

Between the Hint of the Dream and the Doxology of the Disclosure

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Genesis 45:3-15 ~ Luke 6:27-38 ~ February 20, 2022

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” says our Declaration of Independence. Yet, many truths and social structures we once took for granted and assumed to be stable are now in question. The whole world feels more precarious than many of us once imagined as we experience a collective awakening and awareness of the delicate balance of life – prompted by the changing climate, waves of pandemic, flagging commitment to the covenant of democracy, tribal polarization, and today the imminent threat of war.

That’s a lot to navigate. It wears on our heart, soul, psyche, body, and mind.

On a day to day basis, it means that when you and I apply familiar levers of agency, they don’t produce the outcomes we once thought self-evident and predictable. We’re not quite sure what is the right next step.

Which means that this is probably a pretty good time to ask, “I wonder what God is up to? I wonder what God is doing?” Not that I am proposing that God is the master-mind and manipulator of worldly events. No; not at all. Rather, where in the midst of all *this*, can we see God’s hand? God’s love? How might we notice, come alongside, and become part of whatever it is God is desiring, whatever God is up to?”

What does this look like? For starters, it looks like a shift in posture, a shift in how you and I might move through our day. The shift comes first with simply asking the question, I wonder what God is up to? Because the question in itself loosens, unmasking my illusions of mastery and control, prompts me to pause and wonder before I assume my agency, my action is required here. Maybe it’s not about me. And to pay attention. God, what are you up to? Did you prompt that person to say the very thing I needed – but did not know I needed – to hear? Did you place me in the middle of this conversation so that I would have to dig deep to find the courage to speak a word of your love?

You know what God’s love looks like, feels like. When she forgives you for that wrong you committed, festering as shame, and the grace washes over you, easing your tightened muscles. When the adrenalin courses through you; you know you cannot leave this derogatory slur unaddressed. When your friend is by your side at your hour of need; it is only later that you realize he abandoned all his plans for the day to be there for you. These are the movements of God.

Paying attention to what God is doing is not a matter of noticing once, and getting our marching orders. It’s a matter of living each day with this intentional posture of open receptivity. We don’t need to wait for the world to be tearing at the seams. For this, in a nutshell, is the life of prayer. Writes Carmelite nun, Ruth Burrows ([Essence of Prayer](#)), “Almost always when we talk about prayer we are thinking of something *we* do and, from that standpoint, questions, problems, confusion, discouragement, illusions multiply. For me, it is important to correct this view. Prayer is essentially what *God* does, how God addresses us, looks at us. It is not primarily something we are doing to God, something we are giving to God but what God is doing for us. And what God is doing for us is giving the divine Self in love” through our day to day interactions.

We just heard read the end of the story about Joseph. The story began with a dream and ends with Joseph’s affirmation that it was in God’s hands all along. This is a fabulous tale with family tension, jealousy, court intrigue, cloaked scoundrels, seduction, famine, salvation – covers

the whole spread. The tension is set from the start – because Joseph is one of twelve brothers, and he’s his father’s favorite – so favored that his father gives him a beautiful robe. One day as a boy, Joseph has a dream and, “when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more.” A caravan came along. The brothers sold Joseph off as a slave. They took his coat, tore it, spilled blood on it, and told their father poor Joseph had been eaten by a lion.

Joseph’s travels lead him to prison. But his dreams, and his gift of interpreting dreams gets him noticed – first by the captain’s beautiful wife, and finally by Pharaoh himself. Joseph rises through the ranks, and Pharaoh appoints him to be his right hand man. Dreams warn of impending feast and famine, but thanks to Joseph, grain is stored up, the famine averted, the people not only of Egypt but all the surrounding territories are saved. Even his own brothers who have come seeking food – not imagining that their brother Joseph is even alive, nevermind that it is he – this powerful dignitary – who stands before them.

“I am your brother Joseph,” says he. But they are blinded by shame, and by fear that he will take vengeance. But Joseph says, “do not be distressed because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.” Three times, he says this. “It was not you who sent me but God.” Finally he is reunited with his long-grieving father. It’s fabulous. Go read it: Genesis chapters 37-50.

Much as it’s only in the last chapter of a murder mystery that the gifted author ties up all the story lines and reveals that it was the professor all along, so our narrator now helps us see – after years of hardship, deceit, victory, and intrigue – that God was present in every chapter, every interaction, in the malice just as much as the grace.

While the text is too ancient for us to know for sure when it was written or by whom, scholar Walter Brueggemann observes, “the narrative appears to belong to a generation of believers in a cultural climate where old modes of faith were embarrassing. The old idiom of faith had become unconvincing.” Hmm... That sounds familiar. Says he, “The narrative... is a sophisticated literary response to a cultural, theological crisis.” It has “a singular intention: It urges that in the contingencies of history, the purposes of God are at work in hidden and unnoticed ways. But the ways of God are nonetheless reliable and will come to fruition.” Says he, “the listening community is invited to live bracketed between the hint of the dream and the doxology of the disclosure.” It is a call to us “to let the dream be at work, even when its outcome is less than clear.”

Written forty years ago, Brueggemann ([Genesis: Interpretation](#)) describes a context with uncanny parallel to our own time; faith is embarrassing, unconvincing. Yet we’re being tossed about by forces as inexorable as the waves of the sea. How might this story be available for us? Do we not hunger unwittingly for a reminder that despite today’s headlines, God is in the midst of us?

While this narrative lends itself to future articulations of God’s providence and even predestination, it also opens the way to understandings of mutuality and intersectionality. Bracketed as we are between the hint of the dream and the doxology of the disclosure, might we enter this day with a posture of inquiry and wonder, seeking indications of the Spirit? How is this emergent moment imbued with holiness?

Just one scenario: For many of us, the determination to create affordable housing in this city and in this ward of the city, has led us to new understanding of the impulses of the past. Beneath the relative calm and bucolic beauty of these tree-lined streets of Tenleytown and Friendship Heights, lies a rich story with all the workings of human struggle, ambition, greed,

racism, pathos, and cruelty, interwoven with acts of creativity, grace, dignity, and many simply trying to get from one day to the next. As we engage in our time with our own hopes and fears, competing claims of safety, repair, and God's justice, we look for signs that the author of our salvation is bending the narrative toward love.

Paying attention to what God is doing does not mean abdicating responsibility. The story needs actors, the actors need to act – from love, with love, toward love. Jesus exhorts us to love your enemies, turn the other cheek, give both your coat and your shirt, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It seems a big ask, overwhelming in magnitude. But if I've stepped into this moment first wondering how God is among us, trusting that God is the first and primary agent, the response and engagement Jesus seeks flows naturally. God has brought us to this moment. How now, will we respond?

The psalmist says, "Put your trust in God, and do good." Put your trust in God. Sounds so naïve as to be downright foolish. Unless of course you consider how foolish it would be to not put your trust in God. Believe the dream. We'll sing praise to God by and by. Amen.