



**September 5th, 2021**  
**Gifts of the Pandemic (I)**

*Twin Towers United Methodist Church*  
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## **WORSHIP GUIDE**

*Before you begin your time of worship, find a comfortable place to be and gather whatever you might need: your Bible, candles, something to write on and with, your computer/connected device (if you intend to listen to music online), etc. Feel free to adapt this worship guide in any way that makes best sense to you and those you might be gathered with. (Consider inviting someone – a friend, a family member – to worship with you.) Commit to spending the next hour with God.*

**PRELUDE** - Listen and sing along to a song or hymn that blesses and centers your spirit!

**WELCOME** – (from *An Improbable Gift of Blessing* by Maren C. Tirabassi & Joan Jordan Grant)

Come and hear what God has done -  
**God has listened to all our prayer.**

When we pass through the torrent of deep troubles,  
God turns the sea to dry land.

When we are tangled in the web of life,  
God does not let our feet slip.

When we are tested as silver is tried,  
God keeps us in the land of the living.

When we go through fire and water,  
God brings us to a spacious place.

**Come and hear what God has done --  
God surrounds us with steadfast love.**

### **OPENING PRAYER -**

*Let us join our hearts and spirits in prayer:*

We are reminded by the ancient wisdom in Ecclesiastes, O God,  
that You make everything beautiful in its time.

We pause to take that in,  
even as we recognize our own impatience with all that is difficult,  
our own exasperation with all that is imperfect,  
our own restlessness with all that is incomplete,  
and our own distrust that you can use anything, work through everything, and redeem all.

As we worship, invite us ever more deeply into your time and into your timing.  
Draw us into a new sense of trust and confidence in you.  
Open our eyes and our hearts to see and sense how you might be using this very moment  
for good, for healing, and for wholeness.  
In your time, O God, we trust you, we rely on you, to make all things beautiful. Amen.

## **OPENING HYMN - In God's Time, TFWS 2203**

*Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJeNUlNY7Iw>*

In his time, in his time;  
he makes all things beautiful in his time.  
Lord, please show me every day  
as you're teaching me your way,  
that you do just what you say in your time

2. In your time, in your time;  
you make all things beautiful in your time.  
Lord, my life to you I bring;  
may each song I have to sing  
be to you a lovely thing in your time

## **SCRIPTURE - Genesis 37:12-28 (NRSV)**

<sup>12</sup> Now [Joseph's] brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup> And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." <sup>14</sup> So [Israel] said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

[Joseph] came to Shechem, <sup>15</sup> and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup> "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup> The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. <sup>18</sup> They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. <sup>19</sup> They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." <sup>21</sup> But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup> Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. <sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

<sup>25</sup> Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup>

Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. <sup>28</sup> When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

This is the Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God!**

**LISTEN** - It’s a pretty awful story, isn’t it?

Brothers conspiring to kill their own brother, but then realizing that instead of having blood on their hands, they could have silver in their pockets, and so sell him - sell their own brother, their baby brother, into slavery.

If you are familiar with the whole story, you’d recognize that the enmity in the family begins much earlier. It begins with Jacob (also known as Israel), Joseph’s father, loving, we are told, “Joseph more than any other of his children.” (Gen 37:3). Jacob’s favoritism is obvious, made clear to everyone in the family through the gifting of a very special coat (a coat with princely long sleeves, in some translations, and very colorful, in others). It’s not the best parenting strategy obviously, and predictably, results in all of Joseph’s brothers hating him and not being able to “speak peaceably to him” (Gen. 37:4). Joseph, of course, doesn’t help the cause when he begins telling his siblings about the dreams he has, dreams filled with images in which his brothers, and even his father and mother, seem to bow down to him.

