

### **Genesis 37:1-4**

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

### **Romans 14:22-23**

The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

### **“Do We Have a Why to Live For?”**

*(The thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche)*

Rev. Charles Schuster

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It was Pearl Bailey and one of those children in the Children's Sermon who said, “I see God every day.” People see God every day, they just don't recognize God when they're looking.

The church is a place where we are reminded to look, and that it is God we are seeing. Theology is what we do here. We think theologically. We think about God, and we strive to find where God is in our lives. We look for God here. In the next four weeks, I'm going to think theologically with you. Four theologians, and this morning, Friedrich Nietzsche. He was a theologian, although he said he didn't believe in God, and he was a Lutheran, although he said he'd given up on the church. As it is with anybody, and I'm sure it's true with all of us, we don't agree with everything we read, from even those whose thoughts and writings are helpful. I don't accept every idea presented to me. When I decided to preach a sermon on the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, I knew there were ideas that he had that I couldn't accept. For example, he wrote, “I condemn Christianity. I bring against it the most terrible accusation that ever an accuser can put to words. It has left nothing untouched by its depravity, it has made a worthlessness out of every value, a lie out of every truth, a sin out of everything straightforward. It was corrupted everything that is healthy and honest, and has a perspective on life that stifles creativity and joy.” I think he's wrong about that. In one of his books, he talks about a madman running into the marketplace, who leaps onto the steps of the cathedral, cries out so all in the vicinity may hear him: “I want a requiem mass. I want a requiem mass. I want a requiem mass.” “Who died?”, the people ask. “God is dead,” the man answered. The crowd mocks him for this absurd announcement on the death of God, and then he answers their derision. “If God is not dead, then why have the churches become mortuaries?”

I disagree with Nietzsche. God is not dead, and churches have not become mortuaries, and Christianity does not stifle creativity, it encourages it. This church has not become a mortuary. You look at our children's program, our youth program, our adult education program, our music

program, our senior program, our Methodist men and women's programs, our Stephen Ministry program, and it goes on and on. I disagree with Nietzsche. But he said some things I can agree with, I can. One thing he said, I think he's exactly right about, and you can test it, whether it's true or false. He said, "Every person, every man, every woman, every child, is asking or sometimes will ask or has asked the question: "How can this be? The absurd in life - how can this be?" Certainly Nietzsche asked it. His uncle was a preacher. Both his grandparents were preachers, in fact one of his grandparents wrote a book on the survival of Christianity, he was a fairly famous theologian. His father was a Lutheran pastor. His father died when Friedrich was five, and Friedrich asked "How can this be?" He was a bright young man and he showed a penchant for scholarship and was encouraged, and he got a degree in philosophy, and he got a position, a prestigious position in Switzerland, and then he was drafted into the war, and he lost his job. How can this be? And in the war, he served as an ambulance driver, the Franco-Prussian war, and witnessed senseless atrocity. Human suffering. Evil motives, violence, death. How can this be? He contracted an illness. He suffered his whole life. Nietzsche never recovered from his illness. His father died when he was young, his father's faith made promises it couldn't keep, he lost the best job he ever had, he saw the horrors of war, and life was absurd for him. How can this be?

Everybody asks the question, or will. Makes me think of Joseph. Joseph the dreamer could interpret dreams, that was his gift, but his brothers resented it. They decided to kill him. They threw him down, they put him in a pit, left him to die, then they sold him into slavery, and Joseph wondered, "How can this be?" Taken to Egypt, accused of adultery, put in prison to die, and he wondered, "How can this be?" Favored by his father, given a coat of many colors, accused of a crime he didn't commit. Given the ability to see the future, resented because he could. Mistreated, abandoned, exiled, abused. Life is absurd. How can this be?

Mike Greenberg is a sportscaster. A sportscaster, best job in the world, you would think. In his book, *Why My Wife Thinks I'm an Idiot*, we find in this book a level of disillusionment that reaches to the depth that approaches boredom. "The whole key is being a hero, and I love sports because I love the people who play them. I look up to them. Heroes don't have flaws, at least none you can see, and the trouble today is that athletes are too close, too accessible, their flaws too visibly on display. We know so much about them, it's hard to look past the paternity suits and the unregistered handguns." And he goes on, "When they tell you life is too short, they could not be more wrong. Life is long, nothing could be longer, and most of it is dreary and mundane." Mike Greenberg, a sportscaster. A dream job, you would think, but he's bored, and he's asking, "How can this be?"

