The January 3 bulletin has an insert with two announcements: the first is “New Year, New You: A 6-Week Sermon Series on Personal Transformation." The second is "Denominational Call to Address Food Insecurity in Our Community - Partners Needed."

One will fill the sanctuary. The other will get maybe six volunteers.

Walk into any bookstore and the display tables tell a consistent story: titles like, "Your Best Life Now." "Transformed: 90 Days to a New You." "Breaking Bad Habits, Building Better Ones." The vocabulary shifts slightly from the secular self-help aisle to the Christian one—adding words like "spiritual" and "biblical,” maybe “holy habits” instead of just better ones—but the architecture remains the same.

Transformation is personal. Change is individual. Success means becoming a better version of yourself.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with personal growth. It’s essential to our spirituality. The problem is when it becomes the entire story.

John Wesley said, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness."

Personal transformation was never intended as the endpoint. From the Gospels and New Testament Epistles, through the writings of the Apostolic and Patristic Fathers, it was preparation for communal mission. Individual holiness wasn't the goal—it was the fuel for collective witness. The assumption of contemplative mentors is that genuine spiritual growth will necessarily, inevitably spill beyond the boundaries of self.

As you come to the table this morning, I invite you to meditate on what you see beyond your salvation toward what end are you pursuing your personal growth.

Our Communion Hymn is #409, “I Hunger and I Thirst.”

Pastoral Prayer

God of mercy, it's hard to be aware and attentive to all the things that clamor for our attention and our response. The cries of the hungry and the suffering get drowned out in the cacophony of competing voices and demands.

There is such a mystery in human suffering. Your servant, Harold, wrote a book about *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. A brilliant scientist wonders with integrity, "If God is loving, why does he allow suffering?"

Some of us, most of the time, and most of us, some of the time wonder about the same thing. It's such a mystery and seems so unnecessary.

"We gladly confess with the Psalmist: "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." (Psalm 145: 15-16)

"And yet, we see your creatures not well fed, mired in hunger, poverty, and despair. We see the power of evil that stalks the best of us: the power of cancer, the dread of war, sadness of death—"good death" or cruel death.

"And so we pray confidently toward you, but with footnotes. We pray confidently, but we will not deny in your presence the negatives that make us wonder.

"We pray amid our honest reservations, give us patience to wait, impatience to care, sadness held honestly, surrounded by joy over your coming kingdom—and peace while we wait—and peace at the last, that we may be peacemakers.

"We pray in the name of your firstborn Son, our peacemaker." Amen.[1]

[1] From Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for Privileged People* (Abingdon Press, 2008)

A Mid-course Correction

GENESIS 37:1-4 (NRSVUE) *Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.* [2]*These are the descendants 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.* [3]*Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age, and he made him an ornamented robe.* [4]*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.*

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The Word of God for the people of God!

Early in my ministry I assisted in a funeral for a teenaged girl—I'll call her Laura—high school valedictorian. On the night before graduation, she drove out on a country road to a party at a friend's house. On her way home, a drunk driver ran a stop sign and T-boned her car, killing her instantly.

At the visitation before the funeral, I heard repeatedly: "It's part of God's plan." "Everything happens for a reason." A half-century later I can't count the times I've heard similar comments in response to tragedy.

It's a theology called "The Sovereignty of God:" everything that happens is part of God's ***plan***; God plans and causes every event that happens.

A child is diagnosed with cancer. Is that part of God's plan?

A teenager is brutally raped. Did God plan that?

Another mass shooting at a primary school. Part of God's plan?

This past week a prominent evangelical leader said, "Yes." And that comment got in my face while I was studying today's readings and just wouldn't leave me alone; so, I made a mid-course correction in the trajectory of the sermon.

Does God plan and execute those tragedies? "OF COURSE NOT!"

Still, God does have a plan! It's clearly stated in the covenant with Abraham: "I will bless you and make your name great, *so that you will be a blessing* (that's the part that gets overlooked so often) …and in you all families of the earth shall be blessed." (GENESIS 12:2-3)

So, the question is: if that covenant is still valid, if it's truly for "all families of the earth," where is there "blessing" in a theology that says God plans tragedies, a theology not from the Bible but from post-16th-century Calvinist/Puritan pulpits.