Joseph’s story is one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible, full of intrigue, twists and turns, and even elements of sex and seduction (Who said the Bible isn’t occasionally exciting to read?!). If we were to read onwards, all the way to the end, we’d learn that the many twists and turns, rooted in the very enmity we read about, gratefully, ends well (at least for Joseph and his brothers). Joseph being sold into slavery resulted in his being taken to Egypt. In Egypt, he was bought by an officer of Pharaoh, Potiphar, and eventually - not without some very dicey moments - becomes Pharaoh’s right hand man. “You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you...I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” (Gen 41:40-41). And it was from this position of great authority and power that Joseph was able to save his brothers, save his family, save the whole land of Egypt in fact in the midst of a devastating and severe famine.

But what in the world, you might be asking, does this story have to do with gifts, gifts of the pandemic no less? What does Joseph’s story offer to us, we who are wading through what might feel like an eternal pandemic with all its accompanying challenges and weariness, hoping, more than anything else, to leave it all behind and just get back to what was? What wisdom and

possibility does this story offer to us, we who are seeking to notice, to name, and to hold gratitude for the good (no matter how small), the grace (no matter how fleeting), and the treasures, the treasures we surely want to take with us into whatever season is before us?

As we begin our new worship series, Gifts of the Pandemic, I invite you into this story and to listen for guideposts or perspective that just might open our eyes and hearts anew to God at work all around us, sometimes amidst the most topsy turvy circumstances, and holding out to us gifts, gifts that draw us ever more deeply into the fullness of life, God's life. These gifts are not meant to be cast aside and forgotten, once our circumstances change. These gifts are meant, I believe, to inform and transform what comes next.

The whole long story of Joseph begins in Genesis chapter 37, skips chapter 38, and continues in chapter 39 through the end of the book (chapter 50). It is a significant story in this first book of the Bible. If we only ever heard of or knew of the slice we read today, that of Joseph's brothers conspiring to kill him, opting for a moment to throw him into a pit instead, and finally discovering a way to both do away with him and gain a benefit from him, this would be a truly awful story. And it is. But that's not where the story ends and that's important.

I thought about this as I reflected on the past 18 months. I don't know about you but these past 18 months have exhausted me. They have been filled to the gills with collective grief and tragedy starting with all the death and devastation attributed to the coronavirus itself, death and devastation that continues even now, less because of the virus and more because of human shortsightedness. Then came George Floyd's murder and story after story after story of police brutality, even here in our own island city, all setting off a (incomplete) reckoning around race and racism in this country. This was followed by story after story after story of anti-Asian violence, grandmas and grandpas, aunties and uncles, assaulted on buses, streets, public places. Then came the devastation wreaked by climate change: the wildfires, the hurricanes, the earthquakes, the cyclones, the tornados, the heatwaves and the drought. Combined, some 22 billion dollars of damage happened last year alone due to weather events. This speaks nothing of the personal grief and tragedy, fear and trauma we've each experienced in our own lives. We have individually and collectively lost so much. And while it would be easy to stew in our loss, easy to become overwhelmed by anger or frustration, we as people of faith have to know, have to be grounded in the truth that this is not where the story ends. And that's important.

Our friends at Embrace like to affirm that "the best is yet to come" and I can appreciate that. I can appreciate that my story, our story is still unfolding, that this moment, these last 18 months tell only a slice of a longer story. Deacon Mike has shared with me a number of times that our faith is lived in hindsight. I have taken it to mean that sometimes, we can only see God at work, see the

grace and the good, when we look back. And so Joseph's story reminds me to look forward...in hope, and to look backward...in gratitude.

