Sunday, January 25, 1976
ODTAA
Genesis 42:29-37

A few weeks ago, this story appeared in the local paper with the dateline of Miami, Florida. "The day started badly for Steve Mashin Friday, and it got worse. Returning to his Miami apartment after a night out, he found burglars had hauled off his television set, stereo and wristwatch. He decided to drive to Miami Beach to see his mother and a traffic accident put his car out of action. Hitchhiking home, Mashin stopped to telephone a friend from a phone booth a block from his apartment. A bandit drove up and stole his last four dollars."

Most of us have had days like that when we felt that everything had gone wrong. No matter what we did, it turned out badly. Doesn't it sometimes seem that trouble comes in bunches?

Jacob in the Old Testament stories knew what it was to have things go wrong. As a young man he had gone to work for a distant uncle and had fallen in love with one of that man's daughters. He agreed to work seven years in order to have that woman for his wife. When the wedding came, his uncle tricked him and substituted his other daughter in the ceremony. Jacob found himself married to the wrong woman. So, he stayed seven more years and married the woman he loved. With these two wives he had 12 sons, however the sons he loved the most were the children of the wife he loved the most. One of these was named Joseph and his brothers in jealousy had sold him to a caravan going to Egypt, but they told their father Jacob that he had been killed by a wild animal.

Years later, Jacob knew more trouble and that's where our scripture lesson for this morning takes up the story. There was a famine in the land. His crops had failed, and he had a large family to feed. In desperation he had sent some of his sons to Egypt because he heard food could be gotten there. After a time, his sons returned with the news that the person in charge of food distribution demanded that they bring Jacob's youngest son Benjamin along with them on their next trip as a sign of good faith. Jacob's fear of course was that he would now lose his youngest son and his favorite. In desperation, Jacob cried out to his older sons and to God, "You have robbed me of my children. Joseph has disappeared; Simeon has disappeared and now you are taking Benjamin. Everything is against me!" A more accurate translation would put it - O D T A A, one damn thing after another. That was Jacob 's feeling. I'm certain it was the mood of Steve Mashin that day in Miami. Or just a short time ago we had the man in Fremont, who on the day he was to attend his daughter's funeral because she had been murdered, had the hotel which he owned explode and was mostly destroyed.

One thing goes wrong, and then another and then another. Like Jacob we cry out, "Everything is against me."

How do we as Christians face and handle such events when they come our way?

1. The first thing we can do is to admit and accept the fact that sometimes one thing after another does go wrong in our lives. Days come to all of us when we feel like Jacob, that everything is against us, and a desolating sense of human weakness and inadequacy sweeps over us.

It's not surprising that ordinary people like ourselves should have such feelings, for even the saints have not been immune. There was a day, for example, when it happened to tha.t rugged

man of faith, Elijah. Ahab and Jezebel and the powers of darkness were scheming against him. “Everything is against me,” Elijah said. Life is not worth living. I wish I were dead.

It happened to Jeremiah, one of the greatest and most sensitive of all the prophets. In the 20th chapter of the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament, we can alm.ost visualize him marching to God and saying, “Everything is against me. Nothing turns out right.”

The Apostle Paul had that experience. That nagging, aching thorn in the flesh,” as he called it was spoiling everything, dogging him with dull, chronic pain and misery. “Why can’t it leave me alone?” “It’s getting worse. There are days when it’s sheer torment.”

In another place, in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts other bad times. “Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.”

It happens to the strongest and the most faithful among us and often when things seem to be going well. I’ve been rereading the autobiography of Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of this country’s greatest preachers. At one point in his life his whole world came apart. He had to be placed in a sanitarium because of a complete mental breakdown. The harder he struggled the worse it got.

So, the first answer to the problem of O D T A A, is a recognition that it can happen to anyone. It’s a part of life.

Once we recognize this, it can even strengthen us for the future. Sometime ago I met a man and I said to him, “How happy you are. No matter what goes wrong, no matter how hot it is, nothing seems to bother you.”

He replied by saying, “Not after I got this hand.” I looked at his hand and saw that it had been cruelly hurt. I waited for the rest of the story.”

“A few years ago,” he said, “I was down in the dumps; had lost my job; didn’t know where my next meal was to come from; had a family dependent on me; had been sick for six months; was just feeling better; had a call for a new position; got into my automobile to get that job; ran into a tree, wrecked my car and myself, and lost a part of my hand. Trouble and tragedy came in a heap. Then I got better, got a job and here I am. Nothing can bother me after tl1.at experience; so, I can laugh at anything.”

Some of you may have seen the quotation in Ann Lander’s column from an old man who at 86 had learned how to accept the problems and troubles of old age. He wrote: “At 86, Rosie and I live by the rules of the elderly. If the toothbrush is wet, you. have brushed your teeth. If the bedside radio is warm in the morning, you left it on all night. If you are wearing one brown shoe and one black shoe, you have a pair like it somewhere in the closet.

Try not to mind when a friend tells you on your birthday that a case of prune juice has been donated in your name to a Retirement Home. I stagger when I walk and small boys follow me,

making bets on which way I'll go next. This upsets me. Children shouldn't gamble. Like most elderly people, we spend many happy hours in front of the TV set. We rarely turn it on."

So, it's not only what happens to us, it's what we do with it; our attitude toward it that counts. There are some things we can't change, but we can change our attitude toward them.

2. A second thing we can do when everything seems against us is to remember that Jacob was wrong in his assessment, and we too can be wrong.

Jacob's son, Joseph had been missing-for years and now there was the danger that Benjamin would also be lost. But what Jacob didn't know was that Joseph was Prime Minister in Egypt and it was Joseph who was asking to see Benjamin. There were surprises that Jacob hadn't counted on and couldn't possibly foresee.

At any one time in our lives, we can never see the whole picture. Thus, what sometimes looks like everything, is against us turns out in the long run to be something quite different. This is not to suggest that many of our troubles are not real, they are! But sometimes in the future, everything turns out better that we had expected.

Jacob had to learn to be open to God's surprises. Since he couldn't see the whole picture, as none of us can, he had no way of knowing that when he was at his lowest point, he was also nearest to his highest point — he would soon be reunited with Joseph his lost son, and there would be food for the family as well.

Sometimes help comes to us in surprising ways.

3. The third answer to our situation when everything is against us is the good news of our faith that in the final analysis, evil, wrong and all that is associated with it cannot win. God reigns. It is that article of faith that keeps us going even in the worst of circumstances.

We may not put it in those exact words, but it's the same faith.

When Charles Beard, the historian, was an old man, one of his students asked him, "Can you sum up everything you have learned in life in five minutes?" The historian said he could do better than that. He could do it in just four lines. (1) Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power. (2) The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. (3) The bee fertilizes the flower it robs. (4) When it is dark enough you can see the stars.

Each of these sentences, of course, opens out on a universe of human thought and experience. But they all have as their foundation a basic belief. in the overall goodness and justice of God.

That may not always be evident to us in the short run where things often seem to go wrong and it even seems at times that the evil prosper while the good suffer — but in the long run, overall, God reigns and God is good and seeks our good, or as the Bible puts it: "Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigns." Amen.