

**THE ANTIDOTE TO CHAOS; GENESIS 45: 1-15; AUGUST 16, 2020;  
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I've been reading *To the Lighthouse* the past several weeks—Virginia Woolf's remarkable portrait of family life as seen not so much from the outside in as the inside out, the emotions/passions and feelings of the characters evoked by their everyday circumstances summering together in a big house with holiday guests on a Hebrides island.

After surveying the social/emotional landscape of the last summer they had together before the deaths of two of the children now young adults, one in childbirth, one in WWI, Woolf juxtaposes the summer house in that last happy season together, with its present empty condition on an island in the North Sea.

Here's Woolf: "Night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference. Listening (had there been any one to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the winds and waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason, and mounted one on top of another, and lunged and plunged in the darkness or the daylight (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together) in idiot games, until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself."

Does all of this end in confusion and chaos? Dissipate like those waves, pulverizing the shore of the island? Is human life and the natural world here then gone, obliterated?

It would be easy to make a case for the eventual victory of chaos; Einstein did in his theory of entropy, not by inventing a new mathematics but simple observation and a minimum of elementary assumptions.

We look at the world and conclude in the wake of a 19-year war, of climate change, of a global pandemic and the consequent unemployment and what some say is inevitable financial collapse, not to mention the political gridlock and mismanagement that beckons chaos to our beloved, struggling land. It doesn't take much to conclude that everything is going to hell in a handbasket. It is almost not even an argument. And yet.

And yet today's story of Joseph and his brothers is the biblical response to the view that the universe is winding down and will collapse like a child's spinning top or the notion—as prevalent as the coronavirus—that everything happens for a reason, which is as destructive to human freewill and hope as Einstein's law of entropy. Joseph and his brothers is a tale about a younger brother who survives a murder plot by his older brothers incensed because of his cockiness and their father Jacob's favoritism. In a series of events worthy of a Russian novel, Joseph ends up being the trusted advisor to and administrator of the Egyptian empire for Pharaoh.

Back in Palestine a famine sweeps over the land and the brothers go to Egypt to seek relief and come before their brother, Joseph, whom they do not recognize.

But he, does, them and after more twists and turns, in one of the most moving moments of reunion and forgiveness in the pages of the bible Joseph forgives his brothers and pledges to care for and protect them and their father and all their extended family members during the famine.

How is this story a response to chaos and the cheap panacea that everything happens for a reason? We can interpret the tale in two ways: first, as an illustration that everything really does happen for a reason. Like Joseph, thrown into a pit by his brothers who assumed he would not survive but was discovered by a traveling caravan, taken to Egypt, sold in slavery to a local official whose wife attempted to frame him for adultery, was sent to prison and discovered as an interpreter of dreams. Whereupon Pharaoh learns of his dream analysis and brings him to the royal palace to explain some of the dreams disturbing him; Joseph passes the test with flying colors, and lo Pharaoh places him in charge of everything as the chief administrator of the country.

After a series of such mishaps that lead to a happy ending for Joseph and his people, Israel, it's tempting to say, "see everything happens for a reason." The problem with theological pablum like this is that it sweeps out from under all the human actors in the story or any situation to which it is applied the responsibility to act humanely and justly as a person of God. In other words, do Joseph's brothers get a free pass because even their attempt to kill their brother which resulted in his ending up as Egypt's overseer, could be called the will of God?

This is ultimately an unsatisfying mantra for it leads to patently false conclusions like: 'if God outlines every step of our lives then maybe our own misfortunes aren't so bad. Don't get the promotion we want? It's okay, everything happens for a reason. Did your marriage fail? Quite alright—God has a plan. Plus, it makes God into a cynical puppeteer.

But can we really conclude that God would be okay with the ends justifying whatever means it takes to reach them? Blanket approval for virtually any kind of immoral or inhumane behavior runs completely against the grain of what Jesus taught.

