

God's Intentions

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35:

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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For my sermon on this first Sunday after Labour Day, this Sunday where many of us are finding our way back into fall grooves after summer, I want to invite you to do something that is simultaneously simple and profound.

Think about your life.

This is something that I hope you are doing regularly, anyway. But today I'm thinking of this in a more specific way.

Think about the shape your life has taken, the unexpected turns, the sorrows, the victories, the successes, the failures, the things you could never have predicted. Think about the people whose stories have intersected with your own (for better or worse), the loves, the betrayals, the disappointments, the blessings.

Think about the things that have hurt, the things that have brought joy, the things that took your breath away. Think about the things you've experienced (or not experienced). The challenges you never could have predicted. The things that you absolutely *could* have predicted but which *felt* different than you imagined they would.

I've been thinking about the wildness of human stories this week because of two "inputs." First, the story of Joseph from book of Genesis, which we've heard a portion of this morning and which we'll get to.

The second was an interview with the American poet Christian Wiman that I came across this week. It was on a podcast called "The Sacred," hosted by Elizabeth Oldfield (who has recently written a book called *Fully Alive*, which is quite good).

Christian Wiman is a writer that I have come to appreciate over the last few decades. Which is odd, because I don't love poetry.

I wish I could be the kind of person who reads and appreciates poetry. I've tried to become that guy. I just can't do it. Most poetry just seems beyond me. My brain seems not to be wired that way.

It's Wiman's prose that I appreciate. *My Bright Abyss* was written in 2013 and is one of my favourite books. He's recently written another one called *Zero at the Bone*.

Wiman is a fantastic writer. He has a way with words that I admire. He's someone who longs to be more Christian than he often feels. He's prone to deep doubt, even despair. He expresses religious longing and an existential hunger for God in a way that few I have come across can.

He also has quite a story, which he shared a bit of on the podcast. At 39, he was diagnosed with a very rare and incurable form of lymphoma, and which he has been living with for two decades.

He has been through endless treatments and trials and experiments; he has been on the verge of death numerous times. He has spent long stretches of time in hospitals and in excruciating pain. His story has been a hard one.

It's also been a very unexpected one. To say that Wiman had a childhood that would not obviously point to a career as an internationally renowned poet teaching at Yale Divinity School would be the height of understatement.

Wiman was born into poverty and chaos in small windswept town in West Texas. His father was a "troubled person" who sold vacuum cleaners and bibles door to door before somehow going to medical school and becoming a doctor and then going bankrupt a few years later.

A life of reading or an appreciation of poetry or literature was not modelled in the home he grew up in. The bible was the only book that he ever saw in his house, charismatic evangelicalism kind of being just the air everyone breathed in West Texas.

Indeed, even into his college years, the only books he had read were crime novels. He had never even read a poem until he set foot on a college campus. He was too busy working the Texas oil rigs to pay for his education.

Wiman had also never met an atheist until college, where, upon reading Nietzsche, he promptly dropped his faith. It just “fell away,” he said.

There was also violence in his background. Wiman’s maternal grandfather killed his grandmother and then himself, in the presence of his mother. This obviously left a traumatic mark upon the family, but it was never talked about openly.

Wiman speaks of having all kinds of rage in him as a young man. He would get in fights all the time. He was given his first gun at 12. One of his best friends in school killed someone.

This is a life that could very easily have gone down some very predictable paths.

There is *nothing* about the early parts of this story that would obviously point to a future spent writing and teaching poetry, to becoming what one magazine called, “the most important Christian writer in America.”¹

Yes, *Christian* writer. There is also very little that would point to a return to faith. Many people leave their faith in college and never give God another thought (or at least claim not to... I rarely believe people who say they never think about God!).

But as Wiman discovered poetry in college and beyond, it led him back to God.

Wiman’s faith likely wouldn’t pass many doctrinal orthodoxy tests. It is plagued by doubt, at times irreverent, deeply conflicted. He has massive questions about the bible.

But he actually found that he could never shake God. Here’s how he describes it:

There was something in me from a very young age that was hungering for God and, I would say, pursued by God. And it hasn't abated.”

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¹ <https://trinitychurchnyc.org/stories-news/poet-christian-wiman>

Well, from Christian Wiman let's turn to another wild story. Our OT reading the morning drops us into the story of Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph was the second youngest of Jacob's twelve sons and his father's favourite, as demonstrated by his gift of a the famous robe of many colours.

His brothers, not surprisingly, did not appreciate this as much as Joseph did. It didn't help that the seventeen-year-old Joseph seemed quite enamoured with his status as "favourite son" and eager to share this with his brothers.

He also had a rather vivid dream life. This, too, he was keen to share with his brothers, particularly when his dreams involved his brothers, not least because his dreams involved all of them bowing down to him.

Those of you who have siblings can imagine how these kinds of dream would be received.

He even tells his dad about this dreams, upon which his father promptly and wisely tells him to shut up.

Alas, these dreams had stoked the flames of his brothers' jealousy and hatred and they begin to plot a suitable response for their brother.

Some wanted to kill him, but they end up selling him to some traders moving through the region, fabricating an incident with a wild animal, lying about it to their father and telling him that Joseph was dead.

The traders make their way to Egypt where Joseph is sold to the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Through a long series of events involving Joseph resisting the advances of the captain's wife (and being thrown in prison for his troubles), getting out of prison by interpreting Pharaoh's dreams as a warning to prepare for an imminent famine, Joseph ends up being put in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

He prepares the nation well and they can live off their stored up grain when the famine hits.

