

The Joseph story is about living through a season of distress and pain. It's message is a reminder to us that no matter what the circumstances, no matter how bad it gets, we are still living out our experience in the sight of the living God, who loves and redeems. It continually reminds us that the zig zag of life, the ups and the downs, are not necessarily caused by our own actions. "It rains on the juste and the unjuste." The principal challenge to us in such times is to hold on. To keep the faith. To continue to run the race. I, and you...will get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this messy time, and sometimes our lives seem to be a mess, all messed up,...somehow, usually beyond our ability to see how it is even possible....God will use this mess...for good. The challenge in a season of pain is to not make foolish choices. And at the same time not to be naive...thinking we do not have choices to make, or that we can ignore what is happening. Always, always to remember, with God's help we will get through the difficult times.

Barbara and I went up to the farmhouse on Friday afternoon. It is simply colder north of Highway 7, than it is here in Stirling or even further south in Belleville. When I was in full time ministry there was a year when our Synod met in Trenton. And I lept at the opportunity to spend 3 nights at the farmhouse, with the goal being to close the farmhouse up after my 3 days at Synod. It was during the second week of November. As I drove out of Pickering it was raining, a cold rain...about 5 above. When I got to Belleville and turned north, I was surprised to observe that by the time I reached Foxboro, the rain had turned to sleet. The globs of precipitation hit the windshield and splattered. By the time I arrived

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in Madoc, the village, it was wet snow that was falling, but mercifully not staying on the ground. By the time I crossed Highway 7, and we are only talking about a distance of a few hundred yards, the snow was staying on the ground. Ten minutes further north, at the farmhouse the accumulation was 4 inches. It was beautiful to look at. Every day during Synod the snow melted away. Every evening as I returned to the farmhouse to eat dinner and sleep, two inches of fresh snow fell. I was insecure about the whole thing. I got through it. I had an opportunity to spend precious time

with my colleague and friend John Blue who was ministering in Timmins at the time. In spite of the discomfort of the experience at the time, it has become a precious memory. And by the way I have never slept at the farmhouse when it was snowing, or snow was on the ground since. Older and wiser? Maybe.

For Joseph you would have to say, he had arrived at the good times. Prison has long since faded into memory. Living like a slave in Egypt, even a well kept slave, has faded into memory. He has come to the attention of the Pharaoh who has committed into Joseph's hand real power. He is not the Pharaoh, but no one in all of Egypt has more power than Joseph has. He is in charge of disaster relief. The 7 years of plenty, when the Nile enriched fields produced bumper crops are history. The 7 years of famine are in full bloom...I guess blight would be a better word. And as predicted through the dreams which God gave to Pharaoh, and which Pharaoh came to understand only through the interpretation of the Hebrew prisoner, Joseph, Joseph has become the man in charge of managing this life threatening crisis.

He ordered the building of storage barns and granaries. Joseph managed food supplies during the 7 good years and saved a

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food supply for the 7 bad years. Now people outside of the cities of Egypt and throughout the kingdoms of the Mediterranean basin are dying for want of food. It was an international crisis. Only in Egypt was there a food supply that could provide relief during this ancient depression. Only to those who could afford to travel to Egypt, to buy grain was the possibility of survival a reality. And by the way, ancient Egyptian records verify the scope and the nature of this terrible time.

Joseph had said to Pharaoh, "I'm not a magician or a seer. I do not have a "gift" for interpreting dreams. But God, the living God is showing Pharaoh what is going to occur in order that Pharaoh may be His instrument to save many lives." A lot of people made the trek to Egypt to buy grain during the crisis. And in the midst of these refugees in search of hope, who should wander in to the Food and Relief Administration over which Joseph functions as the Pharaoh's man in charge...but 10 Hebrew brothers who were responsible for Joseph's descent into hell more than 15 years ago. They had meant to kill him. They saw the chance to make

some money and they sold him into slavery, bound for Egypt. Their assumption was that the kid was soft. A spoiled brat. With all the premeditation of a gang hit, they assumed he would disappear forever. That Joseph would die. It was a perfect crime. Someone else would pull the trigger. They would not even have to watch. They smeared blood from a sheep or a goat on the coat of many colours. They tore it. They told Jacob, their father a wild animal must have gotten their younger brother.

