

*Based on Genesis 45, selected verses. Joseph provides for his family in a famine.*

Two years it has been since the famine began, for Joseph and his brothers. Two years since COVID began, for us.

It is not over. It is only just beginning.

The *endemic* phase, we are calling it now, this nebulous transition we undergo where the worst is (hopefully) over and instead we learn how to live with this new reality.

In order to survive the next phase of the famine, Joseph's brothers and their families must literally move to a new land. It is a massive paradigm shift for them, just like the kind of massive paradigm shift you and I are required to make today in order to survive what may very well be another five years of *endemic phase COVID and its aftermath*.

The question becomes, for Joseph and his brothers – and for us – how we provide for each other through the rest of the famine/endemic COVID. Where do we place our trust, how do we use our power for good, what do we do with our fear in a time of great unknown?

For us, as for Joseph and his brothers, we do well to remember that simply staying alive is a victory, that provision *will* come (even if it requires us to metaphorically move to a new land), and that friendships are absolutely critical for anything approaching wellness on the other side.

For us, as for Joseph and his brothers, we do to keep an on emerging generations, to marshal our resources, as Joseph says, for the sake of our children and for our children's children, so that they will not come to poverty.

This is what our ministry at Shepherd University is all about.

*Morgan Sell, Director of Campus Ministry:*

Today is the Universal Day of Prayer for Students, sponsored by the World Student Christian Federation, whose mission is to restore justice and peace in the world. And today I will be reflecting on how might we best pray for students these days?

Well let's just say it's been rough. It's not just been like run of the mill rough, it's been deeper than that, longer than that, rougher than that. It's been well, hellish.

I'll start off by kind of circling this word prayer in my own way. To pray, or prayer, can look and feel and sound like many different things. Of course, there is the traditional prayer, hands together, head down, eyes lowered or closed, heart and mind on God. There is also the bedside prayer, kneeling, hands together, sometimes looking up in desperation, other times, head lowered, eyes downcast or closed. Prayers can often include some kind of plea, or request, they can be silent, in meditation, in remembrance. Prayer can be joyful! Prayers can be in celebration of something or someone, or some good news. To God all praise and glory, we would say. Basically, however we believe prayer is best heard, by ourselves, others, the universe, God, or higher power, is usually how the prayer is best delivered.

Prayer can also look different on the outside, we can pray together, we can pray alone, we can pray over the phone, or outside in a circle, or even at the line in Walmart when we need to cut to the front and someone graciously says yes.

Prayer can be brought into a space, it can bring people together, It can tear people apart and we must also recognize that prayer in many spaces has made a lot of people feel like they just don't belong.

And If there is anything we don't need MORE of, it is that polarization through prayer. Instead Let's revolutionize prayer, reform it, reuse it, and reignite it's intention with love and understanding.

I'll be honest I had a lot of resistance to the physical act of praying. I had never been taught how to pray in the traditional way, so I really just didn't know how to do it. Instead though, over the years, I, like many of you all here today, have developed my own way of connecting to spirit my own way of watching over the ones that I love (including myself). This is definitely not to discount the more traditional ways of praying, for certain those ways of praying have gotten me through some of my darkest times. They have also been some of my most empowering moments. Each way of praying is important, each is good.

Throughout my time as campus ministry director, I have made friendships with many students since August of 2020. This was the summer after the pandemic began, masks were being worn, hand sanitizer ready, I set up a table outside of the eating place there on campus with my rainbow stickers and my handouts and I met Courtney. Courtney was so nice, well she IS still so nice. I remembered through that interaction, the wonderful energy that comes WITH students. Students, following their passion, in classes that exhilarate them, expressing themselves through art and theater, finding their voice in activism and equality. Students of life. My soul was remembering this unique energy of the student learner.

Since then, we've had a year and a half of continued stress, fear, & alterations to what University life would look like and the students were forced to FIND resilience. Many of these students, far away from their families, already set to a disadvantage. Many students identifying as BIPOC, Black, Indigenous, People of color, some students also some identifying as part of the LGBTQIA + community, now mixed in a pandemic where classes, mostly held online and in person interactions with real live humans began dwindling more and more. Isolation that we may have felt as a community, compounded in a dorm room where the kitchen is a shared space, and the shared living spaces no longer lived in. Anxieties rising. Let's just say, that the bag of resilience, that was almost empty to begin with, was now stretched, worn, and being carried for far longer than it was ever meant to be carried.

I have been amazed with how students like Courtney have continued to make art, and continued to express themselves in a time such as this. Her and the other theater students just put on a student led production of "Voices from our people", a play that asked the question over and over again: Can we heal by ourselves, or do we heal together?

I often feel that the best way that we can support students is to simply keep showing up. It is my job to not ask them for very much right now, but to instead ask them to lunch. Because lunch is a treat. And by God, these students deserve to be treated. Lunch is relaxed, it is fun, it is sometimes, exactly what is needed during this

ongoing time of uncertainty. At lunch you don't have to have conversations you don't want to have, you simply just sit there, be seen, be fed, be well, & be loved.

Often times during these lunches, I'm able to share parts of my journey, and also able to deeply listen to parts of their journeys as well. They share their poetry, their stressors, their thoughts about the future. It feels like a family around one table.

Without really saying it out loud, these students and myself, have all kind of vowed not to use toxic positivity. When things are hard, we name that. We use dark humor, but we try not to be too sarcastic. We speak intentionally, we listen. We realize we're all learning together and we're all doing the best we can.

What can you do to support these students you might wonder? Well, you can continue to support me? & the work I'm doing by continuing to support this congregation as well as the ministries it holds. You can get involved with the committees of this church that focus on LGBT equality as well as racial justice. You can volunteer with the Eastern Panhandle Youth Alliance that helps students 12-18 who are LGBTQIA+ identifying, or you can find ways to support the international students at Shepherd University, God knows they need our support and our love. And if you're feeling really called, I invite you to join forces with me on the campus ministry committee. Join me in meeting these students exactly where they are and quite literally watching them lead the way.

You can, and you already have done lots of things for this ministry, you've had us over for dinner, given us furniture and food. Remember, we like food. And you've offered generous gifts that have provided hope and restored faith. We definitely need all the support you may feel called to share. Like I said, its been rough & these students, all students, are just amazing. And should be treated with so much deep profound respect and admiration.

I personally cannot wait for springtime. I can't wait to go for a walk outside with this group of students, to think to myself, we made it! We made it. We got through another season, another cold, dark, long, rough, and sometimes hellish season.

And although I cannot promise there won't be hardships or challenges in the next season, I can promise that I'll be there cheering them on & learning from them. I will be praying for them in my own way. I will keep showing up, even when it's hard, and I hope you will too. For all the students, from pre-K to college, let's love them, be proud of them, listen to them, let them lead the way, but also celebrate them when things are good and when things are not good. Let's be honest with them about the ways we mess up and how we're trying to do better.

Thank you.