

Pastoral Prayer

Loving God, like Joseph, we don't always understand why things happen the way they do; why our plans and dreams fail, and we find ourselves facing challenge after challenge, and disappointment after disappointment. Yet, like Joseph, we also believe that You are at work in our lives, and that You have a larger plan and purpose for each one of us.

Give us faith to trust in You no matter what challenges we face. Give us courage to place our dreams and ambitions in Your hands, and then follow where You lead without hesitation, confident that Your loving presence goes with us.

As we surrender our lives to you, continue to shape us into people of prayer.

With confidence that you love to hear us, your children, pray we come bringing our prayers for the world You love.

We pray for those who find themselves surrounded by high winds and stormy seas; those who feel overwhelmed by events and circumstances—the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, serious accident or illness, chronic pain, depression, or divorce—and who don't know where to turn.

We pray for those who, like Joseph, find themselves deeply wounded by people they love— people they thought they knew and trusted— and who are struggling to know how to respond.

We pray for those who, are experiencing a crisis of faith; who long to wholeheartedly trust in God but are held back by questions and doubts.

We pray for those who, have fallen into the pit of despair; who have begun to doubt God's presence and power; or question God's call in their lives.

We pray for those who have had their hopes and dreams crushed; those whose lives have suddenly taken a different turn, and who now wonder what lies ahead for them.

Loving God, it is not Your will that any should suffer. We offer our prayers for all those who hunger and thirst, those who live in the midst of violence or poverty, and those who feel abandoned or ignored by the world around them.

Through the life-giving power of Your Holy Spirit, make Your sustaining presence known to all that we might know and live Your love.

In the name Jesus Christ, our Savior, we pray together the prayer that he taught...

Sermon-Genesis 50:15-21

¹⁵ Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they approached ^[a] Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and

the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept, ^[b] fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

I have shared that I tend to be a type A planner who likes things neat and orderly. That is certainly true of little things like my spice rack organization, and it is definitely true of big things like my plan for life. My life plan was to get married, have kids, lead congregations, and be active in the denomination. My plan preferred that I would be a famous author or preacher or officer of the church who was asked to fly around the world for speaking engagement. The plan included having it all...being fully present to my family while simultaneously working around the clock and I went to great lengths to make that appear to be my reality.

My life plan was neat and orderly much like this skein of yarn. And slowly but surely my neat little skein was pulled apart. Raising kids was way more rewarding and way more difficult than I had predicted. I loved pastoral ministry but really struggled when there was conflict and making difficult decisions around the building and finances. While there was a time I was considered a “rising star” in the denomination, it vanished overnight with a change of leadership. And then, on May 1, 2007, I got up as I usually did and ran out the door to attend an ecumenical clergy breakfast. After the breakfast I stopped at the hospital to visit a church member and arrived at my office mid-morning at which time I got settled, took a deep breath, and turned my phone. As my phone came to life, I realized I had a number of missed calls and voicemails all of which were from my dad. I listened to the message and heard my dad’s voice of desperation telling me that my sister, who was 13 at the time, had a severe asthma attack, that they were at the hospital, and that it was not looking good. I freely admit most of the rest of the day was a blur. I remember doubling over in pain, I remember running through the airport to get an emergency flight, I remember sitting on the plane to Michigan praying over and over “God, I believe you are good, please God, let my sister live.” And I remember, when the plane landed, turning my phone on once

more to hear a message from my devastated dad telling me to go to the house and not the hospital because my sister, Cari, didn't make it.

In that moment my theology degree, my years pastoring people through crisis, none of it mattered. The neat skein of yarn of my life was a mess. I was so grief stricken and angry, I simply could not believe that God was in fact good and certainly I could not believe that God was good ALL the time.

I suspect as I share this that I am not alone. I suspect that we have all had those moments when we have faced our dying dreams, wondered if we had gone down the wrong path, questioned the unraveling of our lives. Maybe, like me, you are the person pleaser and performer, and now all of that perfection and rule following is suffocating. Or maybe you work hard to keep people at a safe distance and now the distance has turned into intolerable loneliness.

