

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, AUGUST 30, 2020

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 46)*

One: "God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble."

All: "So we will not be afraid, even if the earth is shaken and mountains
fall into the ocean depths..."

One: "...Even if the seas roar and rage, and the hills are shaken by the violence."

All: "The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge."

***OPENING HYMN** "If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee" GtG 816

1. **If thou but trust in God to guide thee,
with hopeful heart through all thy ways,
God will give strength, whate'er betide thee,
to bear thee through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
builds on the rock that nought can move.**

2. **Only be still, and wait God's leisure
in cheerful hope, with heart content
to take whate'er thy Keeper's pleasure
and all-discerning love hath sent.
No doubt our inmost wants are clear
to One who holds us always dear.**

3. **Sing, pray, and swerve not from God's ways,
but do thine own part faithfully.
Trust the rich promises of grace;
so shall they be fulfilled in thee.
God never yet forsook at need
the soul secured by trust indeed.**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Dear God, you say you will lead, but we do not follow. You say you will provide, but we'd prefer to fend for ourselves. You say you forgive, but we feel the need to earn your love instead. Forgive us our foolishness, gracious God. Help us to take you at your word, trust your love, and rely upon your strength, in the manner of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON** (from I John 4)

One: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven."
All: **"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent the only Son into the world so that we might live through him."**
One: So rejoice and be glad and believe in the good news!
All: **For in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, we are loved, we are given new life. Amen! Alleluia!**

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Genesis 45:1-15

GENESIS 45:1-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God, who has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father

and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.' ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “In the Darkness Offstage” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Ever feel like you walked in on the middle of a story?
Imagine a person on stage, receiving lines one scene at a time, not knowing what's coming next, not knowing what's in the darkness offstage.

Like Joseph must have felt.

Here was Joseph: loved by his father, even favored by his father. Envied by his brothers, who eventually turned on him. They throw him into a pit out in the fields.

What's to happen next? He does not know.

A caravan of traders comes by, and Joseph is eventually sold into slavery in Egypt. He winds up in the house of Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard. Joseph does good work there, and Potiphar takes notice. So, too, does Potiphar's wife. She tries to make a move on Joseph, which he refuses. So then she turns on him, lies about him, and Joseph winds up in prison.

What's to happen? What's going on? What's next?

Have we felt that way before? When you've just been informed that the diagnosis is aggressive cancer. When the coronavirus numbers go up, then down, then... and who knows what will happen next. When the company informs you that, because business is down, you've lost your job. When you come back to your house to discover that the winds and waves have washed it all away. When you receive the phone call that your child was just killed in an accident.

What's to happen?

What's going on?

What's next?

Now what?

William Shakespeare once wrote,

**All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:**
("As You Like It" II, vii, 139)

We are like that person on stage. Being on stage, and not knowing what's happening off stage. Having no clue what's going to happen next, except for what's revealed on stage. We're given a script, one day at a time.

We'd like to know the whole script -- but we don't. We'd like to know what's going on in the darkness offstage -- but we don't. Shucks! We'd even like to be the director and be in control -- but we're most definitely not.

We don't know.

The world -- life -- can be a scary place. We'd like to know everything before we make a decision. And we'd like to have it all under control before we let our children go out into the world. And we'd like to be able to protect ourselves and those we love, and have some sort of guarantee about that.

But we can't.

We are onstage, saying our lines, fulfilling our roles, doing our part.

And though what is offstage may concern us, it is not our concern. It is not our responsibility.

We need to learn to accept the fact that there's a lot about life, even my own life, that I don't know.

-that which is beyond our sight, that which is beyond the limits of our control.

-that which is beyond our ability to understand or know, or simply that of which we are unaware due to time, place, or distance.

-that which is in the future, which we cannot discern or anticipate, which we cannot see is coming.

-that which is hidden from us, even that which is in the human heart, including sometimes our own.

We need to learn to accept the fact that there's a lot about life, even my own life, that I don't know.

And in the midst of that, we need to work to trust God. Trust that God knows what God is doing, even though I may not. Trust that God will provide for me and care for me, guide me and love me, even though that does not mean life on "easy street," nor does it mean a life free from difficulty, hardship, or tragedy.

To do that -- to trust God through the difficulty, the hardship, the tragedy, the not-knowing -- is not easy.

And I wish I had a stirring story to tell. But I don't.

Except perhaps our own, and Joseph's.

Remember, Joseph was in prison where we left off. But the story does not end there. In prison, Joseph interprets dreams of his fellow prisoners. Eventually, he will interpret the dreams of Pharaoh: dreams about 7 years of good crops followed by 7 years of famine. Joseph is put in charge of the project to store surplus grain, and then distribute it during the famine. It is during

this time that his brothers come, looking for food. And Joseph realizes something: he sees a truth about his life that he did not see before. And he says to his brothers,

“And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God....”

Later on in the story, he would also say,

“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as God is doing today.” (Genesis 50:20)

You know, that’s an impressive statement to make. And maybe Joseph could not have said it earlier in the story. But he can now.

Curious thing about God’s providence, as it is called: God’s providing, God’s guidance, God’s work in our lives.

As someone has noted,

God's providence...can be trusted for the future, but only traced in the past.

