

I am your brother, Joseph

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Genesis 45:1-15

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This happened about twenty-five years ago. I was sitting in the book-lined study at the home of Alan Lewis and his wife Kay. Theirs was a lovely split-level home looking out at those lavender crowned hills surrounding west Austin. I had known Alan for several years by this time, and I knew his story by heart.

Born a Protestant that divided and blood-soaked land of Northern Ireland, educated in Britain and in the American Ivy League, he had served as a senior lecturer at New College, Edinburgh, for many years, before being called as professor of “Constructive Theology” at Austin Seminary in the mid-1980s. Knowing that the call would be certain, President Jack Stotts arranged for Alan to be enrolled in the seminary’s medical insurance program before returning to Scotland where he would settle matters there and emigrate here.

That’s the only reason why, going through the rigorous physical examination connected with immigration weeks later, when doctors discovered an inoperable malignant mass in his chest, that Alan had medical coverage in the States. And he would need all the medical coverage he could get.

For the next several years, Alan survived, often by a thread. And he didn’t just survive. He thrived. During this time of treatments and pain, of hope and disappointments, he wrote his masterful book on Holy Saturday, a unique and beautiful theological analysis of that day that Jesus spent dead in his tomb. Alan taught class after class crowded with grateful students. His quiet courage, his dark humor, and academic brilliance were gifts to his colleagues and a whole generation of new ministers in his adopted land.

Alan did not believe for a moment that God made him sick to teach him or anyone else a lesson, but he did find in the depths of terminal illness and suffering a grace and a deep peace, and, he believed, some understanding of what it means for God to suffer our humanity.

That afternoon as we visited in his study, neither of us had any way of knowing how near his death was. He was preparing for yet another round of experimental cancer treatments, a new chemotherapy. We were talking about God’s providence, how hard it is to believe that the creator and ruler of the universe cares so keenly for each of us that the hairs on our heads are numbered.

With that wonderful Northern Irish accent of his and a sense of humor forged in a refiner’s fire, Alan said: *You know I’ve always thought it arrogant for people to claim God’s providence for themselves, but my faith in luck is getting shaky.*

I remembered that conversation with Alan this week as I thought about our biblical text from Genesis.

Alan was one of those rare people who did not allow a thought-less word to escape his lips. When he spoke, he said exactly what he meant. And I suppose that's why I was stopped in my tracks one day recently hearing someone say, "Have a blessed day" with the same chirpy routine that others will say "Have a nice day." The two phrases are not even remotely similar.

It is possible to be right in the center of God's blessedness and to be in the eye of a hurricane, literally or emotionally. You've been there.

It is possible to be cradled in God's providence while going through hell on earth. You've been there.

It is possible to be right where God wants us, right in the sweet spot of God's blessings, while nothing like a nice day or even a nice decade is passing. We know this is true.

Joseph, the favorite son, was blessed. He sported the sort of long-sleeved garment that only the boss gets to wear, while his brothers sweated unadorned in the sun. And Joseph, sold into slavery by his envious brothers, was blessed, we learn later, but in such unexpected ways.

His brothers, drawn by their rage and jealousy into an inexcusable act of betrayal and into years of guilt, were blessed. And so was Joseph's aged and grieving father, despondent for years over the death of his favorite son, only later to find out his other sons had lied to and betrayed him.

Generations yet unborn of Hebrew people and Egyptians were blessed because a handsome and sagacious young Jew ended up in the Pharaoh's Court, suffered false imprisonment and enjoyed an eventual elevation to serve as Pharaoh's chief advisor.

Joseph's brothers and family were blessed in the grip of a devastating natural disaster, a region-wide famine, when the brother they once sought to destroy saved them. And, of course, Joseph, who saw through his brothers' envy and enmity, through all the travails and undeserved trials he faced, claimed grace and mercy rather than revenge as his portion, and, because of this, was blessed above them all; so much so, that Joseph was recognized centuries later as the very model of the Messiah.

Recently I saw a *New Yorker* cartoon in which a couple were in their apartment. One says to the other, "I never imagined that the apocalypse would involve so much sitting around."

Me neither. I pictured Mad Max Under Thunder Dome when I imagined human existence threatened by natural disasters; I had no clue that an apocalyptic event would involve so much hand-washing.

The anxiety in the air, like the Novel Corona Virus itself, has turned up the dial of reactivity in our whole society, exposing cracks and divisions among us, seething hatred, social unrest

and violence. All of this only exacerbates the anxieties we feel while sitting around with too much of the televised and streamed horror-fest we've come to call "the news."

Can we claim God's blessings *right* here and *right* now?

If so, what does that mean?

What does it mean to claim God's blessedness in moments like these?

I've mentioned Lady Julian of Norwich before. In a blog I called her the "Patron Saint of Pandemics." Born in the mid-fourteenth century, Julian witnessed the worst plague in history, The Black Death, which killed fully one-third of the people of Europe. One might, in that time, have walked through a village in England emptied of every single living soul only to hear hungry dogs barking. Terror, civil unrest, economic devastation stalked the world hand-in-hand with death. And in the busy commercial city of Norwich, a young woman prayed that she not be spared illness and suffering, because she believed that in suffering she might draw closer to God and know more deeply God's love for others.

My old friend, the Dean of twentieth-century Christian Education in the Presbyterian Church, Dr. Ellis Nelson, when we read Julian's journal together, begged me to choose to a less "morbid" book next time. And I can't disagree with Ellis's description of Julian as morbid. But, as distasteful as I find some of Lady Julian's medieval piety, she possessed the long view, the broad view, the view "from a distance," what Ralph Waldo Emerson described as a perspective as though we were seeing ourselves and all humanity in the light "yielded by a star a hundred million miles distant... so the hours should be instructed by the ages, and the ages explained by the hours."

When this young woman, Julian, rises from her bed having touched the hem of the shroud of the angel of Death himself, then she speaks of being blessed. "I love thee," she says to God, "I love thee and thou lovest me, and our love shall never be departed in two, and for that profit I suffer. And all this was shown in 'gostly' (spiritual) understanding, saying these blessed words (as though God spoke in Middle English), 'I keep the full securely.'" That's what she heard in her painful revelation from God, God telling her, "I hold all things securely."

Julian, like Joseph, takes all that life throws at her and asks not merely "How do I make lemonade from lemons," but 'How might God use this moment to shape me to become more like him, to love without expectation to be loved, to forgive without expectation to be forgiven, to understand more than to be understood, to redeem even those who meant me harm?

"I am Joseph, your brother. I am the one you sold into slavery. And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."

What a perspective Joseph has.

Joseph would if he could redeem souls from whatever hells of guilt and shame and separation and anger into which they have plunged themselves by their own envy and hatred, because he understands, he sees the whole of our humanity as from a distant star: he sees a single striving, broken thing, all of humanity, struggling across history, on this blue marble hanging in an infinity of darkness. And in an insight borne of suffering, he has compassion; indeed, he becomes himself the compassion of God. "I am your brother, Joseph."

Amen