

**SERMON**  
**“Onboard the Ship Called Fellowship”**  
**Genesis 50:15-21, Mark 4:33-41, 1 Peter 5:5-11**  
**Sunday, September 13, 2020**

The only survivor of a shipwreck was washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed feverishly for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming. Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements, and to store his few possessions.

But then one day, after scavenging for food, he arrived home to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. The worst had happened; everything was lost. He was stunned with grief and anger. “God how could you do this to me!” he cried.

Early the next day, however, he was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him. “How did you know I was here?” asked the weary man of his rescuers.

“We saw your smoke signal,” they replied.

Like Joseph’s brothers, in our Old Testament reading for this morning, many of us find ourselves quite unaware of God working in the background of the worst of situations to bring about the best in results for us all. Where we may see nothing but the destruction of the hut that once had provided us with shelter from the elements; God uses it to send a smoke signal for our rescue and salvation.

Upon discovering that the second in command of all of Egypt was their brother, Joseph’s brothers imagine the worse. Think about it for a moment: after being forced by a famine to leave their homeland and come to Egypt begging for food just so that they can stay alive; they discover that the one they had sold into slavery and then fabricated a lie about his untimely death; is not only alive and well, but is the second most powerful man in the world; wouldn’t they have much to fear.

But instead of seeking retribution and avenging the evil his brothers had intended Joseph takes an entirely different direction. “Do not be afraid!” he says to them. “Am I in the place of God? 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. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.”

What a jaw-dropping response this is, from a man who had been betrayed by his brothers, tossed into a pit, and then sold into slavery. We might expect him to be angry, but he’s not. We would sympathize if he was bitter, but he’s not. We would understand if he felt a need to pursue revenge with all the shock and awe of Egyptian military might ... but he doesn’t go this way at all. Joseph focuses on reconciliation, not revenge.

Over the course of the last six months as our congregations have not been allowed to gather for in-person worship, many of us, like the lone survivor on the deserted island, have watched and wondered *Where is God in all of this?*

- This pandemic?
- Within the political divide that pits our nation’s leadership one against the other?
- Racial Injustice that continues to hold this country and its people hostage?
- Economic Disparity?
- Cancer?

God is in the midst of it all, assures our text from Genesis, working through the mess of it all in order to bring about His goodness and our salvation. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary gives us three reasons why we, like Joseph’s brothers, should not live in fear:

- 1) We are all in the same boat together. Like Joseph and his brothers, none of us are in the place of God; but we all stand together under the authority of a divine other who works purposefully on behalf of us all.
- 2) Regardless of our actions, evil or not, we can be assured that they have been drawn into God’s larger purposes for goodness.
- 3) We will be cared for as we await God’s purposes to prevail.

I can't help but think of the Israeli soldier who was on patrol in an area of occupied Palestine when he felt a rock strike him in the back. Before he had a chance to turn around, another rock had struck him in the shoulder, then another hit his helmet.

He whirled around; his rifle ready to fire. In his sights were several Palestinian children. Children. They were picking up more stones to throw at him. The soldier did not want to fire, but he could not allow them to attack him again.

Suddenly, he had an idea. He bent down and picked up three of the rocks. He picked them up and began to juggle. Yes, juggle. The children were mesmerized and forgot about their stones. The soldier did a few tricks, and the children laughed. Then he did a grand finale, and they applauded. He took a bow and walked away.

No, that soldier did not end the war with his action. But he took what had been hurled as weapons and transformed them into objects of wonder. He took a broken moment and made it whole with the laughter of children. That moment revealed God's shalom.

Desmond Tutu in his book *God Has a Dream* wrote: *"All over this magnificent world, God calls us to extend his kingdom of shalom-peace and wholeness -- of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, of joy, of reconciliation. God is transfiguring the world right this very moment through us because God believes in us and because God loves us. What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And as we share God's love with our brothers and sisters, God's other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no opposition that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be turned into love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled."*

No matter what storms we are facing, my brothers and sisters; the story of Joseph and his brothers stands as biblical reminder that there is no storm where God can't calm its waters. Whether we are Democrat or Republican, Spirit of Truth Ministry or Oaklette UMC, male or female, black or white, Facebooker or In-Person worshipper; we are all on the same ship together. And as our Gospel passage from Mark 4 assures us: Jesus is already onboard with us. He like Joseph calling out to his brothers in the midst of their fear, is calling out to us to be calm and trust in God.