Two stories, a little humor here. Bessie was her name. She was the town gossip. She watched everybody in town, she started rumors in the town. People didn't like it, but was a small town, and if you crossed Bessie, she was apt to start a rumor about you, so nobody did. Someone new moved into town. He went to the bank one day, and the only parking space was in front of the local bar, and Bessie started a rumor that Frank, the new person in town, was an alcoholic. Frank heard about the rumor, and who started it, and so he called Bessie up and he told her that he knew what she was saying, and that he was not an alcoholic, in fact he didn't drink any alcohol, he was a teetotaler, and Bessie answered him, "Likely story, your red pickup truck was there. Where there's smoke, there's fire." Frank said nothing more but later that evening, quietly

parked his red pickup truck in front of Bessie's house and left it there all night. How can this be? Life is absurd.

Another story. A man rushes out of the house, he's late for work. His wife says to him, "Do you remember what today is?" "Of course I remember what today is. I know exactly what today is. It's a special day, and you'll know by the end of the day that I remember what today is." And he left, and he had no idea. Not a clue. (Kind of like, "I don't think you did the readings, did you." No, I'm sorry about that. There's a Bible in front of you, pick it up and read it..) He thought about that all day, and he thought, it wasn't her birthday, and it wasn't their anniversary, and it wasn't Valentine's Day. But he knew it was an important day, but he couldn't figure it out, so he went to the jewelry store and bought a diamond pin and wrapped it up and picked up some perfume and a bouquet of flowers and made reservations at the best restaurant in town and bought tickets to the ballet, which she liked, he didn't. He came home early, and he told her about the evening that he had planned. They went out to dinner, they went to the ballet, he pretended to like it. On the way home in the car, he turned to her and said, "Did you enjoy our special night together?" She turned back to him and said, "I did, I certainly did, and I must tell you, this was without question the best Groundhog Day I've ever had."

Life is absurd. How can this be? When the town gossip is given credit for telling the truth, when you don't know what day it is, or what time it is, or even who you are, when you are betrayed by those you trust, or when you're at the bottom and you think it can't get worse, but it does, how can this be? The dream you worked for, you achieve, and now it's become an empty life, like Mike Greenberg, how can this be? The ladder of success took you up to the point, you rise to the level of your incompetence and you don't know what you're doing, how can this be? I did everything I possibly could that they told me to do. I eat right, I exercise, and now I learn my heart is weak and my lungs are no good. How can this be? Someone walks into two churches in Colorado with a gun and people are killed and the killer is angry because the church will not support gay and lesbian young people. And then someone walks into a church in Tennessee with a gun and people are killed because the killer is upset because the church is supportive of gay and lesbian people. How can this be? Two doctoral students celebrating the turning in of their dissertations, and lightning hits the one tree in the forest under which they stand. One tree in the forest, and you can see the line it burned in the tree, you can see where it left the tree. Two doctoral students, prime of life. How can this be?

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God is never so close to us as when we think God is far away. God is not indifferent to our pain, not indifferent to our struggle, not beyond our confusion. God is in the tears we cry. God is in the silence when we feel we are alone. God is the light when it is dark, when we cry out, "How can this be?" and we ask, when no one else will ask, "How can this be?" It is the God we worship, encouraging us to ask it.

Nietzsche said another thing. "The answer to the question, 'How can this be?' is a question, but it's personal. Do you have a 'why' to live for? What is your 'why' to live for? Paul the apostle had a why to live for and you would have heard it expressed, if I had not forgotten to have Rev. Everhart read it. Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out onto our hearts. That is Paul's why to live for. Anna Quindlen has a why to live for. She spoke it to the graduating class of Villanova University a number of years ago, and she said, "I'm a good

mother to my children. I have tried never to let my profession stand in the way of being a good parent. I no longer consider myself the center of the universe. I show up, I listen, I try to laugh. I'm a good friend to my husband. I've tried to make the marriage vows mean what they say. I'm a good friend to my friends, and they to me. And I must tell you that without them, all of them, there would be nothing for me to say to you today." A why to live for.

