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Our scripture today comes from selected verses from Genesis, chapters 37 – 50.

Last year, *The Atlantic* magazine asked a question, ‘If you could go back in time and change one thing, anything, what would it be?’ Duke professor Sandy Darity says, “I wish that Radical Reconstruction had been made a reality after the end of the Civil War. If this had happened, former slaves would have enjoyed full political participation, along with control over the schooling of their children, protection by the Union Army, and land grants of 40 acres for farming.”

Marina Warner of the University of London wished that King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella had torn up the Alhambra Decree, which expelled all the Jews out of Spanish territories in 1492. “History would look very different,” she said, “if the coexistence of Jews, Muslims, and Christians had continued.” As a side note, it wasn’t rescinded until 1968.

Charles Ryan of Napa, California said if he could change anything, it would be, “the burning of the Library of Alexandria, Egypt.” It housed the largest and most significant library of the ancient world. It had a research institute, and was the center of knowledge and learning. Bernard Seneway, of Ellicott City, Maryland said, “The creation of the Interstate Highway System, which killed train travel and enabled urban sprawl, pollution, and inequality.” Gerry O’Keefe, of Olympia, Washington said, “The establishment of chattel slavery in the British colonies and its continuation after the American Revolution.” [If You Could Go Back in Time and Change One Thing,

What Would It Be?” *The Atlantic*, November 2019, www.theatlantic.com.] These are all very significant.

Changing history, or turning back time, has been reflected in literature and movies. I don’t know how many times I read the *Time Machine* by H.G. Wells in high school. For our *Avengers* fans, you know that Dr. Strange wore a time bracelet that could make time go back and forth - to make a ‘wrong’ right again. *Back to the Future* tells the story of Marty McFly, who went back to 1955, in a DeLorean car time machine, to make sure his parents met and fell in love when they were teenagers. Arnold Schwarzenegger played a robot in *The Terminator*, which was about a mission from the future. The robot goes back to 1984 Los Angeles to kill the mother of the man who would go on to be a hero. There are numerous TV shows concerning time travel: *Quantum Leap*, *Dr. Who*, *Timeless*, *Outlander*, *Heroes*, *The Librarians*, *Early Edition*

(remember the guy got the paper a day ahead of time), and more. So, how about you? If you could go back and change something in history, what would you do?

Would you prevent the assassination of Abraham Lincoln or JFK? Would you overthrow Adolf Hitler before the Second World War? Would you want to change some choices you made as a teen or young adult, because of the long-term, even life-changing consequences? In today's scripture, we have a story of deceit, slavery, with numerous twists and turns. Through it all, God worked through each situation, to fulfil his promises for his chosen people.

In chapter 37, in the book of Genesis, a man named Jacob settled in the land of Canaan and he had 12 sons. At 17, the youngest reported back to their father that Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher were not up to par. If we'd go back, we'd say, Joseph, 'quit being a jerk.'

Jacob loved and favored Joseph more than any other of his other children, because Joseph was born when Jacob was aged. To show his favor, he made Jacob an ornamented robe. His brothers "hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." They would have worn 'field or work clothes' as they cared for the sheep. If we could go back, we'd say, 'Jacob, stop playing favorites.'

Then, to make matters worse, Joseph was a dreamer. He had two dreams about the future. One of his dreams contained the message that his brothers, and even parents would bow down to him. When his brothers heard this, "they hated him even more."

One day, in his ornamented robe, Joseph was sent to check on his brothers as they pastured their father's flock. His brothers "saw him from a distance, and they conspired to kill him. The brothers said to one another, 'Let's kill him and throw him into one of these pits; then we can say a wild animal devoured him.' Fortunately, the eldest brother, Reuben, talked some sense into his brothers. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit for a while, but lay no hand on him." Reuben's plan was to rescue Joseph later and return him to his father, yet hatred came into play.

