

Sermon for Sunday, August 13, 2023

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

“The Messy Middle”

Reverend Amy Zalk Larson

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passage for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Our Old Testament story today reminds me of a tongue-in-cheek quote that I enjoy: *Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes the reason is you're stupid and make bad decisions.* I know that's harsh, but I appreciate the quote because it doesn't blame God for our human brokenness.

Our story today is full of people acting poorly and making terrible decisions.

Jacob loves Joseph more than all his other children and they all know it? Even if Jacob feels more connected to Joseph, why rub it in his other sons' faces by giving Joseph an elaborate coat?

Both Jacob and Joseph seem to lack common sense. Joseph has these incredible dreams - OK- but is it a good life choice to describe them to your brothers who already hate you? Probably not. And Jacob, is it a good idea to send Joseph out alone, wearing that coat, to check on the brothers that you know hate him - the brothers he's already snitched on, the brothers who “could not speak peacefully to him?” Seems like a bad idea. None of this means that Joseph in any way deserves to be thrown into a pit and sold into slavery.

Joseph's brothers also behave terribly. The oldest, Rueben, at least stops them from killing Joseph, but could he have done more? Probably not. Rueben, Joseph, Jacob, and all the brothers are trapped in cycles of sibling rivalry and family dysfunction.

Since the time of Isaac and Ishmael and then Jacob and Esau, this family has been stuck in patterns of pain and hurt that repeat generation after generation. Each plays their role and the cycle just continues on harming families, peoples, the whole ancient world even.

What roles do we play in cycles of dysfunction in our own families and communities, in our nation and on this planet? Do you act like Joseph: full of big dreams and high hopes but not quite sure where to go with them, how to navigate your life in relationship with other people? Do you feel like Jacob's other sons: longing for the love and attention of someone who doesn't seem to see you, wanting to stop a person or group that's hurting you before they can harm you further? Maybe you feel like Rueben. You want to put a stop to all of this pain, but can't quite do enough in the moment.

Many of us often feel like Jacob, a bit overwhelmed by conflicts and the challenges of family life. Or, like the four mothers of Jacob's children, who are likely watching all this unfold with a sense of dread and hopelessness in the pits of their stomachs. Everything happens for a reason. A major reason that Joseph ends up in a pit is because hurting people are trapped in unhelpful roles and behaving poorly.

One character who doesn't appear at all in this story is God. Where is God as all this is happening? God has promised this family will be a blessing to the whole world. Yet, all this dysfunction seems to threaten that. At the end of Joseph's story, with some hindsight, Joseph reflects on what God has

been up to amid this tumultuous family dynamic, how God has been at work in it to preserve life and help many peoples. He can see that even when he and others acted poorly and made bad decisions, God worked good out of evil.

We'll hear about that next week. Our Psalm today gives us a sneak peek. But in the part of Joseph's story that we hear today, there is no mention of God. It's tempting to try to rush to the end, to forgiveness and healing and new life. Yet it's good for us to stay with this messy middle of the story today, because that's where most of us live most of the time. In hindsight, we may be able to see God at work, but how do we live in the meantime? What is it like for Joseph in the mess when he's attacked and then trapped in a deep pit, when he finds himself in a strange land? Does he lose hope and struggle to keep the faith? How is it for us when things are messy, uncertain, complicated? How do we live with hope then?

The beginning of our Psalm today gives us guidance for such times, encouraging us to take specific actions in order to keep the faith. A few of the actions really jumped out at me as crucial:

***Give thanks,
call upon God's name,
sing praises,
search for the strength of the Lord, seek God's face,
remember the marvels God has done.***

Even when things aren't clear, it helps to give thanks and practice gratitude for even the smallest graces: well, at least my brothers didn't kill me; the sun came up; there is water to drink; the day is finally over; all is not lost. It helps to pray, to call upon God's name. As we do, we stay connected to God even when we are confused, angry, hurting, even when God seems silent. It also helps to sing praises with others in defiance of despair, as we do today.

The Psalm encourages us to be on the lookout for signs of God's presence. These may not be grand, yet even being able to take a deep breath is a sign that God's Spirit is present with us, praying in us with sighs too deep for words. And it helps to remember what God has done in the past because God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Even when we can't see it, we have a God who enters into the pit with us in Jesus, works good out of evil, and brings new life.

So, let's call upon God's name in silent prayer now, and then sing praises together.