This leads to Joseph's brothers' reentering the picture. The famine had hit Canaan hard so they go to Egypt to buy grain. And it leads to them unwittingly (and unknowingly)

finding themselves face to face with the brother they had sold into slavery as a seventeen-year-old boy. Now he is around forty years old and the second most powerful man in all of Egypt, almost single handedly responsible for avoiding a famine in the land.

What will Joseph do? He has every right to be angry. Wrong has been done. He spent long years languishing in an Egyptian prison. He was unjustly treated. He was sent away to a foreign country where he was cut off from his family and was utterly alone. If ever someone had been justified in withholding forgiveness, it would have been Joseph.

And yet... Joseph forgives.

And he draws attention to the beautiful truth that God can take even what we human beings intend for evil and repurpose it for good.

As in the story of Christian Wiman, I don't think it would have been possible to draw any kind of a straight line from Joseph's origins to where his story ended up.

From the youngest son of a semi-nomadic family in Canaan, through a story of family conflict, abandonment, trauma, forcible relocation, enslavement, false accusations of rape, imprisonment, to a barely believable promotion, to ending up in a position of enormous power and influence in Egypt.

This is not a trajectory anyone could have predicted. It would not have been difficult to imagine Joseph's story ending very differently than it did.

And yet, God was at work. Somehow, mysteriously, God was weaving together all the sorrow and injustice and apparent randomness and cruelty and confusion and betrayal into a story of goodness and hope.

This is not to say that every hard story has a straightforward happy ending.

Even Joseph's story is a complicated one, at least in its broader consequences. Yes, he reconciled with his brothers and there was a happy family reunion.

But this reunion in Egypt was one step in the longer story of the people of Israel's becoming enslaved and suffering in the land for nearly half a millennium. Life is complicated.

I do think Joseph's story and Christian Wiman's story give us permission, even an *obligation* to remember that we serve a God who can and does take human sin and stupidity and ignorance and repurposes it for good.

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good. This is what Joseph said to his brothers and it is as true today as it was then.

Our bad motives, ultimately, are no match for God's good intentions.

This week I read a book written by Christian Wiman and his Yale colleague Miroslav Volf. It's called *Glimmerings* and is framed as a conversation between a poet (Wiman) and a theologian (Volf). It's a series of letters between the two friends about faith.

At one point, Volf says this:

My trust is not based on the conviction that "everything happens for a reason" but, to match this worn-out phrase with another one, that "God knows how to write straight even on crooked lines."²

I think Christian Wiman would agree. And I think Joseph would agree.

I think any of us who believe that God could bring about the healing, forgiveness, and salvation of the world through the brutal injustice and execution of Jesus of Nazareth can come to no other conclusion than God knows how to write straight with crooked lines.

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How about us? I began this sermon with a simple invitation to think about your life.

Think about the winding path that has led to where you are right now. Does it seem straightforward? Have there been glorious surprises? Dead ends? Gut punches?

² Miroslav Volf & Christian Wiman, *Glimmerings: Letters on Faith Between a Poet and a Theologian* (New York: HarperCollins, 2026), 102-03.

Have you found yourself, like Joseph, in a strange place, far from home, wondering how on earth you ended up here and where this story might be going?

Are you in the early stages of a story that so far seems unpromising? Are you right in the middle of a story that doesn't seem to be going anywhere? Are you closer to the end of a story that is tinged with regret?

Or, perhaps you are in the middle of a good story, filled with gratitude, joy, purpose, clarity, faith, hope, and love! If so, thanks be to God!

But we all must interpret these stories God has placed us in. One of the duties of faith is to interpret them well.

Can we believe that God writes straight with crooked lines? Can we trust that the grand story the Author is telling is a hopeful one?

Can we have faith that no matter the various ways in which our motives and the motives of others go astray, no matter how much suffering our stories might contain, God's intentions for us and for the world are always good and never change?

And in the midst of all our mixed-up stories and their intersections, can we learn the vital art of forgiveness?

I'm not going to say much about our gospel reading because Jesus' parable is fairly plain. Forgiveness is of vital importance and God takes it very seriously indeed.

To be human is to require forgiveness.

Christian Wiman's story, Joseph's story, all our stories make this plain.

We misunderstand and miscommunicate. We lie to each other. We lie to ourselves. We impose burdens on each other, intentionally and unintentionally.

We do damage even when we try to do the right thing. We love deeply and thus we hurt and are hurt deeply. We carry our pain around in unhealthy and destructive ways.

Forgiveness—God’s forgiveness and the forgiveness of one other—is one of the ways in which the crooked lines of all our stories are made straight.

I often think that forgiveness is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

At one point in the podcast I began with, the host asked Christian Wiman what he considered “sacred.” “What is the thing that you wouldn’t give up even for money,” she asked.

Here’s what Wiman said:

“Gosh, there's very little I would give up for money... I wouldn't give up my 10-year-old dog for money.

She pressed on: “What about glory or acclaim?”

No. If I was given the choice of winning the Nobel Prize and being able to spend the rest of my life as a simple Christian with a simple faith, I would take that. And it would be that quick... that would be my highest aspiration actually.”³

I love this response.

And I am convinced that a simple Christian is someone who trusts that God’s intentions for our lives and for all creation are good. And who forgives.

May God help us to be simple Christians.

To trust the One who writes straight with our crooked lines. To help us forgive as we have been forgiven. To believe that whatever our story might look like at any given moment, God’s intentions for us are always good.

Amen.



³ From The Sacred: Preparing to Die, Then Learning to Live Again with Poet Christian Wiman, Sep 8, 2026