(Alan P.F. Sell, theological secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches; found in 4/28/86 issue of The Presbyterian Outlook)

One summer while I was in seminary, I was working for a church at the same time I was experiencing a deep personal struggle. The pastor I was working with recognized it, and he (slyly) invited a friend over: an older woman, a wise woman.

As we talked, she asked, “Bill, can you look back on your life and see God’s hand at work.” I said, “Yes.” Then she asked this: “Then, can you believe that God will work this out, too?”

We look back and see how God has worked through our own "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day" -- our hard times -- in our life to bring grace and peace, growth and love, healing and understanding, and life. God at work, guiding and providing, sometimes guiding us into and through the valley of the shadow of death ... for a purpose.

And then we seek to trust in that providence, that guidance, that divine behind-the-scenes working.

This is not to say that every, or even most, bad things that happen in our life are God's doing -- No! But God can work even through the bad things, and God sometimes might even nudge us into the hard times ... for a purpose.

So Paul affirms,

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God. (Romans 8:28)

Or another way to translate it:

God makes all things work together for good.

Or:

in all things God works for good.

In all things, God is at work: in you, in me; for you, for me; for the world.

Not that we sit back and let God do it all.

Remember, Joseph was faithful, honorable, and sought to do what was right: in Potiphar's household, even in prison.

But even then, as we seek to be faithful and do what right, and it doesn't appear to be doing any good, we seek to trust that God is working.

So we sang earlier this morning,

**If thou but trust in God to guide thee,
With hopeful heart through all thy ways,
God will give strength, whate'er betide thee,
To bear thee through the evil days.**

...

**God never yet forsook at need
The soul secured by trust indeed.**

("If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee" - words by Georg Neumark, 1657; translated by Catherine Winkworth, 1855, 1863; alt. 1987)

And God can be trusted, even as God is working "behind the scenes."

A young girl whose name may never be known died in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. But her faith will never be forgotten. On the wall of the cell she occupied until her death, an Allied soldier found these words she had written:

**I believe in the sun
Even when it is not shining;
I believe in love
Even when feeling it not.
I believe in God,
Even when God is silent.**

(Arthur Caliendo, in Make Your Life Count)

To trust in God's presence, God's providence,

...takes a lot of courage

**To put things in God's hands,
To give ourselves completely --
Our lives, our hopes, our plans,
To follow where God leads us
And make God's will our own.**

--it takes a lot of courage--

**But all it takes is foolishness
To go the way alone!**

(Author Unknown)

And, I don't know about you, but I'd just as soon not go it alone, even if it be with a 'silent' Partner.

None of this is meant to suggest that no matter how bad the situation, eventually "they live happily ever after" so "don't worry, be happy" and everything works out hunky dorry. Remember: the girl in the concentration camp did not survive that horror.

Yes, sometimes things work out splendidly, just as we had hoped. And sometimes the ending is even a magnificent resurrection. But remember even the first was only preceded by an agonizing crucifixion.

This is no "easy street" we're talking about, but the tough, difficult, sometimes dismaying road of faithfulness and obedience, and trust in the trustworthiness of God.

-A road that took Abraham away from the only home he ever knew.

-A road that, at one point, seemingly meant the death of his beloved son, Isaac.

-A road that meant animosity between the brothers Esau and Jacob, and Esau's death-threats directed at Jacob.

-A road that was treacherous and frightening and wounding for Jacob.

-A road that stole Joseph from his family and sold him into servitude, prison, and abandonment.

And a road that led the 11 disciples to a dark, dark Saturday. 'How could God bring good out of the death of their beloved Jesus?' they must have wondered.

For, you see, Jesus is the paradigm, the pattern, the model for taking this road, and claiming it, and embracing it.

"*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mark 15:34) he cried from the cross -- perhaps acknowledging the fear we experience of the darkness offstage, the agony of the unknown.

But also: "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (Luke 23:46) -- trust in the 'silent partner' in the darkness offstage.

No, this trusting is not easy.

But that's precisely why this story of Joseph's (and others) is so important.

For as we remember and recall how God has seen us, and others, through in the past, we are encouraged and strengthened to trust God in the present, even though we don't see and can't perceive what is happening offstage or what will come in the next scene or the next act or even the next drama that comes after our own curtain call.

We tell the stories -- Joseph's, Jesus's, our own, and others -- and each one is a different telling of the same story: a biography of God's providence, a reminder of God's providing, the story of God's trustworthiness; and in the end, the encouragement for us to trust God in our own story on the stage of our life, today and tomorrow and forever.

The director of this play, of this stage, IS trustworthy (truly). And we can entrust ourselves and our lives in the Director's hands.

Just ask some of the other players who have been on this very stage, and they'll tell you the same thing.

In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac ... and Joseph, believe it, and live it.
Amen.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.
With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Lord, help us.
People: We trust in you.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Traditional)*

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.
Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Gracious Lord,
you have given us more mercy than we could imagine
and more blessings than we deserve.
Receive now these gifts
as tokens of our gratitude to you,
that your mercy may be multiplied
and your blessings abound
to embrace all those in need. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Be Still, My Soul” GtG 819

**1. Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide,
who through all changes faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.**

**2. Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
to guide the future surely as the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.**

**3. Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be forever with the Lord;
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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