It reminds of me something Greg Dawson said to me last week, after the worship service. Greg is a United Methodist minister, some of you know him. He is also an artist. He attends this church. If you're a United Methodist minister, you don't belong to the church, you belong to the Annual Conference. It's a small matter, a big matter. He's the one who built the stained glass windows that go down the east hallway, and I understand there's another one about to come in, some time in the near future. He said, "Chuck, I got it all figured out." "What is it, Greg?" He said, "You start out as a child, and you're the center of the universe." He said, "And then we move from the center to the periphery. For years, I was just Greg. Then I was Karen's husband. Then I was Alex and Emily's dad, and way over here, now I'm Ella's grandfather. And my job, from the periphery, is to be supportive of the people who are now in the middle." That is his why to live for.

There's an old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip where Calvin says to Hobbes, "You got to live for the moment, that's my motto, because you never know how long that'll be. You could step out into the street and be hit by a cement truck, whack, and you'd be sorry that you put off the pleasures. That's why I say you live for the moment." And Calvin said to Hobbes, "So what's your motto?" And Hobbes replied, "My motto is to look both ways before I cross the street."

What is your motto? What is our why to live for? A young mother overheard her two daughters talking about marriage. The two girls were four and six, and the six-year-old philosophically asked, "Which would you rather have, a rich husband or good eyes? I'd rather have good eyes." The four-year-old responded, in a manner that is reflective of her four-year-old approach to life, she wants it all, the four-year-old said, "I'll take a rich husband and contact lens." What's our why to live for? This Wednesday, Pam is doing a book review on a book written by William Sloane Coffin. Coffin was the pastor at Riverside Church in New York City, and is very clear to talk about the darkest time in his life, is when his son Alex was killed in an automobile accident. Someone said to him after Alex's death, "We just don't understand the will of God, do we?" And that set him thinking. "Was it the will of God that Alex never fixed the stupid windshield wiper? Was it the will of God that he was driving too fast in the storm? Or that there weren't lights in that part of the road? Or there weren't guard rails separating the road from Boston Harbor?" He said, "I know even when the pain is deep that God is good. I know that once grief was unbearable, I know how it turns to bearable sorrow. And the truth begins to take hold, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it." And Hemingway was right. At the end of his book *A Farewell to Arms*, "The world breaks everyone, then some become strong in the broken places. My own heart is mending," he said, "I have learned that love not only begets love, it also transmits strength."

God is in the grief, helping us find a why to live for. God is in the struggle, as we stand at the grave, to affirm the goodness of the past. See, Nietzsche said he didn't believe in God, but I think he did. He just didn't call it God. He believed in humor, he believed in laughter, he believed the

source of laughter is pain and if we learn to embrace our suffering we can conquer it, he believed in faith, but he held that the best way to strengthen one's faith is to have the courage to raise doubts. It was the why he had to live for. He believed in being alive all of his life.

Madelyn L'Engle remembers, "God always calls us to do the impossible. It's the why we have to live for." Today your job, the why to live for, to do it the best you can, or to brighten up the life of a friend who's sad, or to give back the gift that God has given to you, to live until you die, or to die the way you lived, or to live in such a manner that the people who know you will know what you believed by the way you lived, to believe that good can come, even when nobody else believes it, to take every challenge as a test, and to know, when tested, you'll become a better person than before, even if you fail. We strive to find a why to live for, and we find it, and how do we find it? God is in helping us find it as we do our part. God is in the why to live for. Nietzsche was right, I think. If we find a why to live for, we can face the question, "How can this be?" There is a God, Mr. Nietzsche, and the church is not a mortuary, Mr. Nietzsche, because here we are reminded, if we look, we will see it, and if we see, we will recognize God, and if we look and if we see God, we will have a why to live for, and if we have a why to live for, then we can withstand anyhow theology. Thinking theologically is the most important learning there is, because it's learning for living.