

**Joe:** Our reading this morning comes from Genesis 50, the conclusion of the story of Joseph and his brothers that began way back in Genesis 38.

**Savannah:** As you may remember, Joseph was the youngest of Jacob's sons by his mother, Rachel, who was Jacob's favorite wife. Therefore, Joseph was the favored son, pampered by his father, and given a long cloak with flowing sleeves as a symbol of his favored status. Joseph was a dreamer, and he shared his dreams with his family, dreams about all of them bowing down to him. That went over like a coughing fit in a restaurant in the midst of a global pandemic. His brothers plotted to kill him, but decided selling him into slavery was a better option, because they could pocket the cash. They told their father Jacob that Joseph had been killed, which broke Jacob's heart.

**Ben:** An Egyptian official named Potiphar bought Joseph and saw that he was good with managing things so he made him overseer of his household. Potiphar's wife saw that Joseph was very good looking and she had other things in mind. When Joseph rebuffed her advances she made false accusations against him to Potiphar who had Joseph thrown in jail.

**Millie:** There Joseph met two servants of Pharaoh, his cup bearer and his baker who had gotten on Pharaoh's bad side and landed in jail too. They had some dreams that they wondered about and Joseph interpreted those dreams for them. His interpretations of their dreams came to fruition, which was great for the cup bearer, but not so great for the baker, but that's another story.

**Michelle:** The cup bearer was restored to his job with Pharaoh. One day Pharaoh shared with his courtiers that he was having some troubling dreams, about fat cows and skinny cows and plump ears of grain and withered ears of grain, and no one could tell him what the dreams meant. The cup bearer remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh, "Hey, there's a guy in the joint named Joseph who can interpret dreams." So Pharaoh called for Joseph.

**Deborah:** Joseph told him the dreams were premonitions of seven years of plenty to be followed by seven years of famine. If only there was someone wise and discerning enough to supervise a storehouse project during the seven good years to provide for the famine that will follow them." And Pharaoh said, "How about you?" So he put Joseph over the whole project. Sure enough, everything Joseph predicted came to pass. When it was all said and done, Joseph was Pharaoh's right hand man.

**John:** Meanwhile, back in the Promised Land the famine was hitting Jacob and his family very hard. There was nothing to eat and Jacob learned there was food in Egypt. So he sent his sons down to Egypt to buy grain. Guess who was running the grain store? Joseph! He recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. So he messed with them. A lot. To make a long story short, when it was all said and done, Joseph's brothers were a quivering mess. Finally, Joseph revealed himself to them, crying so loudly, all the Egyptians could hear him. It was quite a site. In the end, they brought Jacob and all the family down to Egypt. And they lived happily ever after. Sort of.

**Joe:** Joseph's brothers were always a bit nervous that he was going to get revenge for what they did to him. When Jacob died, they were sure their reckoning had come. That's where we pick up today's reading. From Genesis 50:15-22.

## Genesis 50:15-22

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?’ <sup>16</sup>So they approached Joseph, saying, ‘Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup>“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. <sup>18</sup>Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, ‘We are here as your slaves.’ <sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.’ In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

22 So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s household; and Joseph lived for one hundred and ten years.

The past three weeks we have considered instances in Genesis when life as it had been known unraveled. In the flood, at Babel, and with Abraham and Sarah, it was God who set the unraveling in motion. In the Joseph narrative, it was human agency. Joseph’s brothers unraveled his life, not to mention his robe with long flowing sleeves when they sold him into slavery. Potiphar’s wife unraveled his life further when she had him thrown in prison in Egypt under false accusations. Joseph’s life unraveled due to things done to him by other people in his life. Yet when he looked back on all that, he could say to his brothers, “You intended to do harm to me, but God intended it for good.”

That's quite a theological statement to make. Was God behind Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph? Did God call forth the jealousy and hatred of his brothers in Genesis 37 when they say, "Here comes this dreamer...let us kill him and throw him in the pit"? Were those Midianite slave traders agents of the Almighty's will? That seems like a dangerous statement to me. Was God working the Master's wife's power play that landed Joseph in prison? Was all of this carefully orchestrated by God so that Joseph could come up with a food storage program during seven years of plenty that would make Pharaoh the wealthiest king on earth? Did God intend for all the people to give all their money and all their livestock and all their land and even themselves to Pharaoh for food? That's what happened in Genesis 47. Was the enslavement of Egypt part of God's intended plan? Was all that what God intended?

