

“We didn’t start the fire”. So begins Billy Joel’s hit song about the challenges of growing up between 1949 when he was born and 1989 the year he released the song. The song lists some of the major events of that period in single word allusions that add frenetic impact to the relentless beat of the music. His one-word references cover the gamut from politics to popular culture: Joe McCarthy to Marilyn Monroe, the Brooklyn Dodgers (sic) to Wheel of Fortune, the H-Bomb to the Aids epidemic. And, as the title says, some of the major events of this period are due to events or decisions that happened before his time.

Personally I think 2020 may give that 40 year span a run for its money. There are enough parodies of “We didn’t start the fire” being posted on Facebook to indicate that others think so as well. We are beleaguered by the corona virus, political dysfunction, social unrest, financial instability, natural and man-made disasters, and meddling by foreign governments; the world seems to have turned upside down – and that’s the polite way of describing our current situation. We might well wonder where God is in the midst of this...

But that is the way of the world. Sin compounds sin and our mortal fallibility tends the fire that we might not have started but we certainly fueled. The story of Joseph illustrates this and also illustrates how God uses our circumstances for good.

Although our reading says that this is the story of the family of Jacob our protagonist is Joseph, yes that “technicolor dream coat” Joseph. Joseph is one of Rachel’s children, and the youngest of the adult brothers. He is Joseph’s favorite son. You might remember how parental favoritism has played a prominent role in Jacob’s family. Once again the eldest has been displaced by the youngest. Jacob’s father Isaac favored Esau and Jacob’s mother Rebecca favored him. As result of Rebecca’s machinations Esau is deprived of his blessing and vows vengeance on Jacob. This last blow in which Jacob deceived his father by disguising himself as Esau came after Jacob had convinced Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew. Deception between husband and wife, between son and father, anger, rejections, and vows of revenge are set in play and Jacob will pay the price.

Jacob’s favoritism, epitomized by Jacob’s gift to Joseph of a long robe with sleeves, has not endeared Joseph to his brothers. Moreover Joseph is a talented youth, subject to prophetic dreams, dreams which in the telling are supposed to become true. When Joseph tells of dreams in which his family bows down to him it’s another reason for the brothers to resent him. Finally, Joseph is a tattle-tale – he brings his father a bad report of the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. Why then would his father send him alone to be with his brother who were tending flock smiles away? It was asking for trouble. Joseph didn’t start the fire but he certainly stoked the flames.

On seeing Joseph from a distance the brothers give vent to their anger. Although they stop short of fratricide, the brothers decide to sell Joseph to some traders and to deceive their

father into thinking that he was slain by a wild beast. They dip the long robe with sleeves in blood and bring it Jacob to let Jacob draw his own conclusions. Lies and deception continue. Jacob's own behavior has come back to bite him – as it did when he was tricked by his uncle into marrying Leah before Rachel.

Two weeks ago our reading from Romans included verse 8:28 “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” We are going to see God working his purpose out through Joseph over the next two weeks but Joseph is not going to have an easy time of it. He will be become a slave and he will be falsely imprisoned before becoming the Pharaoh's right-hand man. Joseph will eventually bring his family, including Jacob to Egypt to escape a famine. He will establish them in lands where their skill as shepherds will be valued. Joseph puts in place policies to manage the visions of famine that his dreams have warned him about. The people of Egypt will indenture themselves to the pharaoh through these policies that will eventually enslave most of the peasants of Egypt who do so in order to avoid starving to death. The burden of taxation will be crushing. So Joseph is a clever policy geek, but in so doing his policies are sewing the seeds for the slavery that will entrap his descendants. Joseph didn't start the fire but he certainly stoked its flames.

Granted this sets the stage for the Exodus but a great cost of human suffering.

Given that our world is a mess these days, where, as we look around us, do we see signs of hope? I see it in peaceful support for acknowledging that we need to do something about the racism that affects our society. Unfortunately we also see a lot of negativity as those who feel threatened push back, sometimes violently. I see it in the dedication of the healthcare workers who have been on the frontlines combatting the pandemic, whose sacrifice is made harder by those who refuse to take the necessary safety precautions. I see it in the teachers who are struggling to find a way to reach out to their students in the midst of uncertainty and the challenge of resuming in person schooling while they are trying to manage their own families at home. I see it in the prayers that are posted online which demonstrates the caring and support that goes on behind the scenes – even when these are offset by words of willful ignorance and lies.

So yes, God shows up and we will find a way through this. Our gospel reminds us that the best way is to do this is together, as the body of Christ, the people of God – the faithful remnant.

Our gospel lesson is a very familiar story. After the feeding of the 5,000+ Jesus sends the disciples away in a boat so he can get a little peace and quiet. The sea gets choppy and in the mists of the early morning the disciples see Jesus walking towards them on top of the water. They are freaked out and Jesus tells them not to be afraid. Peter, ever the spokesperson for the

disciples, asks for proof that the figure is indeed Jesus, asks Jesus to call him to come across the water. Jesus complies and Peter begins to walk. Then he notices the wind – remember never to look down! Then Peter begins to sink. Jesus rescues him and chides him with the words: You of little faith, why did you doubt.” Now most of the time we associate Peter’s expression of doubt with his starting to sink but one commentator suggested that Peter’s doubt is the test he puts before Jesus, when he asks to leave the boat. (NIB Matthew, pg. 328 , Eugene M. Boring) In Matthew the boat can be a metaphor for the church faithfully awaiting Christ. Peter leaves his fellow disciples by putting Jesus to the test and leaving instead of waiting for Jesus to arrive – which Jesus was in the process of doing. It’s not like the disciples could have gotten away. So if we take this perspective to heart in these times when we are battered with the winds of fear, uncertainty, and even the threat of illness and death, we do well to stay together. Jesus will come, he has promised to be present with us whenever 2 or three are gathered in his name. (Matthew 18:20)

No we did start the fire but we know that advertently or inadvertently we contribute to the flames. Our best hope, not just for survival but to be a part of things that work together for good for those who love God, is to stay together as the people of God, that faithful remnant who have been called according to his purpose.

Amen.