

“Sovereign in the Chaos”

Greetings From 2020

Downtown & Lexington

August 9, 2020

Hey there church family and those of you who are new or just checking Midtown out. If you've got a Bible, grab it and open to Exodus 2.

I'll warn you up front: this sermon is fairly emotional and personal. We're gonna breeze through the first few chapters of Exodus where I've been studying in my personal time with Jesus. I started studying Exodus thinking we might be teaching it as an upcoming series.

But God knew it was exactly what I'd need personally. While the COVID pandemic has presented massive issues for our church and nation, this season has also been very painful personally for me. So when I got to the end of Exodus 2, this really stood out to me:

Exodus 2:23-25

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. [Check this in verse 24] And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

There are four verbs that describe God here and they are huge. 1.) God hears their groaning. 2.) God remembers His covenant, 3.) God sees His people and 4.) God knows.

That's a beautiful picture of God. God hears His people's cries. Emotionally connected and aware of what we're going through. He's not ignoring you when you pray to Him.

God remembers His covenant love. He chooses over and over again to show unconditional love and grace toward sinners like us. God sees what you're going through before you even tell him. Which is great news when pain makes us feel alone like no one sees what we're going through. And I love that it says He knows. He doesn't just see and hear from a distance. He knows. We'll come back around on that.

That's beautiful right?! But there's a problem. When our lives are chaotic -- like they've been in 2020, Amen?? -- we don't perceive... or remember... or believe this to be true of God. It doesn't seem like God sees or hears or cares. --> Let me rewind us back to Exodus 1 and show you why the Israelites might have been struggling to believe these things about God.

Exodus 1:1-5

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt.

So Exodus actually starts by reminding us of the last 13 chapters of Genesis that tell us how the Israelites got to Egypt in the first place. The short answer is chaos, pain, and suffering. Jacob the dad whose name changes to Israel has 12 sons -- a.k.a. the 12 tribes of Israel -- and they all end up in Egypt through a long, wild story of treachery and redemption.

Joseph is one of Jacob's youngest sons and his brothers SELL HIM... into slavery.

Just massive family dysfunction. If your siblings haven't human trafficked you, your family is probably better than Joseph's. Long story short: Joseph ends up in Egypt. Long story short part 2: In Egypt, Joseph keeps suffering like crazy but God raises him against all odds to power and prominence as Pharaoh's right-hand man. Boom.

From this position, God helps Joseph save the entire nation of Egypt from a terrible seven-year-long famine no one saw coming... AND... not only that but God also helps Joseph RESCUE his brothers who sold him into slavery in the first place.

I told you it was a wild story. ... And I need you to catch this right: At any point, Joseph could have totally focused on his problems. "God this isn't fair. God what are you doing? God do you see what I'm going through? Do you hear my cries? Do you care?"... But at the end of his life... in hindsight, he sees it all very differently.

Check this out. In Genesis. 50, Jacob the dad dies... Joseph's brothers panic "What if Joseph turns on us?!" They grovel before him... offer to be his servants... listen to Joseph's response:

Genesis 50:19-20

But Joseph said to them, 'Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 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.'

Wow. See Joseph could have focused on His problems. Joseph's brothers are all focused on the problems... that they caused... But that's not what Joseph does. Joseph chooses to focus on God's providence. At the end of his life, Joseph looks back on all his pain and what he sees is a powerful God reigning sovereign and working in the midst of all of it. Joseph sets his eyes on the God who sees and hears and knows and remembers His covenant love. And Joseph sees that God using his very painful, and broken circumstances to bring about salvation for many!

So that's why the Israelites are in Egypt...And it's really relevant backstory because now... just like it went bad for Joseph, it's about to go very bad for the Israelites. Pick back up in Exodus 1:6:

Exodus 1:6-8

Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

Uh-oh. See as it turns out, Joseph saving the entire nation of Egypt from a seven-year famine gave the Israelites some clout - some favor and goodwill in Egypt... But this new King Pharaoh doesn't know about Joseph. And instead of friends, he sees a threat:

Exodus 1:9-11

And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens.

Did you see what just happened? Out of nowhere, chaos just erupted on God's people. Pharaoh starts making them work as slaves. They weren't slaves yesterday... But all of a sudden, they're getting whipped today.

And the nightmare gets even worse. Pharaoh announces a law that any male Israelite baby should be thrown in the Nile River to drown. Talk about chaos. That's crazy Nazi Germany stuff.

So just a quick reminder... 2020 is not the first time God's people have found themselves in bizarre and terrible circumstances. Amen?

