

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 15, Year A
August 17, 2008
The Reverend Amy H. Morehous

“Close Every Door”

*Close every door to me
Hide all the world from me
Bar all the windows
And shut out the light
Do what you want with me
Hate me and laugh at me
Darken my daytime
And torture my night
If my life were important I
Would ask will I live or die
But I know the answers lie
Far from this world.*

(Beginning of “Close Every Door”, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat)

Joseph has dreams of power, and tells his brothers of his magnificent dreams, dreams where 11 sheaves of grain bow down to the one sheaf – and tells them they will all bow down to him. His insistence of his status eventually infuriates his brothers so, that they capture him, throw him in a pit, and eventually sell him to slave traders. Joseph eventually ends up in an Egyptian prison, powerless and forgotten, at the mercy of the whims of those in power. From grandiose dreams of power, to having virtually none. Who has the power, and who is powerless? And how is God working in each of us, at any moment in time?

If we grew up anywhere in the Western world, we can probably easily fill in the blanks between the beginning of the story that we heard last week, when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and the climax of the story today. In fact, if we’ve heard or seen Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, we can probably even sing most parts of it. However, don’t let familiarity make you a stranger to one of the most powerful stories in the Hebrew scriptures.

In today's reading from Genesis, Joseph and his brothers have come to another reversal. Joseph has now risen to be the head of the Pharaoh's household, and the brothers are driven out of their land by poverty and famine to prostrate themselves at Joseph's feet, not recognizing the brother whom they once sold into slavery.

What struck me about this story, this time, is how God works in each person's life – particularly in those reversals. Joseph is arrogant and sure of himself and his brilliant future, and is cast into a pit, sold into slavery and eventually ends up languishing in prison, separated from all he has known and loved. His brothers are envious and consumed with hate, make a foolish, evil choice and live through famine, poverty and their own crushing regret. They have each had power, and they have each been powerless. By the time the brothers have their tearful reunion, no one has escaped tragedy – all have experienced astounding reversals of fortune, and they are not the people they were at the beginning of the story.

The Canaanite woman who accosts Jesus in today's gospel is in a similar place. Her daughter is tormented, and she breaks every societal taboo to confront Jesus in a public place. She persists, even though she is ignored, excluded, and ridiculed. Jesus compares her to a dog, and still she will not give up. Jesus and the disciples make it evident that they have the power, and she has none. As a woman, and a Gentile, she is the lowest of low on the social ladder. According to the custom of the time, simply speaking to her in public would be to acknowledge her as a social equal – to speak to her would be seen as 'stooping to her level'. But she is determined, and Jesus finally speaks to her – even though by speaking to her, he is reducing his own status. He not only speaks to her, but eventually acknowledges and praises her for her faithfulness, even though it probably horrifies the disciples (and anyone else interested in propriety), and costs him honor himself.

When considering the reverses of life, and how God works in them, the musical tune that actually kept running through my mind is not from Joseph, but from *Into the Woods*, by Stephen Sondheim. If you haven't seen it, it's an interweaving of many fairy tales – Cinderella, Goldilocks, Jack and the Beanstalk, Rapunzel. Many terrible things happen to the folks that inhabit the play. (It's amazing when you read the original fairy tales, how horribly grim and bloody they can be.) A giant runs amok, and kills some of the villagers. A witch curses Rapunzel, and her prince. Goldilocks is nearly eaten by the wolf. Near the end, one of the characters sits, and ponders leaving...leaving his child behind, and his friends...leaving to escape the unpredictability, violence and chaos of his life. Exhausted by tragedy, and despairing of a life without pain, he sings a moving plea for "No More."

*No more giants waging war.
Can't we just pursue our lives
With our children and our wives?
'Till that happy day arrives,
How do you ignore
All the witches, all the curses,
All the wolves, all the lies,
The false hopes, the goodbyes, the reverses,
All the wondering what even worse is still in store?
Just...no more.*

We've all been in that place where we can bear no more. Where our pain is such that we can't conceive of life going on in the same way. Joseph has been in that place, and his brothers certainly have too. The Canaanite woman could no longer bear the torment her daughter was in – who among us can bear to watch our children suffer, without pleading to God to take the suffering away?

