**Big ‘Buts’ of the Bible: But God!**

**Genesis 50:15-20**

Rev. J. Douglas Paterson

February 4, 2018

Big things come in small packages sometimes. Just consider the mitochondria. Mitochondria are little organelles inside our cells that produce ATP, or the energy source for the cell. Why is that important for our sermon series on “Big ‘Buts’ of the Bible?” It’s not. I just think it is good to throw a biology lesson in every once in a while. And it is a reminder that we should pay attention to small things, like the word “but,” especially when it is used in Scripture.

You know our premise of this sermon series. That little conjunction b-u-t carries a lot of responsibility. We have found when it is used by Jesus, it is often a call to action and a real game changer, like when he asked his disciple who people thought he was, and then asked, “But who do you say that I am?” No longer can we just theorize with detached interest. It requires us to participate one way or another.

Or when humans use it in response to God, as we saw with Moses, it is usually to keep the game from changing and keep the status quo with which we are comfortable instead of having to step out in faith.

Jesus also uses the word “but” as a way to redirect our understanding about faith and God. Because Jesus has a unique understanding of God, his teachings bring clarity to God’s truth, which means we have to unlearn what we’ve assumed to be the truth. So in his Sermon on the Mount, he is constantly saying, “You have heard it said…, **but** I say to you…” We will look at that specifically next week.

This week we are going to look at the word “but” when it appears upon the lips of the narrator. And who is the narrator? It’s anyone in the Bible telling the story of God’s movement in history. Sometimes it is upon the lips of a specific character like our Old Testament lesson from Genesis. It is Joseph who articulates the movement of God. Or like Paul when writing to the Romans. It is Paul doing the speaking through his writing, but he is playing the narrator giving voice to how God moves in and through our lives.

Now it is not just any “but” we are looking at today. We are looking at a specific “but” that the narrator uses. We are looking at the “but” that immediately precedes another small three letter word – “God.” When the narrator combines “but” and “God,” you have the makings for a seismic understanding of God’s movement in human affairs.

So let’s take a look at what happens in our Genesis story. You know this story. Joseph is Jacob’s favorite son. He’s the youngest in the family, of course. Joseph was given favors that his older brothers didn’t particularly appreciate, as well as a talent to interpret dreams. Now I don't know if Joseph is just naïve or outright stupid, but he tells his brothers about of a couple of his dreams. In those dreams, his brothers are bowing down and serving him. I have a brother. That’s not the kind of thing you tell your brother even if you think it is true.

Scripture literally says the brothers hated Joseph. And so they plotted to kill him. Cooler heads prevailed and they ended up throwing him into an old cistern.

Now it is a little confusing exactly what transpired, but Joseph ended up being sold to a caravan of Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt, who in turn sold him to Potiphar who was the captain of the Pharaoh’s guard. Joseph did quite well for himself and for Potiphar. Potiphar’s wife, though, was a bit of a scamp, telling lies about Joseph which ended with Joseph going to jail.

His powers to interpret dreams came in handy. The Pharaoh had some pretty disturbing dreams that Joseph was able to interpret, and in so doing saved Egypt from a devastating drought and famine, which made him the right hand man to Pharaoh. This same drought brought Joseph’s father and brothers to Egypt seeking food and refuge. Jacob, of course thought his son Joseph, was dead, and the others weren’t quite sure what happened to him. They didn’t realize that Joseph was now one of the most powerful persons in Egypt.

Joseph toyed with them a bit and, eventually, revealed himself to them. Then there was one big, happy reunion.

Our Scripture is the very end of that story and comes at the occasion of Jacob’s death. After Joseph and all the brothers buried their father, Jacob, the brothers were nervous that Joseph might now seek revenge for what they had done to him. Joseph’s response brings us to the “but” of the story. “Don’t be afraid,” he says. “Am I God? You planned something bad for me, **but** God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as he’s doing today.”

Actually, if you read through the whole story, you will see several “but Gods.” At every turn, when humans were acting badly, God took their bad actions and made something good come out of it. For me, that is the core of the Gospel.

Notice that God did not cause the bad to happen. There are some who believe that everything that happens is the result of God pulling the strings. So Job, in his misery, had friends coming to him trying to help him see where he went wrong that would cause God to inflict such punishment, so that he might repent and find relief. We have popular TV evangelists who see mighty earthquakes or hurricanes as God’s imposed retribution for our sin. But that isn’t the way God works, at least according to Jesus.

God does not cause our misery, nor does God prevent the bad from happening. People like to grumble that if God is such a loving God, why does God allow bad things to happen? Unfortunately, God does not protect us from the consequences of our own stupidity, or from the ebb and flow of the natural order. But neither does God leave us there.

In Martin Bell’s boo, The Way of the Wolf, he has a story called “Rag-Tag Army”. It begins like this: *I THINK God must be very old and very tired. Maybe he used to look splendid and fine in his general’s uniform, but no more. He’s been on the march a long time, you know. And look at his rag-tag little army! Listen! The drumbeat isn’t even regular. Everyone is out of step. And there! You see? God keeps stopping along the way to pick up one of his tinier soldiers who decided to wander off and play with a frog, or run in a field, or whose foot got tangled in the underbrush. He’ll never get anywhere that way. And yet, the march goes on.*

He goes on to describe a group of “soldiers” who take off their shoes for the march and of course, God will have to stop again and wait for them. Then, there is a group who is holding hands while they march. The ones on the end, are not holding onto anything – “one hand is reaching, empty”. So, they hold hands with each other and “everybody marches around in circles. And so God must stop again”.

*If God were more sensible, he’d take his little army and shape them up. Why, whoever heard of a soldier stopping to romp in a field? It’s ridiculous. But even more absurd is a general who will stop the march of eternity to go and bring him back. But that’s God for you. His is no endless, empty marching. He is going somewhere. His steps are deliberate and purposive. He may be old, and he may be tired. But he knows where he’s going. And he means to take every last one of his tiny soldiers with him.*

*Listen! The drumbeat isn’t even regular. Everyone is out of step. And there! You see? God keeps stopping along the way to pick up one of his tinier soldiers who decided to wander off and play with a frog, or run in a field, or whose foot got tangled in the underbrush. He’ll never get anywhere that way!*

*And yet, the march goes on….*

“As for you, you meant evil against me,” Joseph said, “**but God** used it for good”. God takes all our bad and foolishness and molds it for good. We don’t always see it because our range of vision is pretty narrow, and pretty short. It is hard for us to see the thread that leads us throughout eternity. But God continually molds and remolds to bring creation to God’s intended fulfillment. We see pain, misery and failure, but God can use even that, to bring about blessing and grace.

As Christians, we see that most specifically in the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Even when humanity was at its worse, torturing and killing the one whose simple message was about God’s love and peace, God was able to use it for good. You heard how Paul expressed it in his letter to the Romans with another “but God” statement: *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.* ***But God*** *proves his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us.*

Of all the “buts” in the Bible, perhaps the one to take the most comfort in is “But God.” It is the assurance that in spite of all our foolishness, failure, misery and woes, God will not leave us there, and is even now working to bring you and me to joyous fulfillment.

And I pray that will be experienced in your life and in mine. Amen.