

SERMON: 2020...Hindsight
TEXT: Genesis 50:15-21

9-13-20

Ever since the beginning of this coronavirus pandemic, a colleague of mine has been signing her emails with a closing phrase, “All shall be well.” Most of the time - for me - it was an encouraging reminder. On occasion, though, if I received an email from her on a bad day, it was kind of annoying and not very convincing. “All shall be well.” Right. I’m glad now that I didn’t think to reply, “thanks, Pollyanna.”

“All shall be well,” is actually a shorter version of a rather famous quote from an ancient mystic known as Julian of Norwich. “All shall be well and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Julian lived in 14th century England as a Benedictine nun and an anchoress - a woman who set herself apart for God and lived isolated in a cell.

According to a book of *Devotional Classics* (ed. Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith), “she became seriously ill at the age of thirty and in the midst of her suffering prayed for a vision of Christ’s passion. Once in a time of prayer Julian heard the words, *I am the foundation of your praying* - words that greatly influenced her

spiritual life. She always pointed to the goodness and love of God, a light in a time of darkness for Julian, who lived in an age of social unrest and fear of the Black Plague. Joy is perhaps the keynote in her writings...[which] have been called *the most perfect fruit of later medieval mysticism in England.*”

Did you hear that? In a time of serious illness, social unrest, and a plague, Julian of Norwich wrote about **joy**. “All shall be well and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Regarding Joseph and his brothers in the scripture from Genesis, they had all had their own moments of suffering and struggle, to be sure. And we need to know more about those struggles in order to understand today’s passage better. I’ll try to make a long story short as we review.

You may be familiar with the story in a more contemporary setting, known as *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, a musical by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. I’ve never seen the show, but I understand it’s a comedy, which the original story most certainly is not.

Way back in Chapter 37 of Genesis, we read that Jacob “loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age.” This favoritism was blatant, as Jacob had even “made him a long robe with sleeves,” a symbol of love. Joseph’s brothers hated him because of it. Adding salt to their wound, Joseph shared with his brothers about a dream he had in which his brothers bowed down to him, and a subsequent dream in which even the sun, moon, and stars bowed down to him. Not long after this, the brothers found an opportunity for revenge. They tore the robe off Joseph and threw him into a pit, leaving him to die. But when they saw traders passing by, they instead sold Joseph as a slave. The brothers returned to their father with Joseph’s robe that they had dipped in goat’s blood, leading Jacob to believe that his son was dead.

Through all this, I don’t imagine that Joseph had any thoughts of “all is well.” With his brothers’ betrayal, taken away from the rest of his family, alone and working as a slave in a strange country, it’s more likely that he thought his life was over.

As his story continues, there are some additional hardships and misfortunes that Joseph experiences. Accused of adultery by his master’s wife, he is

imprisoned, but “because the Lord was with him,” and because of his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph rose to power in the land, becoming second only to Pharaoh himself. Years later, his brothers came to Egypt looking for help in a time of famine.

They don’t recognize him, but he knows them, and he does take advantage of the opportunity to exact revenge on them, placing conditions they must meet to earn his assistance. Finally, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and they fear even greater payback for the harm they did to him. They beg his forgiveness and offer to be his slaves. But Joseph replies, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...”

As the saying goes, *hindsight is 2020*. Looking back on all the heartache, the suffering, the years of separation from his family, Joseph is in tears, still grieving all that has transpired. But his tears are also full of gratitude for the reconciliation that is happening and for the good that God has accomplished in and through Joseph. Ultimately, all the bad led to something good.

I think many of us can relate to this idea. And I think it's important for us to take time to look back over our lives and recognize all the ways that God has redeemed and even transformed our struggles to bring us into a time of rejoicing and triumph. It's that realization that helps us to say, "that had to happen in order for this new reality to be born."

It makes me wonder what our hindsight - months or years from now - will reveal about this terrible year of 2020. This may be the only thing that we can all agree on these days. It has been a terrible, awful, painful, and stressful year, regardless of your age, race, social class, or location in the world. And as the months drag on, it becomes more and more difficult to proclaim with Julian of Norwich and my friend who quotes her, "All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."

Will it? And if so, when? I just heard on the news that Dr. Fauci is warning, even when we have a vaccine, the virus won't be eradicated overnight. He's cautioning that we will be well into 2021 - if not into 2022 - before we can begin to feel safe again.

Fast forward to... let's say 2025, what will we have learned? What will be among the good things that we can say resulted from these bad times? Will we be able to look back at this year and proclaim that God transformed the evil into something good? That God brought light to the darkness? That God resurrected so much death into new life?

I saw something on Facebook this week that caught my eye. *I Miss 9/12* was the heading. "I would never want another 9/11, but I miss the America of 9/12. Stores ran out of flags to sell because they were being flown everywhere. People were Americans before they were upper or lower class, Jewish or Christian, Republican or Democrat. We hugged people without caring if they ate at Chick-Fil-A or wore Nikes. On 9/12, what mattered more was what united us, than what divided us."

There will never be a time when anyone will be grateful for the events of 9/11/01. But in hindsight, we can be grateful for the good that came out of it.

Kathryn died last month; she and I grew up in the same church. Her grandmother and my mother were best friends since their childhood, so our

families go way back. She was 41 years old, left a husband and four children. She's been battling a rare form of lung cancer for about five years, and she's known all along that she might not survive. So she lived very intentionally, with a singular focus on her children and family every day. She homeschooled them when she was able. She taught them to cook and take care of the house. They all went to Disney World and took a vacation with their extended family. Together, they studied about heaven, to take the fear out of it. There's nothing that will ever make it okay that she died so young. Cancer will always be evil. But in her strong faith, Kathryn knew that God would always be good. And I'm certain that someday her children will look back and be grateful for all she taught them and how she made every day count.

We may not emerge unscathed from 2020, but may we trust that God's goodness will prevail. And may we work together with the knowledge that all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well... to the glory of God!

AMEN.