This story prompted me to remember the movie, *Sliding Doors*. It's probably 20 years old and tells two stories – what happens when Helen, the main character, makes it onto the subway train on a particular day...and what happens when she doesn't. Two dramatically different possibilities arise in a split second that lead Helen down two very different paths. Isn't it true that our lives are full of Sliding Door moments – they are big and small, noticed and unnoticed – but every moment pulls us into a new set of possibilities. Would the people Israel have been saved had Joseph not been sold as a slave? Would the relationship between Joseph and his brothers ever have become a loving one had such drama not taken place? We don't know. What we do know is that nothing – not even something as ugly, violent and traumatic as being sold into slavery - prevented God from continuing to be present and to make possible transformation. One commentator puts it like this, “In our lives we cannot avoid being accountable for actions which hurt and give pain to others whether on a personal level or indeed on a global level. However, it is the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit which can overcome our sin, bring new life and possibilities from situations.” It is indeed good news that all of life is useable, that possibilities for goodness, for reconciliation, for wholeness continue to be generated no matter what. Joseph's story reminds me that all of life, all of it, is useable and all of life holds possibility. (And so we look forward in hope, backward in gratitude, but we look around...in faith, with trust.)

Finally, throughout Joseph's story, the scripture writers note that God was with Joseph – it is noted when he is sold to Potiphar (“The Lord was with Joseph” Gen 39:2); and it is noted when Joseph is banished to prison (“But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love” Gen 39:21). Regardless of how life unfolded – positively or negatively – God was with Joseph. God was not punishing Joseph when bad things happened and God was not blessing Joseph when good things happened – God was, in some sense, simply walking alongside Joseph throughout. And Joseph acknowledges this – each time he interpreted a dream, for the pharaoh's cupbearer, baker and the pharaoh himself, he pointed to God. Joseph and God, in one sense, were partners – Joseph is rooted in God and because of that, God is able to act through Joseph. Joseph's story reminds me that God is with me. God is with us. No matter what.

Friends, Joseph's story invites us, I think, to travel through this challenging season with a lightness and with assurance. God is with us, now and always. God is with us come what may. And God can and God does use anything that comes our way - even a pandemic - to seed goodness and life, to invite healing, wholeness, and reconciliation, to grow love and justice. So may we every day and always, look forward with hope, look backward with gratitude, and look around with faith. Amen.

## **SONG OF RESPONSE/MEDITATION - How Can I Keep From Singing, TFWS 2212**

*Listen and watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2hddmy63U>*

**PRAYERS of the PEOPLE** – *Spend time in prayer. What did you hear for yourself through today's scripture and reflection? Talk to God about it. Then lift up the joys and concerns that are in your heart. You might write them down, speak them aloud, or pray for them in silence.*

*We would be honored to pray with you and for you.*

*Please send a note via text, mail, or email or give a call to our Healing Prayer Team.*

**SHARING OUR GIFTS**– *How might you offer yourself and all that you have to God this week? How are you being invited to practice generosity? Spend a moment listening for God's direction.*

*You are invited to contribute financially towards the purpose and ministry of TTUMC. We are a congregation committed to being conduits of God's healing in our neighborhood and beyond, and in so doing, impact the last and the least. You can contribute by mailing in a check, dropping off cash, or giving online (visit [www.twintowersumc.org](http://www.twintowersumc.org)). Take a moment and do that now.*

## **CLOSING HYMN - O Breath of Life, W&S 3146**

*Listen & watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lpCy3Qq3VI>*

O Breath of Life, come sweeping through us,  
revive your church with life and power.

O Breath of life, come cleanse, renew us,  
and fit your church to meet this hour.

O Wind of God, come bend us, break us,  
till humbly we confess our need.

Then in your tenderness remake us,  
revive, restore, for this we plead.

O Breath of love, come breathe within us,  
renewing thought and will and heart.

Come, love of Christ, afresh to win us;  
revive your church in every part

**BENEDICTION** - May the God who makes all things beautiful in their time, strengthen your heart with confidence, open your eyes to sense hope and possibility, and pump you full of boldness to adapt, to innovate, and to dance with life as it comes to you. And through it all, may the breath of life and love, the very wind of God, sweep through us and breath within us. Amen!

**NOW GO AND PASS CHRIST'S PEACE!**

**NEXT WEEK'S SCRIPTURE:** Isaiah 43:19