There is another side to that coin. Joseph has become a successful and powerful administrator in Egypt. If he gives an order it is law. If he says something has to happen, the only legitimate question is “how do you want it done.” Notice this! Joseph has

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never lifted a finger to try and see his father or his brothers in seven or more years. He has never tried to take an armed guard and go home to see how things are, how the family is doing. There is a degree...we are talking about his family here....there is a degree to which Joseph has dealt with the pain of what his brothers did to him by turning the page and burying the book under the workload he called his new career in Egypt. He did not forget God. He did not forget the dreams of his brothers and even his father Jacob bowing before him. But he has never expended so much as one drop of energy to reunite with his family or his past in Canaan. Here he is in Egypt. Powerful. Well to do. The second most powerful man in the Empire. And into the granary walks his past...his brothers want to buy food.

Suddenly the old wounds are bleeding and raw, as though it was yesterday that they bound him and through him into that empty cistern, declared it time for lunch and talked about the various ways they could eliminate him while he screamed in pain and begged for life. The past has a way of finding us in the present. And at least one of the lessons of the story of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph and his family, Jacob his father has responsibility for a major chunk of this mess...at least one of the lessons of this Joseph saga is that no pain is so deep, and potentially life altering, as the pain inflicted by family and within the family circle.

What is Joseph to do? It is clear that his brothers do not recognize Joseph. Why should they? He was a teenager when they threw him into the cistern and sold him to Ishmaelites who were going in

caravan to Egypt. Now he is a middle aged man. He is dressed like an Egyptian nobleman. He wears the eye make-up that was part of that culture. His hair is done in the Egyptian style. He is

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muscled. His chest is that typical V shape we see in the movies. He's handsome. He does not look like the smart alec kid they would remember. He speaks Egyptian! He catches on fast that are speaking Hebrew and he remembers enough to his birth tongue to understand exactly what they are saying. And he is smart. Joseph calls on an interpreter to converse with them. He never lets on that he knows who they are or understands what they are saying. If there is one thing Joseph does understand it is this. He has them right where he wants them. If he wants revenge...and it is tempting! So tempting! He could do it...wipe them all out. Set them up so they appear guilty of fraud or robbery.

First he accuses them of espionage. "You are foreign agents come to check out where we are vulnerable here in Egypt during this crisis of famine. You mean us harm. You want to steal the food we have so carefully stored and are distributing as relief here, and selling to those who come from afar." (Does any of this sound like current events?) He puts them under arrest for a few days to cool their heels. Joseph visits the cells and he hears them talking. "We are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen." And Reuben who had tried to keep the 9 from actually shedding Joseph's blood says, "Didn't I tell you? Didn't I say don't sin against the boy? And you wouldn't listen. You never do! Now look at what's happening to us all." There is a real stew of guilt going around, and the blame game is being played too. And that comment that never really helps. "I told you this would happen." It does not change a thing.

Do you know where the saving grace is in these scenes in which the past has invaded the present and brought new pain to

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everyone from the old family in Canaan? It is actually Joseph who says the words. I believe Joseph is wise. In fact I believe he is so wise, and faithful he has not yet worked out what he must ultimately do. Joseph says, "Obey me and you will live, for I fear God!" Do you realize where that insight must ultimately lead? If it is true, if Joseph fears God, the God

whom we know in Jesus Christ, the God of the whole of the Old Testament and the New; if he fears God he is going to have to love God first and last, and his neighbour, the family in Canaan is in need, they came to Egypt to buy food because there was nowhere else to turn. They are desperate. He is going to have to love them...as though they were himself. He is going to have to forgive them. He is going to have to let go of his own pain, and embrace them in theirs. And Joseph has not yet figured that all out. So the story continues.

Family pain. Bad memories. Stuff out of the past when we suffered at the hands of people who ought to have simply loved us. If you want to be free of that ultimately you have to decide to just let it go. To forgive. To forgive and forget. Joseph eventually gets there, but it is not painless and it sure is not quick. Sometimes that is the lesson God is labouring to teach us. Hear it and heed it.

Let us pray;

Lord show us that hanging onto the pain inflicted by friends and loved ones in the past only leads to bitterness and a sour taste in our own hearts and lives. Soften us and soothe us. Teach us to use the power to forgive...power you have placed in our hands. Amen