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Genesis 45:1-15 / Psalm 133

CREATIVE CATASTROPHE

Mel spoke in her sermon last week about “the middle” of the Joseph story and she challenged us “to live in the middle” of our own stories without rushing to their conclusions. But eventually, every story comes to an end as does the story of Joseph and his brothers. They had sold him into slavery and are now reunited and reconciled in the land of Egypt, far away from home. However, the story only ends in part. As T.S. Eliot taught us in his *Four Quartets*, “In my beginning is my end ... and in my end is my beginning (*East Coker*).” So, where to end and where to begin?

When Joseph and his brothers finally meet, Joseph releases years of penned up emotions with overwhelming force: “He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.” His brothers are terrified and shoot looks at each other with dismay. Joseph responds, “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.” There is a lot of weeping and kissing, and more weeping, and then the story ends. Only to begin again ...

In the encounter with his brothers, Joseph lays out for them the task God has set before them. God was in this all along, as Mel pointed out last week. And now, through a veil of tears, jumbled emotions of guilt, relief, incredulousness and joy, God’s plan comes into sharper focus. Joseph was sent ahead of them into the land of Egypt “to preserve life [and] to preserve a remnant ... to keep alive many survivors,” because the years of famine are far from over. As a matter of fact, there is more of it to come.

This pronouncement gave them pause, as it gives us pause as well. The great reunification party of Joseph and his brothers is spoiled when he announces that the hardships are far from over. He ends with the ominous phrase “to preserve a remnant and to keep alive many survivors.” Which

means many will survive, but not all. At this point, the “end” of the story doesn’t look much better than the middle.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary defines “remnant” as “What is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe (vol. 5, 671).” It is important to note that while catastrophes in the Hebrew Bible are often interpreted as divine judgment for the people’s sins and disobedience, this is *not* the case in the Joseph story. The famine just is what it is, a natural phenomenon, and Joseph is not a particularly righteous guy who gets to save the day ... we may remember how he used to rub it in with his brothers that “daddy loves me more than he loves you.” Joseph is merely God’s spokes person to proclaim God’s purpose: “Your job going forward is to preserve life!”

Every healthcare worker today understands what that means and how high the costs are to do just that. Every teacher, every parent, every grocery store worker, every delivery person, every meat packing worker and strawberry picker, they all know what it means to preserve life and understand that the costs to do so may be very high indeed. This virus, which is our “famine” today is here to stay. It will not go away tomorrow but there is a good chance that it is going to become part of our lives for years to come. It is a natural phenomenon. It is not sent by God as divine judgment for our sins and our disobedience. It just is what it is, no matter what labels human beings are trying to attach to it.

The question which is so unsettling underneath all the hubbub and the hype is the one *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* raises: “What will be left of our community after it has undergone this catastrophe?” It is so unsettling because we do not know. It is unsettling because like Joseph and his brothers we may have to “relocate to the land of Egypt,” to foreign territory, in order to survive and thrive. Which means we may have to leave our old ways behind. What matters, according to the biblical text, is not the life we used to have in a land we used to know, engaging in ways we used to do things . What matters is to preserve life. And as the psalmist reminds us, we only get through this together: “How very good and pleasant it is when we live together in unity! ... For there the LORD ordained his blessing — life forevermore.”

I read an essay by Laura Hillenbrand a few weeks ago, entitled “I Was In Love With A Tree That Swallowed The Sky.” Having lived in Washington D.C., she bought a house in Oregon without ever having been there

because of a photograph she saw on the internet. It had a breathtaking mountain view and rivers, forests and hills to boot. Hillenbrand drove her RV across country and when she arrived was greeted by a gigantic Norway maple in full fall foliage in her backyard. “The tree was so in love with life that it swallowed the sky,” she writes. It became her sanctuary, her refuge. She would sit under the tree, embraced by its leaves, and read, meditate or take a nap. Life was good.

And then, one day, her neighbor talked to her. The tree had grown into his property and overshadowed his view of the mountains, rivers, forests and hills. They came to an agreement. Laura would have an arborist cut back the tree severely without felling it. Detailing the violence the saw inflicted upon her beloved tree is something else to read. When all was said and done, the majestic Norway maple was a ruin of its former glorious self.

But Hillenbrand also noticed something which had escaped her before. There was a small dogwood, leaning against the maple. It was scraggly with only a few green leaves on it. The maple had starved it as it lived in its shadow. But now the little dogwood thrived. She writes: “The maple was not gone, but reimagined, and with it, the dogwood beneath, and the whole world around them. I gazed at all this beauty, feeling my grief arrive at gratitude.”

And then, a bird came. A scrub jay. In the evening light, she perched on the pruned maple, fluffed her feathers and watched the sunset. The next day, the bird came back at the same time. And the next day, she brought a baby with her.

And so I wonder: What does the current catastrophe hold for us and which creative potential might we unfold as we are called by God to live in a foreign land in order to preserve life? I wonder what we may have to cut back now in order for a different life to emerge which we cannot yet see. I wonder what kind of bird will perch in the ruins of our former life, which song she will sing, and how many babies she will bring with her.

In the words of Laura Hillenbrand, “After these days of rending, of loss, of violence, of grief, of convulsant change, may we find a beautiful, grateful reimagining. May we land as the blue bird does, resting and peaceful.”

May it be so. Amen.