

## ENGAGING PASSION

- NEVER PUT A PERIOD WHERE GOD PUT A COMMA

Ordinary Time

Genesis 39:20-23

A Sermon Preached by  
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Seattle, Washington 98125  
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Pastor Catherine Foote

May we be joined in prayer.

God,  
May the words of our mouths,  
the meditations of our hearts  
be met with grace in your sight  
for you are our rock and our Redeemer.  
– Amen

Last week Amy reminded us in her sermon that every story we hear from scripture has a story that came before it and has a story that will come after it. And the people who listened to those stories and who told those stories ages ago knew the whole story. They knew the context they know where everything was heading. Sometimes we contemporary listeners can lose that thread so today we have a reading from the book of Genesis that book of beginnings. And we find a fellow named Joseph in prison what happened before that matters. Joseph, as the story goes, was the favorite son, the second youngest of his father Jacob. And he grew up with all of the privileges of the favorite son. He no doubt anticipated a bright future and he told all his siblings as much. Don't you just love it? The brothers, though, weren't as excited as Joseph about it all. In fact, they were so unexcited that they actually conspired to kill him. And as they were about to carry out that plot, one of the brothers perhaps with a change of heart – a slight change of heart – came up with an alternative. Let's not kill him. Let's sell him instead. Well, the other brothers said well fine he's as good as dead. And off he went with the caravan. Once Joseph was sold, in the brothers' mind that was the end of the story. Period.

But God was still speaking. As it turned out, Joseph ends up in Egypt and he does incredibly well. Again Joseph might expect his future to be bright. And again Joseph's plans are changed, once again by treachery and this time by false accusation. And he ends up once more as good as dead.

But God was still speaking. Listen for the word of God.

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

As we seek to respond to your word and will, and encourage one another in the growth of our minds and spirits, let us hear this morning's Scripture from Genesis 39:20-23.

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### Genesis 39:20-23<sup>1</sup>

Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; God gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

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### Pastor Catherine Foote

If you wanted to name a theme running through this wonderful collection of stories that are contained in the book of Genesis, it might be the title of today's sermon: "Never Put a Period Where God Has Put a Comma." Woven through every story is the firm conviction that God is still speaking. And the stories never turn out the way you expect them to turn out. God creates a perfect world, a garden for us to live in; but humanity stumbles. Abraham and Sarah are childless with no future, but God promises and delivers heirs. Esau is born first but Jacob receives the blessing of the firstborn. Through various ways and unexpected possibilities, the story changes. Even God changes. It is phenomenal! And so it is with the story of Joseph. His father had a vision for him. He himself was pretty sure how his life would unfold. And then everything changed. These stories of Genesis, of course, are very human stories.

They're our stories – mine and yours – we anticipate in our communities, in our lives, how something will unfold and it takes a turn. Sometimes a very hard turn. Those are the moments we listen for God. Those are the moments we resist the temptation to decide we've come to the end of the story, to be very careful with our life's punctuation.

As the storyteller reminds us in this story of Joseph, there even in prison, God is with Joseph. Never put a period where God has put a comma.

### Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Two weeks ago I shared a story about another transition in my life, another leaving of home that felt as big as this transition in my life feels now. It was my very first day of kindergarten. And I was standing outside of our house by the stone wall, my shoulders back with my new red shirt, my new black pants, and my shiny new black shoes while my dad took my picture. I was right on the edge between utter terror and exhilaration. Excitement. That *very* edge where every-thing can happen. That is, enough fear to know there is something out there worth going to and enough excitement to help you go into it and through it. Well, the school bus pulled up at the end of our driveway, which in this case was a paneled Dodge station wagon pulled up to the bottom of the of the driveway and stopped. And I took off running and I ran all the way down the driveway. And right before I got to the car I tripped and fell and I rolled under the car. Now those of you who know me know that you've seen me do that many times. And I also want to tell you that is not the only way to do transition and

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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change. But I must tell you how often in my life that had my way of doing it. What I didn't tell you was the end of the story.

What happened was that I crawled out from under the car and I brushed off my brand-new clothes and I scooted into the backseat of the station wagon next to a boy with a brand-new buzz cut who looked as wide-eyed and terrified as I felt. And I closed my eyes. And I said to myself, "What is happening isn't really happening. The car is *not* pulling away. Mom is *not* standing at the end of the driveway with my little sister in her hands waving goodbye. I am *not* going away. I am *not* going to school. I am *not* going to cry."

I must tell you, 51 years later I have learned a few things, and one of them is this: In this time of this beyond-words transition in my life and in this congregation's, I want you to let you know that I have and I will look back; and I want you to know that I will cry; and I want you know the grace beyond words that they are such tears of gratitude and of such love.