The other way of interpreting the story is more nuanced and formative for our faith. There's a difference between saying that everything happens for a reason and saying that whatever happens to us through our own actions, brilliance or stupidity can never separate us from God but that God is by our side, in our midst, ultimately bringing about God's intention and purposes *despite us*.

If we see it that way we see a different narrative. We see this spoiled little brat, Joseph, taunting his brothers; we see his brutal, vengeful brothers, we see Potiphar's scheming wife's attempt to put Joseph away; we see Joseph unjustly imprisoned. We see humanity at its worst and then we see a self-absorbed kid transformed into a gracious forgiving man, guilty brothers repentant and grateful; and we see an entire family—down to the last shirttail cousin reunited, saved from famine despite all the things that could have, and odds makers said should have, prevented it happening.

It's not so much everything happens for a reason as things happen and God prevails. The story reaffirms the sovereignty of God and his purposes. When Joseph says to his brothers, "God sent me ahead of you to preserve before you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance," we are hearing how God *is at work*.

This spoiled, self-absorbed kid has had an awakening; he has encountered the purpose and presence of God in his life. Despite the random and crazy things he's been through it was God who led him from a pit to the life of a slave to the righthand of Pharaoh and opened his eyes and heart to God's saving presence.

The other thing that happens is God's people, Jacob's family is saved from famine. *Despite greed and sibling rivalry God's purposes prevail.*

The relentless thrust of creation is the working out of God's purposes; and central to that aim is the survival of God's people—this is the story of how they get to Egypt from which many years later they will flee, with the help of God and Moses, not because God made Pharaoh into a slave master; but because in the course of human affairs ruthless dictators emerge and present temporary obstacles to God's purposes; until God steps in and by the grace of God people respond to the call to fight for justice, to work for change in themselves and in society and the course of history *is redirected*.

I admit that it's very difficult to be in the midst of some trying time or circumstance and see where God might be at work changing the situation. We simply have to trust that God *is there* waiting to use our failures and mishaps to humble some unsuspecting brat of a kid or his brothers or you and me and in turn open our eyes and hearts to the path of abundant life.

This whole system is based on faith, which in New Testament Greek is the word for trust, simple, every day, household trust. I trust the weather report today when it says no rain, even though the sky looks dark. All we have to go on, to rely on is the currency of trust in our day to day decisions and actions; and history, that is, remembering what happened the last time we thought the sky was falling and it was just a black walnut from the towering tree.

How does all this relate to chaos, Einstein's entropy? Everything *doesn't happen for a reason*. Things happen. "Life's a beach" as the bumper sticker says. And if you have no frame of faith to see your life and the world through then you might easily conclude that we won't survive; that chaos and the cold abyss is lapping at our shores and the planet and humanity will be engulfed by Virginia Woolf's leviathan waves.

Of course, the seas *are* rising. Add to that war, species destruction, a pandemic, national strife, incompetent leadership, fiscal troubles, unemployment, systemic racism on and on. It's like we're walking on a tightrope over some bottomless pit with no safety net. A rational conclusion would be that the end is near, that the sky is falling if you got hit on the head with a black walnut and the sky just happened to be dark. Or, if you had to withdraw \$200k from church invested funds to sustain the teaching staff of a landmark school that had to close because of the pandemic that showed no signs of abating.

I'm not saying there aren't risks in life or that we shouldn't evaluate them and make informed decisions. But I am saying we are God's people and our life together is for the fulfilling of God's purposes and that we have on our team the Holy One of Israel, the Lord God Almighty who cleared a path for Joseph and Israel and will do so for his church if we open our eyes and our ears to his beckoning; if we step out on faith like Jesus consistently asked of his disciples and praised those he healed for doing.

Maybe you have some of your own dark circumstances and are starting to envision in detail the very worst that is about to happen. What the story tells us today is 'do not fear' God is at work in and through you and your circumstances. And trust.

Does chaos or God win in the end? The way we answer determines whether we live with hope or despair, caution or courage. Go ahead, push all the chips to the center of the table, call and see Satan who sits smugly waiting for us to fold.

The stakes are high when you play the game for keeps. Amen.