

**The Sunday Missive – August 20, 2023**  
**The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Hymn 608 Eternal Father strong to save**

Eternal Father, strong to save,  
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,  
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep its own appointed limits keep:  
O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.

O Christ, whose voice the waters heard  
And hushed their raging at thy word,  
Who walkedst on the foaming deep,  
And calm amid its rage didst sleep:  
O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.

Most Holy Spirit, who didst brood upon the chaos dark and rude,  
And bid its angry tumult cease, and give, for wild confusion, peace:  
O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.

O Trinity of love and power, thy children shield in danger's hour;  
From rock and tempest, fire and foe,  
Protect them wheresoe'er they go;  
Thus evermore shall rise to thee  
Glad hymns of praise from land and sea.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic8zMkYwnq8>

**The Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

## **Genesis 45:1-15**

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. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 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.

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. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 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. 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; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 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. 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. 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.’ And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 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.” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

## **Psalm 133**

Oh, how good and pleasant it is\* *When brethren live together in unity!*

It is like fine oil upon the head\* *That runs down upon the beard,*

Upon the beard of Aaron\* *And runs down upon the collar of his robe.*

It is like the dew of Hermon\* *That falls upon the hills of Zion.*

For there the Lord has ordained the blessing\* *Nothing less than life for evermore.*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0E9\\_jRtrHc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0E9_jRtrHc)

## **Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32**

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

### **533 How wondrous and great thy works**

How wondrous and great thy works, God of praise!

How just, King of saints, and true are thy ways!

O who shall not fear thee, and honor thy Name?

Thou only art holy, thou only supreme.

To nations of earth thy light shall be shown;  
Their worship and vows shall come to thy throne:  
Thy truth and thy judgments shall spread all abroad,  
Till earth's every people confess thee their God.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQGeU6eHjP0>

### **Gospel Matthew 15: 10-28**

Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their

masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

### **Silk Purse Story – Proper 15A**

Thus the legends of the Israelites continue, with the story of Joseph and his brothers giving us an explanation for the Hebrews' presence in Egypt the first place. These histories in the Hebrew Bible are complex indeed, if not convoluted. Come Exodus, of course, we will see the people escape under the leadership of Moses. But if you weren't enslaved in the first place, you wouldn't have to escape. Lo these thousands of years, the stories have been passed down as means of reaffirming Yahweh as the one and only deity of the Israelites, and by extension, us: our help in ages past, our hope in years to come; immortal, invisible God only wise.

The most challenging and lingering difficulty of our attempts to understand, or at least reconcile ourselves with our bittersweet experience as human beings has been to acknowledge the ongoing existence of evil without accepting it as inevitable. Today's newspapers bemoan this exact problem: The hard truth is that there is no sure defense against outright lies, nor against the horrible acts of young (mostly) men filled with resentment and fired up by lethal propaganda around the world. There are questions but there are no longer so many mysteries. We know where extremism breeds and who fans the flames. We know the terrorists strike in places where people of all ages and nationalities gather to enjoy themselves, and that these criminals often use the most banal instruments to spread the greatest fear.

The real questions that remain are about ourselves — how we who live in societies that celebrate tolerance and freedom, that guarantee civil rights and the rights of minorities, should respond to acts whose very purpose is to make us turn against these rights and freedoms.

This is at the heart of the fierce debates over security in Europe and the United States: Do we fortify all the places where people gather, thus forfeiting the casualness and openness that make our promenades so lovely? Should we arm governments with extraordinary powers to surveil, investigate and restrain immigrants and extremists? Should we learn to accept a constant element of threat as the price of our freedoms? Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy of Spain seemed to get it right after the attack at Las Ramblas back in 2017. The way to beat terrorists, he said, is with societal unity, international cooperation, coordinated security and the firm determination to defend the values of our civilization: democracy, freedom and the rights of people. But of course we have to have some agreement about who constitutes a threat.

How very good and pleasant it is indeed when people live together in unity; like precious oil on the head, like the dew of Hermon falling on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained our blessing, the blessing of life forevermore. Which is to say, if we truly want all that God has to offer, we must work for peace, according to the Psalmist.

But why, oh why, we want to know, would a benevolent Creator – who presumably could simply prevent bad things from happening -- not just do so? Today's story includes Joseph telling his brothers, whom he is about to rescue from starvation along with their families, "God sent me here to preserve life." In other words, God made them sell him into slavery in Egypt, just so he could be there to save them at this moment. Why didn't God just fix things without letting anybody suffer?

Moreover, Joseph goes on to say that his family, the sons of his father Jacob, Joseph's eleven brothers -- the sons of the man now named Israel -- along with their wives and children will be the only ones left of the people called Israel to survive the seven-year famine: "God sent me before you so that I might preserve you for a remnant here on Earth, to keep you alive: the survivors." In other words, God made preparations so the family Israel would be the

nexus of a post-famine nation Israel. But as a great hyena once said, "...sure, we'll be prepared. For what?"