In the short few weeks that Pastor Gina and I have been here we have been blessed to start hearing your stories and I am grateful for your willingness to accept us as your pastor and be open and vulnerable with us. We have heard stories of how hard the pandemic has been, how painful the changes within the church have been, stories of grief over spouses, parents, siblings, friends, and even children. We have heard stories of broken promises, dreams that never materialized, and jobs that are anything other than life giving. While I am still

learning who you are and what your stories entail, I am reminded once more that while we easily say and sing about God's goodness, living that through difficult moments is something else entirely.

This morning we heard the conclusion of Joseph's story in Genesis 50. For those of you who are not familiar with Joseph and his famously colorful coat, I am going to try and sum up his journey in under a minute. Joseph was his dad's favorite and so he got special treatment. This made all 11 of his brothers jealous to the point that they beat him up and threw him into a pit. From the pit he was sold into slavery. As a slave he was taken to Potiphar's house which is where Potiphar's wife took a very special, specific liking, if you get my drift, to Joseph. When Joseph was not willing to go along with the fantasies of Potiphar's wife, she accused him of being inappropriate with her. At which point he was falsely imprisoned. In jail, Joseph translated the dreams of two fellow cell mates with the understanding that when they were freed, they would help free Joseph. Oops, when they were freed, they forgot about Joseph and he sat there in jail longer. Eventually, Joseph was called upon to interpret the dreams of the Pharaoh and he was able to save all of Egypt in the time of a serious famine and drought. At the very end of the story, Joseph's brothers are so hungry they unknowingly beg Joseph for food. When they

discover that it is their long-lost brother Joseph meets them with forgiveness and this powerful word “You intended evil, but God intended it for good”.

When I read and reread Joseph’s story I can’t help but acknowledge that the skein of Joseph’s life was frequently unraveled as well. Pit. Slavery. Prison. More prison.

During a renewal leave in January of 2019, I was able to spend hours and hours and hours and hours praying, wondering what happened to my neat skein of yarn. Had it really gone as wrong as it felt or was my life more put together than my obsessive-compulsive brain could realize?

And then during this renewal leave, I read Jen Hatmaker’s book *Of Mess and Moxie* who writes:

“In Genesis 50, Joseph told his brothers after they sold him into slavery in a fit of jealous rage: You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...” This is important: Meant is the Hebrew word for wove. In other words, you wove evil but God rewove it together for good. After his brothers went Tasmanian devil on him and essentially tried to bury him in the backyard Joseph deposited all the tattered shreds of his life into the careful hands of God, who just picked up the threads of hate and deceit and abandonment and injustice and refashioned them into a truly beautiful story.

God used all the same threads. He didn't create a replica. God didn't start from scratch. He didn't throw the destroyed original in the trash and begin again with all new material. God rewove what was torn into a stronger version than the first. God will reweave the threads in time-the approximate gap between Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery and him standing before them as the second-highest leader in the country: twenty-two years."

And just like that, with a terrible lump in my throat and this wet stinging in my eyes, I looked at what I had been crocheting, my blanket. And God powerfully reminded me, God has given me the freedom to make a choice. I could either stay down and live like my entire life will remain this mess of unraveling. I could become bitter or vengeful. I could give up on becoming who God created me to be. Or I could live my life knowing that God is reweaving me into something beautiful. I could live a life believing that from the pit to my broken marriage, from Potiphar's house to my failed dreams, from the jail cell to the grief-stricken plane ride to Michigan, that God is weaving all things for good.

Joseph's story is a story of a leader who dared to be resilient through the muckiness of life and to profess through it all that God was working all things for good. It might not happen overnight. There might be nights in the pit but there is joy and redemption that comes with the morning! Joseph dared to believe the

good, to BE the good. Joseph led with forgiveness, mercy, and the belief that God would never forsake or abandon him.

Today, I am still navigating this unraveled mess and discovering me. The real me.

The messy, imperfect, brave, scared, creative, loving, compassionate,

wholehearted me. This morning I am grateful that as I co-create this beautiful life

with God that I get to do it alongside each and every one of you as you co-create

your beautiful lives with God. I believe that every time we come together as the

body of Christ, that God weaves in another stitch of grace and love and beauty

and joy and hope in our lives. And so, my siblings in Christ whether your skein is

neat and tidy and orderly, or if your skein of life is a hot mess, dare greatly like

Joseph. Choose to be resilient and trusting in God's goodness, even from the pit.

Choose to lead with forgiveness and grace, and know that through it all God is

weaving your life for good because God is good...all the time. And all the

time....God is good. May it be so. Amen.