

# *Communion in the Midst of Famine*

*Providence of God Series 4*

by

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Genesis 43:1-10, 26-34

Now the famine was severe in the land. <sup>2</sup>And when they had eaten up the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go again, buy us a little more food.” <sup>3</sup>But Judah said to him, “The man solemnly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’ <sup>4</sup>If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food; <sup>5</sup>but if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, ‘You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.’” <sup>6</sup>Israel said, “Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?” <sup>7</sup>They replied, “The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, ‘Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?’ What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he

would say, ‘Bring your brother down’?”<sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy with me, and let us be on our way, so that we may live and not die—you and we and also our little ones.<sup>9</sup> I myself will be surety for him; you can hold me accountable for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever.<sup>10</sup> If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice.”

<sup>26</sup>When Joseph came home, they brought him the present that they had carried into the house, and bowed to the ground before him.<sup>27</sup> He inquired about their welfare, and said, “Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?”<sup>28</sup> They said, “Your servant our father is well; he is still alive.” And they bowed their heads and did obeisance.<sup>29</sup> Then he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and said, “Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!”<sup>30</sup> With that, Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there.<sup>31</sup> Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, “Serve the meal.”<sup>32</sup> They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.<sup>33</sup> When they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, the men looked at one another in amazement.<sup>34</sup> Portions were taken to them from Joseph’s table, but Benjamin’s portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.

Today's reading is part of a much longer cat and mouse game Joseph plays with his brothers. You remember from last week; Joseph has risen to great power by interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh. According to his interpretation, God revealed that seven years of abundance would be followed by seven years of severe shortage causing famine throughout the land. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge to fill the storehouses with grain to prepare for the lean years to come. Just as Joseph predicted, famine swept throughout the known world, including Joseph's homeland, where his family still lived, before the famine ultimately disrupted life in Egypt itself. Because Joseph's leadership had provided for this season of deprivation, Egypt has bread, and Joseph himself is the go-to man during the global crisis.

In the previous chapter Joseph's brothers had made an earlier trip without recognizing him as their brother. In the disguise of a prominent Egyptian now, Joseph asked enough questions to get information about the health of his father, and told them to return with his little brother. In today's reading, they've come back bringing Benjamin, and the plot thickens as Joseph takes in and feeds his family, all the while under the cover of his royal disguise. Now, we will get to the big tearful family reunion when Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers next week, but today on World Communion Sunday, this story invites us to linger over the reality of famine and of bread being shared to keep people from starving.

There is plenty of archeological evidence that bread was first made in the Fertile Crescent – specifically Egypt – about 8000 B.C. The land which produced food that could be portable exerted great power over the ancient world; bread became a medium of exchange as valuable as silver or gold during a famine. So imbedded in this family saga is important history about the interdependence of people across national boundaries and cultural divides, particularly in a time of famine.

Today, on World Communion Sunday, this story, ancient as it is, speaks a relevant word to how inter-connected we are across the globe. We are connected to the earth and its ability to produce what living creatures need for

survival. And we are dependent – upon one another – across the world for things as basic as daily bread.

One biblical scholar writes of the famine in the Joseph saga: “The devastation of earth and life that unfolds from Pharaoh’s dreams invites readers to consider the current effects of climate change throughout the globe. In Genesis, the coming of a deadly famine, presumably the result of drought, was caused by the natural rhythms of the earth and its atmosphere. Likely, the Nile, on which Egypt depends for fertility and success of its agriculture, has not overflowed its banks due to insufficient rainfall. Here, wise human actions were able to forestall the horrible effects of the changes in the earth’s life. Joseph, the wise and discerning government official, anticipates, plans and prevents wholesale loss of life. As we all know, then as now, “currently climate change has its greatest impact on poorer peoples and nations.” The scholar concludes, “Christians, and people of faith can look to Joseph to find an example of urgent, committed, and wise action to ensure food security around the globe.”<sup>1</sup>

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports that “the planet will reach the crucial threshold of 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit, above pre-industrial levels by as early as 2030, precipitating the risk of extreme drought, more intense wildfires, floods and increased food shortages for hundreds of millions of people. Even today, it is estimated that over 800 million people are under-nourished – primarily in Asia, Africa and Central America.”<sup>2</sup>

While we, who are gathered in this space, have suffered some measure of dislocation and isolation during the pandemic, we need to remember that Covid-19 caused nearly three million people to flee their homes last year, raising the number of global refugees to over eighty-two million. Of course

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen O’Connor, Genesis 25B-50, Smyth and Helwys, p. 190-1.