We know that evil and suffering are real, that they exist – we see it in the news daily, we experience it ourselves in the course of our daily lives. We were all horrified and saddened a few weeks ago when another congregation's sanctuary became a place of violence and death. When we see pictures of war and destruction, of pain and suffering, of need...we might marvel at our own capacity for hate and for despair. If we haven't already, we will each find our own time of "No More." We each have our own marauding giants, and ravenous wolves, and unexplained curses. We could even compose our own lists of all the things we can't take any more – our own "No More"s. No more suffering from incurable diseases. No more unendurable pain. No more loneliness. No more wars, no more children orphaned by disease or warfare. No more people brought down by hunger and poverty.

When you have your own list of "No More"s, when you see the world, in all its colors, when you've overloaded on news, when you've read every blog, and listened to every talking head on television, it's tempting to become cynical, to accept the very worst parts about ourselves as "good enough". I think it's fashionable, these days, to be world-weary and sophisticated, instead of dedicated and hopeful. It's easy to look for ways to escape – we can turn on mindless TV, plug in our iPods, stop interacting with one another, and inhabit worlds of our own creating. After all, "I'm only one person – what difference can I make? What difference does it make what I say, or what I do?" But before we write ourselves off, throw up our hands and hope for God's Almighty Hand to come down and sweep up the mess, we need to remember that we believe in a God that works in the re-

verses – in a God that works THROUGH the powerless AND the powerful. Jesus turned “the way we’ve always done it” upside down by praising the faith of a Gentile woman. Joseph, a lowly Hebrew slave, saved Egypt from death by famine. Jesus Christ conquered death and sin by dying in a painful and humble fashion. Our God is a God of the unexpected, of the reversal, of power in powerlessness. Our God is not a God of the status quo.

God worked through Joseph’s life when he was a mighty and powerful man AND when he was cast into a dungeon. God worked through the brothers’ lives when they made evil, petty choices, AND when they repented and were reunited with the person they had wronged. Jesus ignored and insulted a powerless Canaanite woman, but then recognized and praised her for her faithfulness when she persisted in asking him for mercy. Her own powerlessness did not hold her back, did not discourage her from speaking to those in power. She stood before Jesus and demanded that he recognize before everyone that God’s mercy was wide. In doing so, she opened the way for all who would believe, even when they are ridiculed, even when they are different, even when others would send them away.

We believe in an almighty, incarnate faith – a faith that includes a place for the powerful, and the powerless; a place for the weak and the strong; for the evil, and the good. We believe that God works through the world just as it is, right now, today, in all its hopeful and its hopeless places. Our God is a God who works through the unexpected, who brings hope and promise even from the tragic and hopeless. Joseph is brought low, and then becomes a powerful man. The brothers seize power for themselves, and are then made powerless. They each lose something, but then gain something new, something God-given and holy.

Earlier this week, the Rev. Chris Buice wrote of the tragedy at (TVUUC) his church a few weeks ago. He writes that “an armed man...came into our space to inflict death.... But, strangely, his actions also reminded us of the preciousness of our children, the sacredness and brevity of life, the true value of friendship and family, and how much we need good neighbors.” (Knoxville News-Sentinel, August 13, 2008)

As the book of Genesis ends, it is just after Jacob’s death, after his joyful reunion with his son that was lost. The brothers once again are living in fear, worried that Joseph will punish them further for their evil deeds now that their father is gone. Joseph once again reassures his brothers. “Do not be afraid! 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.” It’s one of my favorite passages in the Bible. “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”

God means good for each of us, even in the midst of evil, even when we're suffering, even when we ourselves turn from what is right, even when we make choices which grieve the very heart of God. God does not will evil to fall into any of our lives – the God I know with every fiber of my being does not wish pain and suffering on any of us. In each of our reverses - in our illnesses, our tragedies, in our flawed decisions, in our very 'humanness' God is with us. In our times of power and prosperity, and in our times of pain and despair and hopelessness, God is with us. No matter where we are, or who we are, there is always a place for us in the kingdom of God. All we need to do is to hold our faith in our hearts, hold our hands out to our neighbors, and hold ourselves in the light of Christ.

*Close every door to me
Keep those I love from me
Children of Israel
Are never alone
For I know I shall find
My own peace of mind
For I have been promised
A land of my own.*

Amen