In contrast, a theology closer to the spirit and intent of God's covenant with Abraham, a theology more closely in tune with New Testament Gospels and Epistles and the writings of the Apostolic and Patristic Fathers in the 2nd through the 4th centuries can be found in the movement opposing John Calvin led by Jacobus Arminius (there'll be a test next week).

The word for that alternative theology is Providence, from two Latin words. "Pro" means "before"; "video" means "to look." The understanding is that our lives and all of human history is guided (in contrast to being controlled) by One who is "looking ahead," One who has marked a map, highlighting the best route toward the goal of all families of the earth being blessed.

The difference between Calvin and Arminius, between sovereignty and providence is free will. God didn't create puppets or robots. God created humans in the image of God, which includes choice. So, yes, God has a plan. When we choose to follow the marked road map, there's blessing. Life may not be all roses and buttercups! That's never promised; Prosperity Gospel is a scam. But there will be blessing.

If we choose not to follow God's plan, the result is not punishment but natural, predictable consequences of human choice and guidance back to the right path.

In Joseph's story, we see the interplay of divine providence and family dysfunction resulting from human choice.

In today's reading we're still with Jacob, now called Israel. He has eleven sons and the story's focus now shifts to the youngest, Jacob's favorite, Joseph.

Fascinating story. Jacob skipped town, running from Esau, who he had scammed. Went up north to a sheep farm owned by a kinsman named Laban; and fell in love with Laban's youngest daughter, Rachel.

He asked for Rachel's hand, and Laban said, "Work for me seven years and you can have her." So, Jacob worked seven years, there was a big wedding, the marriage was consummated... Now, Jewish brides wore veils concealing their face, and it was dark, so when they woke up the next morning it was not Rachel, but her older sister, Leah, in bed with Jacob. The scammer had been scammed.

Understandably, he was upset; went screaming to Laban, who said, "Oh, didn't I tell you? The younger daughter can't be married before the older daughter. Work another seven years, you can have Rachel, too."

Well, he could see Jacob wasn't too excited about that deal, so he said, "Tell you what, sign a binding contract, go ahead and marry Rachel now; but you still owe me seven years' work." So, Jacob signed the contract and married Rachel.

Now, it gets interesting. Harem intrigue was common in the ancient world, and a regular soap opera develops in Jacob's tent: two wives—sisters—competing for their husband's favor by giving him male children.

Rachel, Jacob's favorite, couldn't get pregnant, but Leah had four sons. So, now comes the original "Handmaiden's Tale:" Rachel gives her handmaid to Jacob (a common practice), who bears two sons who are credited to Rachel.

Leah's afraid she'll get behind, so she gives her handmaid to Jacob, and she

bears sons #7 & 8, credited to Leah. (you keeping score?)

Leah gets pregnant again—twice: sons #9 & 10.

Finally, Rachel gives birth to Joseph. She'll later have Benjamin; but today we're looking at Joseph.

Baby of the family; Jacob's favorite and everybody knows it; if not, Joseph reminds them. He's spoiled, arrogant, narcissistic; a natural for a career in politics.

But outside Jacob's protection, he's defenseless, and his brothers want to kill him, but two brothers intervene, and he's sold to a caravan bound for Egypt.

That intervention sets Joseph up so that, through a series of very interesting events, he rises to power in Egypt (remember: he's a natural politician). And through his influence, Israel's future and the Abrahamic covenant are sustained.

So, the question still is, did God engineer that whole thing—plan it from creation, push buttons, pull strings to make it happen in that order? Did the brothers have a choice when they sold Joseph to the slave traders headed for Egypt? Did Joseph have a choice about how he handled things in Egypt? Did Pharaoh have a choice in promoting Joseph to the highest advisory level in the empire?

If they had choices, if they had free will, God took a huge risk, because freedom always includes responsibility and accountability, and most of humankind has not yet evolved to the point of handling that package.

And watch this: in today's reading and through most of Joseph's story, God is not mentioned at all; it's an entirely human saga full of human choices: mistakes, recoveries, injustices, forgiveness... And there's more: the word, sovereign or sovereignty does not appear in any English version of the Bible until 1976, in TEV.

Toward the end of the story, God is finally mentioned in passing. Joseph forgives his brothers and says, "It wasn't you who sent me here; God sent me here to prepare a place for you."

