared. At first, his brothers don't recognize him. Not only because of the context, but also since it has been years since they have seen him.

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- At the center of our Genesis reading and of Tissot's painting is a paradox that lies at the heart of all human life: *consciously or not*, human beings bring evil upon one another. And so, the question arises ~ *where is God in all this? Does God cause, and therefore *bring about* the trouble that then follows? Or, without necessarily *causing* it to happen, *did not God know all along where things would head, and that they would surely head toward something good?* Either way, *isn't God directly involved in the moment by moment way we wrestle with these and other variables? Isn't God always an overseeing and yet intimate companion, *especially as we face serious and highly consequential decisions?***
- *Do you remember the earlier Genesis story about Joseph's father, Jacob? And how Jacob was distressed in the wilderness concerning his brother Esau. Jacob wondered whether Esau was potentially *once again* a friend, or indeed, whether he was still his adversary. Jacob's wrestling match with God's angel was all about this question. Likewise, as I wrestle in prayer with big and troubling decisions, I can ask God a similar question: *Are you my friend? Or are you also my adversary?* Either way, *if we are looking to blame and assign responsibility, how much are we willing to ascribe to the divine 'hand'?* For God seems to be in control of all that happens. Or, at least, *God lets whatever happens, happen.* When considering *bad events*, it is human nature *to wonder who caused them*, especially with an eye to blame. And, in the process, *it is also fallen human nature to overlook the good end toward which bad events might be leading us.* For there may be *a good end* toward which God is pulling us *forward*.*
- *Aware of this*, we can better appreciate why *it is only to see part of the story of Jesus' suffering and death*, to ask *who caused* these dark aspects of Holy Week. And why we must *also* remember to ask, *toward what end* they were really directed. Sinful human beings, from multiple backgrounds, of course played a role in the *efficient cause* of Jesus' suffering and death. While God,

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of course, played the decisive role in the *final cause* of Jesus' suffering and death, as revealed in his resurrection.

- Here at Grace Church, we find ourselves in a *time of change*, and of probable *great change*. It would therefore be natural for people to wonder *who* or *what caused* us to be where we are. This is how we tend to approach the world, and the challenges we find so often in human events. But we must remember even more to wonder and ask about *the good end toward which we are being pulled forward by God*. This is especially true because we think we can *understand* the past by *examining it*. And by contrast, the future looks *ambiguous* and uncertain, and opaque to our usual ways of examining things.
- All this is very important for biblical people, whose view of life in the word is shaped by Scripture. Learning from the sweep of Salvation History, we must always think in terms of the two hands of God. *With one hand, God nudges from behind, from the knowable and perhaps safer-looking past. And with the other hand, God gently pulls us toward the unknown and therefore sometimes risky-looking future.* For we seek to love and serve "the God Who gave all worlds *that are*, and all *that are to be*."



James Tissot, *Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers*

**Luke 6:27-38**

Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

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