

Breaking Open

Passover Day One 5780 - Rabbi Aaron Brusso

In order to get through this we are not only going to need supplies and solutions we are going to need, as I've said, to tell our stories differently.

We are also going to have to address another American cultural problem, our desire to get through things quickly and put them behind us in a relentlessly optimistic lurch forward.

There's a saying that captures this collective shrug: "it's all good."

"It's all good" is often well intentioned. Said with a wave of the hand or a nod of the head it comes off as grit but it can be just as problematic as the self absorbed wallowing it is intended to avoid.

It's bad theologically because it erases the human experience. We feel pain, disappointment and sadness and then we are told "it's all good," you're probably feeling that because you don't have the right perspective. Things are meant to be. Maybe people are suffering but it happens in life, there's a reason for these things, it's all good.

It's bad morally. When we look out at the pain and suffering of others we understandably may feel overwhelmed and this could be a way of unplugging our empathy. "I know horrible, horrible but things will get better, in fact here are some indications that they already are, it's all good."

It's bad emotionally. It can be a way of being tough and showing that we won't let things get to us. "Hey you just went through something difficult, that must have been scary, you ok?" "Yeah totally, it's all good."

Bob Dylan's voice may not be what it once was but his writing is still as searing and subversive as ever. In his 2009 album "Together through Life" he has a song called "It's all good." He sings:

Wives are leavin' their husbands, they beginning to roam
They leave the party and they never get home
I wouldn't change it, even if I could
Same ol' story—it's all good

Brick by brick, they tear you down
A teacup of water is enough to drown

Check your oil, look under the hood
Whatever you see, it's all good

People in the country, people on the land
Some so sick, they can hardly stand
Everybody would move away, if they could
It's hard to believe but it's all good

The widow's cry, the orphan's plea
Everywhere you look, more misery
Come 'long with me, babe, I wish you would
You know what I'm sayin', it's all good

You can hear him critiquing the theology that would ignore the widow and the orphan, the morality that would ignore the sick and the denial of emotion that would ignore being torn down or left by a spouse.

The Passover story is far from an “it's all good” story. It doesn't go from bad to good. It goes from slavery to freedom, from disgrace to praise. We sit with the fact that we were dehumanized by other people through slavery and the fact that we are no different than our persecutors because we know that the idolatrous disgrace lives within us too. There is no jumping to “it's all good.” There is no “good,” only a chance at responsibility.

In fact one of the first things we do is yachatz, we break the middle matzah. There is a lot of great food coming. There is wine. We have our loved ones. And then we break the matzah. It's not really bread and we're not breaking it so we can pass it around to eat. We hide a piece away as if to say, “things are broken and we are not moving on until we name it and do something about it.” No easy resolution. And even then this matzah will not be whole, but we have a chance to be if we don't ignore the problem.

Things are not all good. Things are broken. And we have to talk about it. Talking about it is not an act of complaining or fishing for sympathy. It's an act of identifying the brokenness by telling each other what happened. On Passover we all become magids, story tellers. We spend time going to the painful place and telling each other what it was like. It's not all good. Here's what happened. Here's what's happening.

One of the things I've learned over the years as a pastor is that when someone is going through something the first thing they need is the dignity to tell their story and be heard. Even if before I call or meet with someone I know what's going on, the first thing I ask is, "tell me what happened." In the magid, in the telling of the story there is the beginning of integrating the pain, the loss, the disappointment so the process may begin of helping this human being form themselves into the new person they inevitably will be in the wake of their experience.

"It's all good" would be like saying "I know my clothes from childhood don't fit but I will wear them anyway. It's all good." We tell stories because things happen in life that make our old stories too small.

And Jewish tradition prepares us for this through the cries of a bris, the smashing of a glass at a wedding, the act of admitting to sins we have yet to commit. We create space for a more morally complicated story to grow into.

This Sunday night we have organized a magid with medical professionals and their families in our community so they can tell their stories. We arranged a panel and will hear from a chief medical director of a hospital, a doctor who got sick from the virus treating patients, the spouse of a doctor and the parents of a doctor treating Covid patients. In response to a call for stories my inbox was flooded. The people we are calling heroes are human beings and it's not all good. They need to tell their stories.

The seder teaches us that the healing is in the sharing and the listening and ultimately the growth that comes from it.

We say at the end of the seder, "zach shochen me'oneh...may you God soon lead the offshoots of your stock bringing the redeemed to Zion in joy. L'shona ha'ba'ah b'yerushalyim. Next year in Jerusalem."

There is not a resolution but a hope of some better place. How do we know? We've already gone part of the way by not denying our humanity and saying "it's all good," but by telling our stories and having them heard and growing into the new space we have made for each other.

There is an opportunity to allow our experiences to shape us into kinder, more sensitive people committed to creating a more expansive and

generous space for all. We can't go back or move past. We can only get to that better place by growing into it.

Jerusalem is an actual place. It is also the space we make in all of this to hear each others stories.