When Joseph arrived, to check on his brothers, they stripped him of his robe and threw him in an empty pit. As they sat down to eat, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, carrying precious cargo to Egypt. Between bites, middle brother Judah said, "Hey, let's not kill him, let's sell him," and his brothers agreed. So they sold him to a trader for 20 pieces of silver. When Rueben found out he was deeply grieved.

Up until his demise, we can assume Joseph was arrogant, conceited, narcissistic, over confident, hyper-critical, and judgmental. He didn't care how his brothers felt. That 17 year

old manipulated his brothers for his purposes, and as a result, his life was turned upside down that fateful day. As Joseph was carted off, he likely had a full range of emotions: anger, resentment, anxiety, fury, and rage as he was bound and transported to Egypt. He likely hoped he would awaken from his bad dream, yet this was his new reality - his life was no longer his. He no longer would be a privileged youth, but a slave, soon to be purchased by one of Pharaoh's officials.

At some point, Joseph's anger must have subsided. He accepted the situation he was in and decided to make the best of it. I imagine he cried out to God remorseful for his indiscretions. God blessed Joseph. As Joseph worked hard, he was successful, and found favor in Potiphar's sight. As a result, he was put in charge of Potiphar's house. Yet what seemed like the best job a slave could get, life shifted and agony once again set in when Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of misconduct and Potiphar threw him into prison. Yet, God cared for and blessed Joseph, even changing the heart of the chief jailer.

While in prison, Joseph became an interpreter of dreams, and eventually he offered insight into the dreams of Pharaoh. He was released from prison and rose to power in Egypt, and became second-in-command to Pharaoh himself. God placed him in a position of leadership to off-set the disastrous 7 year famine arriving in 7 years. As people from many countries came to buy grain during the famine, Joseph's brothers showed up.

At first, Joseph did not reveal his identity, and treated his brothers harshly. He played tricks on them to see if their hearts had changed. After much maneuvering, the youngest brother was brought to Egypt. At a meal, Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers saying, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people." At the end of the story, Joseph forgives his brothers and provides for them, as God intended.

In every time and place, in every awful situation, God is working for God's purposes. Some we see in our lifetime, others not so much. Sometimes we cooperate with God toward these purposes, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we seek different results because of our short-sightedness, ambitions, or goals. But nothing deters God from his purposes; for when we experience even the worst events — in world history and in our own personal histories — God can and does transform those events into good. No event is wasted with God, so there is no point in trying to go back and change history; instead, we can trust God to transform our future.

God is not responsible for the evil that people do. God is not responsible when we don't take care of ourselves or others, but the Bible and history shows us that God can turn a bad situation into a good one, as God did with Joseph and his brothers. When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, they set the stage for his rise in Egypt. When Jesus died and was buried, he was put in the right place for resurrection. In a flash of light, Jesus changed the zeal of Saul, the persecutor of Christians, into a passionate Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. God will always take the most difficult times of our life and transform it, for his purposes.

Each of us has committed sin, suffered defeats, made terrible mistakes, and/or experienced great loss. When we get stuck in the 'what ifs' of those events, it's just like wanting to jump into a time machine, go back and change the circumstances. If we could go back, and change the event, yes everything would be different, but not what we expected.

If Rueben could have turned back the hands of time, he would have sent his brothers off with the sheep, so he could protect Joseph. Yet, unbeknownst to him, God was working towards a surprising conclusion, providing a future for his extended family and a dozen generations following. If we could go back to save Jesus from the agony of the cross, we would not know of Christ's sacrifice for all the sins of the world, and very possibly be living with the burden of our sins. If Saul had not gotten the decrees to arrest the Christians after the death of Stephen, he would not have had his Damascus Road experience which allowed the story of Christ to come to us.

When life doles out the worst twists and turns, and seems to spin out of control, we have the assurance that no matter what, God is with us, working on our behalf. The power of God can use all the horrible things that happen in your life and my life and make us anew. No matter what, we can move forward in the assurance that God never leaves us or forsakes us. He is with us now and forevermore. Let us proclaim this belief in our closing song. Amen.

*Please refer to the words of the final song in the bulletin, "*In Christ Alone.*"

Blessings! Pastor Debbie