"You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good." On the surface, Joseph's words to his brothers seem profound, almost Presbyterian in their predestined perspective. But there's a whole lot of sin going on in the Joseph narrative. Is that part of God's intention? That's hard for me to believe. Yet by the end of the story, the family is together again, fed in the midst of a famine, reconciled with one another and at peace.

What does God intend in all this? What are God's intentions? Father Richard Rohr's devotionals in recent weeks offer wisdom in this regard. He describes "the universal pattern" of life. He writes, "To grow toward love,

union, salvation, or enlightenment, we must be moved from Order to Disorder and ultimately to Reorder." Within this universal pattern, we come to know God's intentions. Order provides us "the necessary security, predictability, impulse control, and ego structure that we need, before the chaos of real life shows up."<sup>1</sup> Ideally childhood is defined by this kind of order. It provides a sense of safety and security that gives us the confidence we need to face the real world when we grow up.

Joseph experienced that kind of order in his life growing up. Favored by his father growing up, loved by his mother, Rachel, who was Jacob's favorite wife, given all the good gifts of life, including that fancy coat of many colors. No wonder he was somewhat full of himself. In Joseph's orderly world, he was the cat's meow. If we're lucky, we know such structure in our lives that gives us the confidence we need to step out into the world.

Sooner or later, however, disorder comes. Describing disorder, Rohr writes, "If we are on any classic 'spiritual schedule,' some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter our lives that we simply cannot deal with using our present skill set, our acquired knowledge, or our strong willpower." He continues, "It will probably have to do with one of ... the Big Six: love, death, suffering, sexuality, infinity, and God. Spiritually speaking,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cac.org/the-universal-pattern-2020-08-09/>

we will be led to the edge of our own ... resources...This is the only way ...God... can get us to change, let go of our egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey...Unexpected weaknesses, failure, and humiliation force us to go where we never would otherwise. We must stumble and be brought to our knees by reality...We must actually be out of the driver's seat for a while, or we will never learn how to give up control to the Real Guide."<sup>2</sup>

Disorder came into Joseph's life when he was attacked by his brothers. That chaos unfolded even more when he was sold into slavery. Then wrongly accused by his master's wife, that disorder shattered his world even further when he landed in an Egyptian prison. Disorder came to his life, and reality surely brought him to his knees. Whether or not God orchestrated all that, who knows, but it's a reality we will all know at some point in life. Unraveled. It happens at some point on the journey of life to us all.

Yet disorder is never the end of the story. Disorder is part of the journey, but it is only part of the journey. It is not the end of God's intentions. God intends reorder, new order, new beginnings, new life. What we see in Genesis 50 is Joseph on the other side of disorder, in a place of

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, "Order, Disorder, Reorder: Part Two," at cac.org. Cited 8/17/2020. See: <https://cac.org/it-must-happen-to-us-2020-08-17/>

grace and reconciliation with his brothers, most fully living into the call of God in his life. This is what God intends.

In this season of disorder in our world, let us remember God's intentions. This pandemic has disordered life in so many ways. It has certainly brought us to our knees, booting us out of our respective driver's seats and leaving us feeling helpless and weak. While I don't believe for a moment that God intends pandemics, I do believe God can work in these days of disorder and chaos to guide us into deeper truths, deeper realities, a deeper relationship with the Real Guide. Which is to say, God intends a reorder for us in all this, new life on the other side of this.

As a nation, we are awakening to the realities of racial injustice that have created so much disorder for generations among African American communities and other communities of color. From slavery, to Jim Crow, to mass incarceration, from race covenants to redlining, and more injustices, public policies kept far too many people of color in the disorder and chaos of generational poverty. As many are awakening to these realities, it has created its own disorder. Where is God in all this? God intends reorder, new order. Austin Channing Brown writes, "Our only chance at dismantling racial injustice is being more curious about its origins than we are worried about our comfort. It's not a comfortable conversation for any of us."<sup>3</sup> The goal of

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<sup>3</sup> Rohr, "The Disorder of Dismantling Racism," August 18, 2020. Cited here: <https://cac.org/the-disorder-of-dismantling-racism-2020-08-18/>

that is not discomfort, but to move us toward a society of justice and equity and freedom for us all.

Life is a process of growth. We move from order to disorder to reorder, or in the words of the gospel, life, death, and resurrection. Through order, disorder and reorder, life, death and resurrection, God is with us. No matter what we intend, God intends justice and reconciliation and redemption and salvation. This is God's intention. That was true for Joseph. It's true for us all. As Paul said to the Romans, "We know that in all things God works together for good." Thanks be to God! Amen.