The question for us... just like for Joseph and all the Israelites... is in the midst of chaos and pain... are we going to focus on our problems? Or will we choose to focus on God's providence?

I wish I had time to walk through the whole text of Exodus 2 where God raises up Moses to deliver His people but I don't. I'll summarize it. Remember the context:

God's people are suddenly enslaved and Pharaoh just passed a law to kill all their baby boys. That's right when Moses' mom gets pregnant with a little... you guessed it... a baby boy.

What she does next is astounding. She hides him for three months. Do you know how long three months is? Do you know how long three months feels when you're in chaos? Do you remember the beginning of May? Ok, next question: Do you know what a newborn baby is? Do you know what they do? They cry. Constantly. She HIDES her crying, screaming, pooping newborn son for 3 months!

And after three months, she realizes she can't do it anymore. So in what I can only imagine was a horrendous moment, she makes a little basket boat and puts her son in the river.

Can you imagine how desperate that moment must have been? Think she might have prayed something like, "God do you see and hear me?? Would you please help!?"

Now I didn't learn this part of the story as a kid Moses has a big sister named Miriam. She doesn't get nearly enough air time. Miriam follows Moses as he floats down the river. And the next part of the story is pretty famous. But the details are incredible.

Pharaoh's daughter... The princess of Egypt just happens to come down to the river to bathe at the exact same time Moses is passing by in his baby basket boat. And instead of killing him like her daddy the

Pharaoh said... she had compassion... And right in that moment guess who steps out of the reeds on the riverbank? Miriam does. Moses' big sister.

And she's so sly... so sneaky... like a super spy ninja ... says nonchalantly, "Hey there princess lady... you think maybe I should go get one of the Hebrew women to take care of that baby for you?" ... And Pharaoh's daughter says yes! So Miriam goes back to get Moses' MOM... the one who we last saw desperately putting her son in the river. No idea what would happen to him!

Until later that day when Miriam her daughter walks up, "Oh hey Mom. Pharaoh's daughter wants you to take care of Moses until she adopts him... sound good?" Ha! Are you kidding me? Do you know how important it is for a child to be with his mother during his earliest years?

The Bible won't let us focus solely on Moses' problems because it's so busy showing us God's providence.

Moses gets raised with a royal education, but he doesn't forget from whence he came. So when he's a young man and he goes out to visit his Hebrew brothers and sees an Egyptian man beating one of them. He can't take it. He responds with swift justice and kills the Egyptian.

When Pharaoh finds out, he wants to kill Moses. So Moses flees to Midian... a spot that just so happens to become a major stop on the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt.

Here's the point: Detail after detail after detail God is orchestrating it all.

So by the end of Exodus 2 when the Israelites' cries are going up, God's saying, "I got this. I've already been working on this. Just like I did with Joseph. Of course, I see you. Of course, I hear your cries. I'm already providing the answer to your problems in ways you couldn't even imagine!!"

Now if I were to tell you all the examples of God's providence in my life, we'd be here for hours. So, be sure to check out the midweek podcast!

From moving to Columbia, to marrying my wife Erica, to how our adoption worked out, to God protecting us from buying a house that flooded so badly in 2015 that the house literally doesn't exist anymore... I could rattle off tons of these, let me just give you two: Speech and debate: Before I was even a Christian, God put me in a high school speech and debate program that trained me in public speaking and making compelling arguments. I now see that as Him preparing me to preach the gospel before I even knew Him. You could call that coincidence but I'm gonna call that providence.

The next year my friend Ray kept inviting me to church. I wasn't interested until he mentioned that there were and I'm quoting here, "hot girls". So I went. I now see that God used my own sinful heart to bring me to Jesus and reshape my broken, lust-filled, sinful heart.

And while those examples are beautiful to me, none of them are really the point today... Because we're talking about God's providence in the midst of our pain.

In my pain: This is one of the hardest ones to talk about. I've been pretty open through the years about the painful parts of my life - especially my parents' divorce when I was in college. If you don't know, my parents were married 27 years before we found out my dad was having an affair. He eventually left my mom even though she wanted to forgive him and work through it.

Now I would never choose for my dad to cheat on my mom... but I can't ignore the fact that God has used that pain in my life to help me minister to hundreds of people with family pain. He's used it to wire empathy in me I couldn't have learned any other way.

Don't mishear me. I hate the evil of what my dad did. I hate the pain. But I find freedom and hope and healing when I stop focusing on my problems and choose to focus on God's providence in it.

Which brings me to 2020. 2020 has been the worst year of my life... and not just because of the national and global headlines. COVID and racial killings and riots have all been deeply troubling to me... but like I said at the beginning 2020 has also been full of personal pain. Right as COVID quarantine was starting, I dealt with some serious health issues, some really painful relational issues, I totaled my car... And so by June, I was ready for a vacation.

And that's when we found out my dad tested positive for Covid...

So all of a sudden this mysterious virus from China. The one that Americans immediately over-politicized cause that's what we do. The one that shut down schools and church gatherings...

All of a sudden that virus came crashing out of the headlines straight into my living room. This was my people. My dad.

And at first, it seemed like nothing too big. I talked to my dad on Father's Day and he said it wasn't even a bad flu. He had a mild fever. A little headache. Nothing big. So the next week my family went on vacation praying for him but not overly concerned.

And on the first morning of vacation, my sister texted me "Hey have you heard from dad in a few days?" I said, "No, I called him this morning." and she responded: "I've been texting every day and no response."

Which was weird...

But I'm a "no news is good news" kinda person. If it was serious then he or his wife Paula would have let us know something... but it was weird...

So I called Paula... And she didn't pick up.

... So my sister and I both called them a few more times... And we couldn't get either.

... So now my heart rate is increasing a bit... And I decided I should start calling hospitals in Pensacola just to make sure... You know just to rule it out.

... The second hospital I called was Ascension Sacred Heart Pensacola. “Yes, Ludovina. Let me transfer you to the ICU nurse.” They informed me that my dad had been transported by ambulance and admitted to the ICU the night before.

... Unresponsive... Unresponsive is not the word you want to hear from the ICU nurse describing your dad who just had a mild headache and a light fever the last time you talked to him.

Over the next three weeks, I spent hours and hours on the phone with nurses and doctors. We watched his ventilator numbers go up and go down. My sisters and I “talked” to him on late-night conference calls and prayed our guts out.

And long story short, my dad fought for 3 weeks before his heart gave out... Despite thousands of prayers. And dozens of nurses and doctor’s best efforts. He’s gone. And I’m absolutely gutted.

Frank Ludovina and I had a complex relationship. He wasn’t perfect. Not close. He made some terrible decisions and caused some of the worst pain in my life.

But at the end of the day, this is my dad. This is Grandpa Santa to my children...

In recent years his refrain had been, “Whatever you need Jon, I’ve got your back.”

Now I’m gonna be straight with you. If I don’t know that God sees me in this... and that He hears my prayers and my cries and my yelps of pain... and that He remembers His love for me when I’m broken... I don’t know where I’d be right now.

But at the end of the day, it’s that last one that really gets me through. He knows.

He doesn’t just see and hear. HE. KNOWS.

There is no more clear picture of God’s providence in our pain than Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus, who was protected at birth just like Moses. Jesus who like Joseph was rejected by and offered up to die by His own people...

One day, Roman soldiers showed up to work just like any other day. They put on their uniforms and went to work torturing and executing a total stranger like they’d done a thousand times before.

Chaos descends on the disciples. They all scatter in panic. Like the Israelites in Egypt couldn’t believe the chaos in front of their eyes. Like so many of us who’ve been knocked over by 2020.

A couple of soldiers stripped Jesus naked. They beat him. Mocked him. Some others lined his wrists and feet up with wooden beams and hammered railroad spikes into his innocent body.

Jewish leaders shouted, “Crucify Him!”

Pilate washed his hands of the whole situation. A broken and oppressive governmental machine just ran over and crushed one more innocent man’s life. With soldiers just clocking into work to do their normal ... yet atrociously evil thing.

And the Son of God is now hanging, breathing out His last.

Utter chaos. Unthinkable evil.

And the sovereign God of the universe is reigning over all of it, knowing exactly how He intends to use this evil for unimaginable good. Just like with Joseph. Just like with Moses.

When you are knocked over and alone and hurting, I need you to know that there is a God who sees you. And He hears your cries. And He knows your pain cause He endured it on the cross.

Every sin committed against you and every sin you've ever done. Every regret. Every loss. Every grief. HE KNOWS.

Isaiah 53:4 says "Surely He has taken our griefs and carried our sorrows. "

Do you know He was crushed for our sins? He was punished so we would have peace! He was beaten so we would be healed.

Do you see it? The worst, most chaotic day in the history of the world. The worst imaginable death done to the best man who ever lived. And God wasn't panicking. He was saving us.

So that no matter what chaos is going on in your life you can hold onto the God of providence who sees and hears and KNOWS. The God who remembers His love for you.

So people of 2020, what's it gonna be. Are we gonna focus on your problems, or choose to set our minds and hearts and eyes on the God of providence who rules over all of it?

Let's pray.