Noah's family formed the nexus of all humanity after the great flood re-booted the human race. The plot of this later story of Israel née Jacob revolves around the rebooting of a specific culture. Although all humanity may have stemmed from Eve and Adam, or Noah and his sons if you prefer, and much of humanity is said to be descended from Hagar or Sarah and Abraham, Israel got its start with, you got it, Israel. That is, Jacob and Co., by way of Joseph's being sold down the river by his brothers and then later preserving them.

From that point on, Israel is not just a family, it's not even just an ethnic group or nation; it is a true cabal, a people whose origins are unique, mysterious and mystical. Everything that takes place from this point forward in biblical history stems from this moment when, for reasons that seem unfathomable, God propels 12 brothers through the worst that life can inflict: betrayal, enslavement, the agony of human evil. And they become the twelve tribes of Israel.

Surely this is not because they deserve pain, nor because they are they inherently evil, any more than terrorists or white supremacists or tyrants are born evil. Surely God's whole enterprise is to convince us that nobody deserves pain, betrayal or enslavement, and nobody is born evil. We are hurt by others. We learn hate from others who have gone before and failed to escape its horrible grip. The history of the Hebrew people is one long effort by God to convince them that nobody deserves these failures. But boy, are we slow learners.

Of course, human life entails pain; without relief we tend towards anger and violence in our reactions to perceived pain. From the outrage of womb expulsion, through the wrenching agonies of adolescence, fights, childbearing, poverty, crime, war and disasters both natural and un-, to the heartbreaks of loss, disease and death, in life: we hurt a lot. It is the nature of our

earthly existence to undergo suffering. Variables like brain chemistry, political environment, education and parental nurture contribute to varying degrees of emotional pain as well.

Because pain comes willy-nilly to all of us, we cannot conclude that anyone deserves it. What Joseph celebrates is how God – that is, how life -- brings about the rebirth and reconciliation of peoples and individuals despite their pain, despite the disasters of nature and the horrors of evil people. That is the remnant of life to which all these stories refer; that is the surpassing of death that Jesus demonstrated and continues to embody; that is the Glory of God we gather to worship, the persistence of goodness and love in the face of suffering and evil.

That some will hurt so far more than others, and obviously through no fault of their own, is clear proof that the degree of human pain is not what any God makes decisions about. God doesn't decide which kid will drive into a bridge abutment, any more than who will win the lottery or be invaded by Russians. When we consider that God's most complex creation is human consciousness, we can begin to see that her decision about human pain has been made once and for all. If nobody deserves more or less pain than anybody else, then nobody deserves any at all; it happens, but it is random.

What God is so eagerly longing to have us know is that the decisionmaking about what to do with our pain is now ours and ours alone; we all have it, the terrorists and the peacemakers in equal measure. It is up to us, the peacemakers to summon the greater resources available to those who love, thus to live out, and live into the greater truth. We will never be able to avoid all pain, but it seems we can bear most anything if only we can turn from sadness and hatred to hope.

When Joseph decides to forgive his brothers for what they have done to him, he realizes that he is now doing the will of God. That's why he says God sent him there. As the saying goes, he makes "a decision to turn his will and his life over to the care of



God as he understands God.” That’s why he declares his family to be the remnant of the old people and the nexus of the new: because they are the ones who have taken undeserved pain and turned it into peace.

Does this mean no more pain for the Israelites? Heck no. They’ve got 400 years of slavery ahead of them once a new Pharaoh comes in who couldn’t give a rat’s patoot for mystical, cabbalistic, Yahweh-following forgiveness foolishness.

No, they’ve got plenty of pain ahead of them, as do we all. But for Jacob -- that is for Israel -- and for Joseph -- as indeed for each of us -- relief and peace come when we embrace our identification with the ones who whisper of the utter undeservedness of suffering, who sing of the longing of God to hold our hearts in hope; when we indeed shout these songs from the highest hills to all the suffering people our voices can reach: *Thou whose almighty word, chaos and darkness heard and took their flight.*

### **371 Thou, whose almighty word**

Thou, whose almighty word chaos and darkness heard,  
And took their flight; hear us, we humbly pray,  
And, where the Gospel day sheds not its glorious ray,  
Let there be light!

Thou who didst come to bring on thy redeeming wing  
Healing and sight, health to the sick in mind,  
Sight to the inly blind, now to all humankind,  
Let there be light!

Spirit of truth and love, lifegiving holy Dove,  
Speed forth thy flight! Move on the waters' face  
Bearing the gifts of grace, and, in earth's darkest place,  
Let there be light!

Holy and blessed Three, glorious Trinity,  
Wisdom, love, might; boundless as ocean's tide,  
Rolling in fullest pride, through the world far and wide,  
Let there be light!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bs255M8e77k>

## **Geode**

The plagues we wished upon ourselves  
With aloe juice and cayenne  
The planets we strained to reach  
That was how being young tasted  
Each of us a geode looking to be cracked open  
And to crack each other open  
Over and over  
I am no longer young except to those who are older  
In the way that youth moves along  
The conveyor belt  
At a consistent distance  
I drink water now  
I try to be gentle  
The years crack you open enough

Alicia Jo Rabins