



Unraveled: Why Does It Happen?
Pastor Sarah Rohde
Bethlehem Lutheran Church
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Today we bring to a close the theme that's guided us the past 11 weeks – “Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart.” Over these 11 weeks, we've been introduced to Bible stories, and we have walked with all kinds of Biblical characters in their experiences of unraveling, all with the goal of deepening our sense for God's presence and activity when the threads of our own lives start to come loose. It's been a meaningful and super relevant theme, a weekly guidepost in the midst of all the unraveling that's taking place in our lives and in our world these days. If you're joining us today and haven't had a chance to hear those stories and sermons from the past few months, I encourage you to go to our website and listen in on those while you're doing dishes or out for a walk sometime in the coming days. Church can be wherever you are these days, so I hope you'll take advantage of that.

I've been reflecting on some of the themes or takeaways from this series, knowing that we'd be wrapping it up today. And as I thought about it, one of the things I appreciated most about this sermon series was the nuances that it evoked around unraveling itself – and God in the midst of it.

One thing that was lifted up throughout this series is that there's often not a clear reason or cause for the unraveling that we face in life. A lot of the time life unravels because that's how life goes sometimes – it's not necessarily anyone's fault or choice, it's not God's machinations from on high, it's simply part of what it is to be human. We are not ultimately in control, and that means we are vulnerable to life unraveling due to an unexpected diagnosis, or loss of work, or an experience that undoes our confidence or clarity in some way, due to death and the rollercoaster of grief, or due to this pandemic that just continues to unravel the most basic threads of daily life, and of course this week we're so attuned to the way it's unraveling our holiday celebrations and ability to gather safely with those we love.

Our God doesn't necessarily shield us from these experiences of unraveling, and that can be a really painful realization sometimes. What good is God if God doesn't prevent these things from happening in our lives? That's a bold and honest question – one that I'm sure God has heard human beings utter again and again, especially when life is unraveling. God in Christ doesn't promise protection from life's pain or vulnerability; God promises God's full and sustaining presence with us when we face life's pain and fragility.

God and God's promises help us to put one foot in front of the other, and along the way, there will be things we learn, things we see in a new way, gestures of kindness and care that buoy us in our weakness, hearts that change and cannot go back, moments of grace, even laughter, all of these

things that remind us that life and love – the very things of God – are going to pull us through yet again. That's God in the midst of an unraveled life. God guiding us, sustaining us, and eventually creating something new within us, just like the weaving that's behind me, something new and beautiful that emerges from the tattered threads of our experiences.

And having said that, I also think the other truth that this series helped us get at, the nuance that we touched on, is that sometimes unraveling *is* the work of God in our life. God desires for us lives of continual transformation. The kind of transformation that is brought about by the gospel, the love of God addressing us in such a way that we are changed, stirred up to live in new ways. And when our God starts to see human beings that are falling for comfort over truth, falling for complacency over holy dissatisfaction, falling for self-absorption over care for neighbor, God gets to work trying in every way God can to unravel hearts that are settling for life as it is rather than life as God dreams it to be.

Sometimes we need to be unraveled by the love of God. Our cemented judgments that allow us to feel good about ourselves and condemn someone else – those need to be unraveled so that we can see again through eyes of love. Our desire for convenience needs to be unraveled, confronted with the cost that it is to humanity and to our earth. The privileges granted to those of us who have white skin need to be unraveled – not just for the sake of our siblings of color, but for our sake, too. Our tendency to stack grievances one on top of the other needs to be unraveled

by the power of forgiveness. Our temptation to work night and day needs to be unraveled by the gift of Sabbath rest. And our apathy, our hardened hearts, the parts of us that would prefer to turn away from suffering or injustice so that we don't have to do a thing about it – that part of us needs to be unraveled by love and how love works. Love notices hurt, love bends toward the oppressed, and love moves us to respond.

