

Sermon for Sunday, August 20, 2023

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost “Emotions as God’s Messengers?” Reverend Amy Zalk Larson Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa

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

Joseph has an epic story. He’s up, he’s down, he’s back up. He’s thrown into a pit, sold into slavery by his brothers, and then running a wealthy household. The powerful woman of the house attempts to seduce him, but he does the right thing, which lands him in prison. He helps well connected men in prison who could maybe spring him out, they forget him, they remember, he’s up again ruling on high. The story is full of suspense, intrigue, and wild plot twists. In many ways, Joseph seems larger than life, amazing, technicolor even - made for entertainment and a bit removed from our ordinary lives, at least at first glance.

His story is a continuation of the epic tale of his whole blessed and broken family. One key difference between his story and that of his ancestors is that God never appears directly to Joseph. Adam and Eve, Noah, Sarah and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all get to see God in person, in some kind of physical form. God speaks directly to them in promises and commands that they can hear straight from the source. Joseph never gets these direct encounters with God. God communicates with him, guides and leads him, but he has to do a lot of reflection and interpretation.

In that regard, we have a lot in common with Joseph. God *does* communicate with us, does guide and lead us, yet it takes some work to discern what God might be saying and doing in our lives. God works through scripture, sermons, music, other people, and through tangible promises in bread and wine and water. These are powerful forms of divine communication that call for our reflection and interpretation.

Many people, like Joseph, also experience God guiding them through dreams, and through the wisdom to interpret them. I don’t often remember much about my dreams, so there isn’t a lot to work with there. I wonder if Joseph experiences guidance from God in another form, one that is even more accessible to all of us. I wonder if God speaks to Joseph, and to us, through our emotions.

Joseph has some big emotions when his brothers come to him three different times while he’s second in command in Egypt. (We heard about the third time in our reading today.) The brothers don’t recognize Joseph, but he knows just who they are. The first time the brothers appear, Joseph seems to feel a lot of anger and distrust. The second time, they bring Joseph’s younger brother Benjamin, the only other son of Joseph’s mother Rachel, the only brother who wasn’t part of the whole pit, selling-into-slavery situation. When Joseph sees Benjamin, he is “overcome with affection for his brother.” He has to excuse himself so he can go weep. And then, the third time the brothers appear before Joseph, and it seems they have changed their ways, Joseph weeps so loudly that he’s heard throughout Egypt.

I wonder if God works through Joseph's emotions to guide him. The anger and distrust he feels, do those feelings show Joseph he needs to engage with his brothers to see if they've changed, rather than just dismissing them? When he's overcome by affection on seeing Benjamin, is God at work to show him how much he misses his family? When he weeps so loudly in our story today, is God helping him see that he does want to reconcile with his brothers?

Maybe emotions can be messages from God. I've been thinking a lot about that since I learned that our emotions are messengers - messengers that can help us understand our lives and what we need to do. For instance, anger can help us see what we value, what we want to protect. Anxiety can show us we need to take action; or if the anxiety persists, that medical help is needed. Relief helps us to know we're safe. Emotions are sources of information, messages.

Interestingly, in scripture the word *angel* can also be translated messenger. Sometimes people talk about being visited by an emotion in the same way that scripture talks about people being visited by angels. I've been exploring the idea that God sends us messengers, angels, through our emotions. That's not to say that God makes us feel angry or jealous or anxious. Rather, God works these types of messages to communicate with us. And, like other ways God speaks today, our work is to honor these messages, reflect on them, interpret them, and discern how to respond.

Joseph does the hard work of discerning as the relationship with his brothers unfolds. It seems he lets himself feel all the anger, distrust, love, grief, longing, and then ponders what it all means. I wonder if tending to all these messages is what helps Joseph see God at work in all the ups and downs of his life. I wonder if this helps him to ultimately respond with love and forgiveness for his brothers.

Emotions seem to be a good guide for him. What might God be saying to you through your emotions? I encourage you to tend to your emotions with a helpful practice called RAIN. RAIN is an easy to remember acronym for the four steps of the practice:

R - Recognize the emotion;

A - Allow the emotion to be there, just as it is;

I - Investigate it with kindness, what message might it have for you;

N - Nurture yourself with self-compassion.

Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture - RAIN.

This can feel uncomfortable. Emotions can be intense, overwhelming even. You might want professional support. Yet we are never alone as we tend to our emotions.

God is always with us.

God is always with you.

God can work through the messages our emotions send.

Today God speaks to you in other ways as well - in word and song, in bread and wine, in gathered community - to assure you that in all things and through all things, you belong to God.

You, and all your emotions, are held in God.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.