

PROLOGUE TO POSSIBILITIES

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 The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
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The story we heard this morning about Joseph is the happy ending of a long and complicated story—one of the Bible’s best novellas—of the teenager sold into slavery. Once upon a time, Joseph had been the apple of his father’s eye—so much so that Jacob made him a coat of many colors. (He was, in fact, a bit of a spoiled brat!) His ten older brothers became increasingly jealous of him to the point of hating him. One day, they sold him to a caravan going to Egypt, and told their father that Joseph had been killed by wild animals, leaving only his coat. And while Jacob grieved, Joseph was carried down to Egypt where he was sold as a slave.

But the Lord prospered all that Joseph did and he rose to a position of authority in the household of Potiphar, the head of Pharaoh’s guard. But when he rejected the repeated advances of Potiphar’s wife, she accused him of attacking her and Joseph was immediately imprisoned. Again, the Lord was with him and when it became known that Joseph could interpret dreams—and it so happened that Pharaoh was having some humdinger nightmares—Joseph was called before Pharaoh. He interpreted the dreams to mean that the world they knew would undergo seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of drought and famine. Pharaoh immediately appointed Joseph governor over all Egypt and Joseph instructed the people to reserve grain from their plentitude, which they did, and when a great drought and famine spread over the world, the people of Egypt could eat from the grain they had stored away, and even sell some to foreigners.

Meanwhile, in the land of Israel, the famine raged and Jacob, father of Joseph, sent ten of his sons—the very ones who had sold the boy Joseph into slavery—to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not know him. After all, how could they have imagined that the bratty brother they sold into slavery would now have authority over all of Egypt? Joseph sent them home with grain and told them that when they came to buy more, they must bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, Joseph’s only full brother, born of Rachel. They left and returned with Benjamin. Again, they went home with grain until a silver cup (planted by Joseph’s servants) was found in Benjamin’s sack and the brothers were brought back to Joseph. This time, convinced of the love his brothers had for their father and for Benjamin, Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers, which we heard in today’s reading.

Their past history was ugly: jealous brothers, a grieving father, a terrified Joseph becoming first a captive, then a slave, then a prisoner. But God was with them all, and they were able to benefit from their past, survive the present distress, and posit hope in the future.

God knows, we are living in the midst of a famine these days: a famine of civility, a famine of peace in places like Ukraine and Ottawa and New York subways, a famine of confidence in health as we weather the pandemic. And sometimes we lose sight of the fact that God is with us, beside us in the worst of what we must endure.

The biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, describes this unease as “disorientation.” In a book about the psalms*, he describes our lives as a cycle of Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation and he places all of the psalms in one of those categories. The process goes like this: In a period of Orientation, life is settled, predictable and we are more or less in sync with the universe. It’s not perfect, but we’re generally healthy and our future is relatively clear. It’s a time for optimism and creativity, a hopeful time. We do our best; we relax when we can and life unfolds in a pretty decent way. In today’s language, we might call it “pre-pandemic.” God is in God’s heaven and all is, or will soon be, right with the world. A psalmist wrote of this state that God “will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways ... (lest) you dash your feet against a stone.” (91:11-12) Or “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” (24:1)

But of course, life doesn’t stay that steady for anyone. Eventually something happens that throws us into Disorientation. It could be illness, our own or someone close to us. It could be the loss of status that comes with losing a job or moving to a new place where no one knows us. Disorientation can come on as a result of dramatic tragedy, like a fire or an accident. Or it may come from a quieter, natural change like aging or children growing up and leaving home. The birth or adoption of a baby, a parent moving in. Whatever the reason, throughout our lives

there are times when we find ourselves pushed out of what is familiar and taken for granted and thrust into the unknown. And good or bad, that is stressful. We're no longer certain about the ground under our feet.

This is when psalmists write words like, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me; why are you so far from helping me?" (22:1) Or "How long, O Lord, will you hide yourself forever?" (Ps 89:46)

In this period, we yearn for the peace and predictability of our past. We yearn to wake up and know, even in a Pollyanna way, what the day will hold. We yearn to get back to Orientation—to the way things were once, when we were *content*. We try to go back, to make things as right as we *remember* their being before. But the fact is that we can never go back, and the truth is that even in Disorientation, we are growing wiser and stronger. The scar tissue that is forming will offer some protection as we go forward.

True healing, new life, renewed contentment comes when we move *forward*, to New Orientation—when we recognize that the past prepared us for what is to come. We awake in a place we did not know before, open to living a renewed life, albeit it in different circumstances—and the hope that abandoned us in Disorientation is restored to our spirits. The psalms that describe this state are among our most beloved: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ... You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." (23:1, 5) Or, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (46:1)

You as a parish have experienced this process: from being two parishes with robust Sunday schools and enough money to pay the bills, to finding yourselves wondering how you'll continue to exist with diminishing congregations and a serious scarcity of funds, to now being one parish, about to find a priest who will accompany you into a future that looks more hopeful than you've known for a long time.

We could say the same about living with COVID 19. We so wish we could go back to when it didn't overshadow our lives, but we're probably past the worst of it now and life is different, but hopeful, because we've learned to live with it.

In all our lives, this process of Orientation, Disorientation, New Orientation will repeat itself over and over. There will always be challenges that make us wish we could time travel back to where we were yesterday, but of course, life doesn't work that way.

But what the Joseph story tells us again, lest we forget, is that God is always with us, helping us to find the best way forward when life sets us back. We have free will to choose our way forward, but we also have prayer and the watchful eye of the One who created us and loves us.

Shakespeare said it beautifully in *The Tempest*: "What's past is prologue; what to come, in yours and my discharge." (Act 2, Scene 1, 253-54)

And our Collect of the Day offers this as we pray our way forward: "Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue..."

With love, we can endure, and thrive, whatever happens.

AMEN.

Readings: Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42; Luke 6:27-38

*Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. 1946, 1956, 1971: Augsburg, Minneapolis. ISBN 0-8066-2120-6