We will resist this unraveling; it's so much easier to stay put in what we know, it's so much safer to ignore the problems of the world and to tell ourselves they're not really our problems. We can live our life that way, but our passage from Exodus today gives us language for that kind of living. It describes it as living with a hardened heart. Living as Pharaoh did, with a heart that was unwilling to be unraveled. Pharaoh would not dare listen to the voice of God, no way would he entertain liberation for his slaves, and he was most certainly unwilling to consider his own bondage to power and greed. He had no idea the freedom, the life, that was waiting for him, should he be open to heeding the voice of God, brought to him by Moses and Aaron, and allowing that voice to lead him to life abundant – a life that is simultaneously so much more difficult and so much more meaningful.

Pharaoh's hardened heart provokes honest reflection for all of us. It causes us to step back and examine the health of our own hearts. Where have our hearts become hardened, closed off, unwilling to wonder? When have we refused the love of God, tugging on our heart, trying to unravel a part of our life that is stagnant or meaningless? Where have we ignored or judged

the suffering of others, rather than allowing our hearts to be affected by it and responsive to it?

Hardened hearts keep us safer, certainly more comfortable; but they also block us from the beating pulse of love that softens us and calls us to lives of compassion and justice.

God says in Ezekiel: “A new heart I will give you, and a new Spirit I will put within you. I will remove from your body a heart of stone, and I will give you a heart of flesh.”

This tragic portrayal of Pharaoh’s hardened heart that is literally closed off to God’s invitation to freedom, is such a powerful one to have in front of us as we bring this series to a close. Because perhaps the invitation embedded in each of the stories we read over the last 11 weeks is this: will we dare to live with soft hearts? Will we live with hearts that are willing to be unraveled by the love of God? And then - will we let that love call us outside of ourselves, outside of our comfort zones, to care for others and to work for a world of justice and peace?

Living with soft hearts is critical for the work of justice. Our soft hearts help us notice when things in the world are not okay. Our soft hearts are affected and hurt when people in this world are not safe to be who they are. Our soft hearts lament that more and more children and adults are going to bed each night hungry, especially now as the effects of this long pandemic set in.

Our soft hearts see pain and injustice, they can't not; but our soft hearts are also supple, and open, beating for something more, something better. Our soft hearts connect us to others; we join with people who dream right alongside us and want to get to work together.

Our soft hearts mobilize us for advocacy and action; they inspire us to use our voices, to write letters, sometimes even to protest, so that we can bring about changes in our society that allow for every person and family to have enough, to be safe and valued for who they are.

Church, right now it might be especially tempting to close up and just get through. I know I've felt that many days over the past few months, especially on days when I feel like I have nothing left. And yet the love that comes out of the heartbeat of God tells us that these are precisely the times to set our thoughts and our hearts on something other than ourselves. The work of justice and caring for neighbor can take on all kinds of different forms; this weekend we're inviting you to write a letter to our legislators in Washington, but we've also shared with you recently the many ways we can all pitch in and support some of our closest ministry partners, all of whom are serving the most vulnerable among us.

Write a letter. Send a donation. Buy a gift card for a foster family or a guest at Lazarus. Help provide the meal that Bethlehem will serve at Hesed House on December 23. Whatever you do, let your soft and beautiful hearts be

your guide in this journey; it'll hurt sometimes, and it'll bless you beyond imagining.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

The song we're about to hear is one of my absolute favorites. It's called "Crowded Table" and was originally recorded by The Highwomen. The lyrics paint a picture of the world as we want it to be, full tables, verdant gardens, and the song reminds us of the role that each of us plays in making it so.

But I just felt like I had to add one caveat... because we are going into a week where we all desperately want our Thanksgiving tables to be crowded. And I didn't want to risk sending any mixed messages, as my hope and prayer is that all of us will do our part to be as safe as possible this week.

So let us take in this amazing song, let us hold this vision of a crowded table as something for which we hope, not just for ourselves but for the whole world.