#### Amy Roon

Comma.

Twenty years and seven months ago I was reading the question on the PSR (Pacific School of Religion) application for the Masters of Divinity program:

"What are your vocational goals?" [*Laughter*]

Yeah, I thought it was kind of funny, too, because, I mean, why else does anyone get a Masters in Divinity? Which I think somehow I realized somebody must go through this program and, and not end up being a pastor ... and am I willing to write down here and tell them that *I* want to be a pastor?

I'll tell you something: I didn't. And I don't tend to tell anyone what I actually want to do or what my hope is – because my life is altogether too much like the Joseph story, with all sorts of people around me and everybody saying, "Yep. That's clearly where she is going." And then *something happens* and I'm in a pit. I don't get *anywhere* in a straight line. Yeah. (*Chuckle*). And I have had and I have not been able to take anything for granted that if I do, X, Y, or Z just like everyone else did that the end result will be the same. Nobody – nobody – voluntarily wants to be a single parent, but if you really want to be a mom you might just step in and do it.

So! What are your vocational goals? Well! I, I don't have any vocational goals. I'm not trying to be *something*. I want to be *someone*. It felt like a good enough answer at the time. And it got me into seminary right? They didn't turn me away.

Four years later, after finishing up the three-year program, I still wasn't sure I was going to be a pastor. It would be another 5 to 7 years after that.

But *in* seminary I started this choir. Because what I didn't know about how or who I was going to be and how I was going to have a paycheck or who else might affirm a calling, I knew that God had given me a voice and singing and with other people was what I am put on this earth to do. So I would have to do it there. And I kept doing it until more and more people joined. And at the end of those four years and an extra fifth – because...

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And I was ready to leave the Bay Area ... and the members of that choir, knowing that I was still nowhere on the path to be ordained (I had a degree, but I was still essentially wandering in the wilderness) And they gave me stole. And they prayed over me. And they said "We don't know when or who will make this official, but you have been our pastor, because you have been pastoring us for five years."

Even when you're in a pit or a prison cell or somewhere stuck, or you never thought "This is not my badge or stole or promise, my identity; this is not where I was planning to be," remember who you are and that God made you *someone* not *something*."

#### David Anderson

As Amy has noted, there are times when each of us feels that we're in the pit and yet God is with us. And there have been times in our life when our congregation where it's felt that we are in the pit, where we might feel the future looks doubtful. The early years as a church on the outskirts of town up in Brooklyn barely hanging on. Tough times. Like when Paul Fluke betrayed us and his ministry. And other transitions, such as when Dale Turner retired or Gail Crouch or Dave Schull or Don McKenzie left, when other leadership or colleagues or members changed or left.

Some transitions are painful. Some of these are the realities of the natural course of life, maybe not easy but not unexpected. Some, many, we celebrate that the new that is calling to someone and the ways that we've shared the journey. But in the midst of the news and the upcoming inevitable transition it can feel like we're in a pit, that our future has been closed off or interrupted. Relationships are upended. Carefully laid plans may be changed or abandoned. Work and focus changes. Life shifts.

And yet we've moved through those changes. We're embraced sustaining energy to help us get through – not over but through – times of loss and change. And in that, I believe that God is with us.

I'm grateful to comedienne and theologian Gracie Allen who left a note for her husband George Burns to find after she died. The note was her reminder to "never put a period where God has placed a comma." And I believe that we are people of the comma, of new beginnings and continuing story, of much doing but also of relationship. And our story has a new beginning even today with new members joining and with gratitude for Elaine and Colton and Anna to change and grow us – who we were into what we are now becoming.<sup>2</sup> And as that new direction unfolds, possibility springs up. Unexpected and surprising gifts appear. A future unfolds. And God is with us.

I'm grateful for the words of Roger Shinn, United Church of Christ rock. Dr. Shinn said, "Every time I look back I meet the eyes of my forbearers steadfastly looking forward and they're looking beyond us to that future." So today, together with those who come before us, with those who are here now, and with those yet to come, let us look forward to *our* bright and faithful future.

#### Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

And two weeks ago I also shared another story but I never completed. That was a story about how traditionally in Christian Orthodox churches in the center of the sanctuary there's an opening. And an

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<sup>2</sup> Colton Kissock, Anna Van Pelt, Elaine Spencer.

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opening to the sky above is a sign and symbol and expression that the Holy Spirit needs room to get into a community and descend upon it. But I never told you where does the spirit descend to, on who or on what? The Spirit comes down and descends upon the community of faith. Here. Among us. And you know, as God was with Joseph and ... , God will be with the community of faith now and always.

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