So, is God sovereign? All-powerful? Does God plan and manipulate people and events? Even tragedies?

Back in the 1980s I was just beginning to get into computers and decided I wanted to learn to write program. Google didn't exist yet; so, I bought a book and started learning a simple programming language called "BASIC" on a Commadore 64. It didn't have a hard drive, I used an 8-track cassette to store data.

I developed some intermediate skills—simple things—and decided to try writing a football game.

Six strategic situations: 1st & 10, 2nd & long, 2nd & short, 3rd & long, 3rd & short, 4th down. For each situation I designed three defensive sets: eighteen total.

On offense, I designed five offensive plays and a punt. And for each play I set up three sets of ten possible results: loss of one yard; gain of three yards, fumble, gain of fifteen yards, TD… etc.

I would key in the down and distance, 2nd & 3: and call an offensive play. So far, I'm in control, right? I wrote the program, designed every offensive play and defensive set. I called the play. But I also programmed two randomizing features.

When I keyed in the down and distance, the computer randomly chose one of the three defensive sets for that situation. When I keyed in an offensive play, the computer randomly selected one of the three sets of ten results. Then, when I hit the "GO" button, the computer randomly selected the result.

I created it. I created every possible outcome, but in the act of creation, I gave up control of the choices that would determine the outcome.

In his classic book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner explores the book of Job and concludes that bad things do happen to good people, but it's not God who wills it.

That makes some people uncomfortable. It's just comforting to believe an all-powerful God is in control so we're not responsible for the result of our choices. God's in control. Job's friends believed when bad things happen to good people, there had to be a reason. Somewhere in his past, even if he doesn't remember, he's guilty and God is punishing him. The entire message of Job refutes that wisdom.

I have a sense of relief in concluding that God doesn't plan and initiate suffering. If God is a God of justice and not of power; a God of relationships and not a celestial Wizard of OZ behind a curtain throwing levers, pulling strings, pushing buttons, our question will not be Job's question, "God, why are you doing this to me?" It will be, "God, do you see what's happening to me? Please help me!"[2]

At Laura's funeral, the senior minister of the church I was serving said, "This was not God's plan. Somebody got drunk and ran a stop sign."

In the book of Job, in the story of Joseph and repeatedly the Bible confirms that in good times and bad times we can turn to God, not to be rewarded or punished, but to be strengthened, guided, comforted within a loving, nurturing, enabling relationship with the God who has a plan, who marks the map for us, and turns control over to us; then walks with us; even when we choose the wrong way.

Pray with me.

[2] Adapted from Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations: Is God All Powerful? - pastor.jim.fccc@gmail.com - Gmail

Sovereignty/Sovereign
AMP ~ 22—1987
ASV ~ 1X—1901
NASV & NASV1995 ~ 8X—1971 & 1995
ESV ~ 3X—2001
GNT/TEV ~ 272X (all in the OT)—1976
ISV ~ 15X—2011
NET ~ 337X (OT), 5X (NT)—2006
NIV ~ 291X (OT), 6X (NT)—1978
NLT ~ 271X—1996
NRSVUE ~ 68X—2021
No other Major Translation

The Hebrew words most often translated Sovereign (all since 1978) are Hashem (the name) and Adonai (Lord or Master), both of which are used as a substitute verbalization of the Name of God YHWH/Yahweh. Adonai, when paired with YHWH, impies “highest majesty”, rather than all-powerful or omnipotent.

The English word, **omnipotent**, appears only once in the KJV: Revelation 19:6 “for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” – Nowhere in any other English version

The English word **Almighty** appears:

- 97X in the NRSVUE
- 64x in the NLT
- 57X in the NKJV and the KJV
- 333X in the NIV + “sovereignty” 2X and “sovereign” 297X
- 58X in the NASV1995 and the NASV and the ASV
- 315X in the AMP (Note: the Amplified Bible usually gives multiple meanings of important words.)
- 58X in the ESV
- 0X in the ERV—also does not use “omnipotent,” “sovereign,” or “sovereignty.”

Until the writings of Augustine (late 4th/early 5th centuries) Christian writings (New Testament Gospels and Epistles, the Apostolic Fathers and Patristic Fathers) emphasized human free will and rejected strict theological determinism.