<sup>2</sup> Miller and Croft, “Planet has Only Until 2030 to Stem Catastrophic Climate Change, Experts Warn,” Cnn.com, 10/8/18.

the reasons are multi-faceted – migrations are caused by war, persecution, human rights violations. But one of the leading causes is hunger brought on by these other crises, as well as climate change. We obviously have no control over how to settle international conflicts, but we make choices every day that contribute to climate change.

The biblical witness before us today speaks to the increasing problem of famine and the migration of refugees – so many of whom just want what Joseph’s family needed – enough bread to keep from starving, in the midst of an ancient famine that had far-reaching consequences across the known world. It is a reminder that all human beings experience hunger, and – across every nationality and race and creed we are joined in our common humanity. Every human being has a basic need for connection to the earth and for nourishment to sustain human life and dignity. Every week we pray for “daily bread” to feed both hungry bodies and hungry souls.

Biblical scholar Kathleen O’Connor says in her commentary on Genesis: “All the more scandalous is the situation of world hunger, malnutrition, and undernourishment outside the doors of the churches and across the world.... The world’s needs and our own can, of course, seem utterly overwhelming.”<sup>3</sup> We cannot fix everything or feed everyone in need, but we can be faithful to the church’s mission that involves every kind of human need, physical as well as spiritual, according to our own capacities and resources – both personal and communal.

It’s why Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church has Hunger Envelopes in the pews all the time, so that you can give to our hunger ministries over and above your regular giving. It’s why our regular giving contributes to the mission of the church reaching into so many local and global communities of need. It’s why – in addition – today we invite your participation in the Peace and Global Witness Offering to support the local and global work of reconciliation, justice and peace. Because the Bible – which we trust to be a special revelation of God’s intentions for the whole human family – dishes up story

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<sup>3</sup> O’Connor, p. 201.

after story of people responding to a crisis with awareness and with a call to action, going back all the way to Genesis, five centuries before Jesus was born.

Fauzia Sufizada immigrated to Australia from Afghanistan just a few years ago. She tells the story of how she learned to share her bread with her neighbors. Because Afghanistan is in the heart of Asia, she says, that's why the country is made up of so many ethnic groups. Her own grandfather moved from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan after World War Two. Fauzia grew up in Kabul but drank tea and made bread from Uzbekistan. From her childhood she had a passion not only for making bread but sharing it with her neighbors. She says that when she first moved to Australia and was a guest at someone else's house she was always surprised when they would say, "Do you want coffee or juice?"

In her home culture – you never asked, you just served. In fact, when she makes bread it is her native custom always to serve three neighbors – taking bread to the neighbor opposite across the street, and the one to the left and the one to the right. "As you know," the Afghan woman concludes, "when you move to a new country, it's difficult to get used to people, with the culture, the way they walk and talk, the way they eat. So I find that sharing food is the only way to connect."<sup>4</sup>

Fauzia learned that growing up in Afghanistan, a country now where food insecurity is ravaging the land. Her story of sharing – to the neighbor opposite, and the one on the right and the one on the left echoes the familiar invitation to the table – they will come from east and west, from north and south and take their places at the feast in the Kingdom of God. Her story reminds us on this World Communion Sunday, we come in the midst of a world where far too many people do not have enough to eat, and there is far too little sharing.

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<sup>4</sup> Fauzia Sufizada, [centreforstories.com](http://centreforstories.com), 2017.

The bread we receive at this table will not fill our stomachs, but it is intended to fill our hearts, and help us remember our call to discipleship. When Joseph's brothers arrived in Egypt, coming for grain to take back to their homeland, Joseph fed them from his table; he gave them more than they needed; he gave the youngest – five times more. And for a moment – in the midst of a famine – there was genuine companionship, a glimpse of world communion.

AMEN.