

Sunday, February 20, 2022

Sermon: "The Ups and Downs of Life"

Genesis 41:1 – 15

The master of English literature, William Shakespeare said, "Life is a stage." Others have said, "Life is a war." Or "Life is a dance." If Joseph had contributed to this attempt at a universal metaphorical construct, I bet he would have said, "Life is a series of ups and downs." And a lot of us would understand and agree.

How many times have you been up and down economically? In your check book balance? In your stock portfolio? Research indicates that 30% of Americans live in precarity – a way of saying from paycheck to paycheck or from government subsidy to government subsidy. Precarity is borrowed from economics to describe the human condition.

From the right and the left, there is a growing sense that democracy is in peril – that it has become a precarious enterprise because so many have given up trying to deliberate with the other side.

Along with this sense of cultural precarity, decades of climate and geological research have coalesced in consensus about a different type of precarity that threatens not just publics, but humanity as a species: the Anthropocene. "In the Anthropocene," note G. Mitchell Reyes and Kundai Chirindo, "the precarity that had been the nearly exclusive preserve of people occupying the bottommost rungs of human society is becoming generalized to most if not all humans—though not in equal measure."<sup>13</sup> The challenge of the Anthropocene is that it signifies precarity at the biological or species scale. It indexes the fact that we (and our various publics) "have now ourselves become a geological agent disturbing [the] parametric conditions needed for our own

existence."<sup>14</sup> In other words, the Anthropocene renders *all* publics precarious. Precarity has become universal.

Everything is on the line. All is at stake. I put my trust in the reality that democracy suffers through ups and downs and that we will not only survive but thrive. I believe that we will thrive in spite of the ups and downs. Aside from the precarity of our planet, our human species, our democracy, I want to know whether or not your faith lives in precarity. How are things with your faith? And for that we need help from Scripture. I think our lives compare somewhat to that of Joseph. I invite you to take the ride on the rollercoaster life of Joseph as told in Genesis 39 – 50. What we read today is the conclusion. Let's go back to the beginning. Let's look at the life of Joseph not as coincidence, being in the right place or the wrong place, happenstance, or luck. Let's look at the life of Joseph as a working out of the purposes of God in unexpected ways. Joseph is often knocked down, but never knocked out. I think some people walk away from faith because they think it is going to protect him, help them prosper, and keep them from harm. Then when that doesn't work out, they throw away their faith. They didn't understand that faith is not magic. God offers maximum support, minimum protection.

Joseph's life begins as one big UP. He was daddy's favorite. Some of you know that feeling. You know what it's like for your siblings to be jealous of you. But did you rub it in their noses like Joseph did? Joseph see pranced around in the coat of many colors. The privileged often make it clear that they are the privileged – painfully so for the non-privileged and gleefully so for the privileged.

Now if I had an entire week, I would preach through all the ups and downs of Joseph's life because there's so much in each of the times that he rises and falls, but I only have the limits of this one sermon to help us grasp this orientational metaphor: Up and Down.

UP: Joseph and the coat of many colors

DOWN: His brothers hated him and threw him DOWN in a pit.

UP: They drew him UP out of the pit and sold him into slavery.

DOWN: Taken down to Egypt. Nothing ever good in the Bible about Egypt. Even Jesus would go there as a baby to escape Herod.

UP: Potiphar saw Joseph's potential and made him the head of his household.

DOWN: Potiphar's wife "hit" on Joseph and he refused her, but she told a lie and Potiphar had Joseph thrown down in prison.

UP: Joseph made friends in prison. The baker and the butler of Pharaoh. He interpreted dreams. The butler was hung by Pharaoh, but the butler was restored to his position.

DOWN: Joseph asked the butler to remember him to Pharaoh and say a good word for him when he was restored. But the butler forgot Joseph. And said nothing. Politics huh? Two more years in jail.

UP: Joseph gets out of prison and interprets Pharaoh's dream: Fat cows and skinny cows. Pharaoh promotes him from prisoner to number 2 in the kingdom. He gives him an Egyptian wife and an Egyptian name. He arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck. <sup>43</sup> He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, "Bow the knee!"<sup>[b]</sup> Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. <sup>44</sup> Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." <sup>45</sup> Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt. Now, this is as UP as it gets for a country boy.

Then, Joseph's brothers show up. They don't recognize him. He's been down south so long that he has a southern accent. He's talking like an Egyptian, walking like an Egyptian, acting like an Egyptian. Joseph did recognize his brothers. It's called residual resentment. We understand, don't we? But something happened with Joseph while he was getting even with his brother, and that something is in our reading of Genesis 45.

Now, I want to try to teach you something. This may be a presumptuous thing on my part, but I believe that some of life's lessons, which we already know, need to be repeated. So in the language of the South, "I fixing to teach you something." Are you ready for a lesson? Sometimes faith needs a deeply moving spiritual experience – something that puts us in a state of revival, renewal and transformation.

We are aware that the Scripture says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." We know this but we are not reading the whole lesson. There's a part there that calls on us to do something: "who are called according to his purpose." My faith calls me, yes, to hope and to action. It speaks to me like this: If tragedy strikes, make it pay dearly with something that is a greater good than the evil which has been done. My faith tells me: upstage death and destruction by amazing grace.

There are moments when we forget who we are: "I am Joseph." He's not speaking Egyptian now. A deeply moving religious experience comes from remembering who we are. There are moments when we forget who our people are. When we identify with all God's people, our faith is revived. "I am Joseph, your brother." And then we need a cause greater than ourselves to give our lives to. I'm saying this is the time for all God's people to have deeply moving religious experiences. All the ups and downs of life come to fruition in this one powerful statement: "I am Joseph, your brother." And he's speaking Hebrew now. He's

talking with the tongue of his family, the tongue of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Oh the mighty power of this admission.

Joseph wants nothing else to do with the division of "us" vs. "them." He wants to stand in solidarity with his brothers.

In the face of defeat, agony, frustration, loss, our faith calls us to stand up! Our faith gets called into action when we are down. The ups of life don't require a lot of faith. It doesn't take a lot of faith to come to church – endurance maybe when the preacher drones on and on, but when the sailing is smooth and life is good, faith is on cruise control.

So, live with the down periods of your life. Down is not our default position. Complain because that can be good therapy. Bemoan your circumstances. Go to despair and down all the dead ends. Resignation. Despair. Anger. "Dump the mud" – all of it. The lingering residual resentments pour them out on the ground. Then open your hands in gratitude that you are alive and still capable of working with God. "And then, set to work, with God, and do not rest until unnumbered blessings break out in a tide wave of righteous deeds. Or until the earth be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea."

Dr. Gardner Taylor, my all-time favorite preacher from Brooklyn by way of Baton Rouge, calls this story the providence of God. It means God is working behind the scenes, providing us opportunities to say "yes" to the divine purposes of peace and praise. The Methodists call this "prevenient grace." The more we say "yes" to God, the easier it becomes to say "yes" to God.

In all our ups and downs, God is with us on the roller coaster. God is with us in all our circumstances, ambiguities, doubts, and contingencies. God is with us in the darkness. God is with us when we are afraid, and most of all God is with us when we are down.

The writer of Hebrews puts it just right in my view: "Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed."

And Paul adds one more thought that we can't afford to lose in the language of faith: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen