

October 25, 2015 “God's Plan For Hard Times” Pt. 1 Genesis 37”12-24

What a marvelous day this is! As the anniversary of this congregation we celebrate 161 years of ministry and witness. Think of the people who have been part of the story. Think of the lives that have been touched by the kindness, and the caring of the church in all that time. Think of the men and the women who have come to this town and this house of worship and this people, that last detail is the most important one by the way, to lead and to guide, to read the Bible and preach its many lessons. To point to the light which is God. To imitate the love which is His in redemption. To remind us we have one principal goal and reason for being...to witness to the reality of Jesus who redeems. To be the redeemed. To share the faith. To sing the joy that only God can bring into our circumstances and our experience.

So I understand if you wonder why I would pick the story of Joseph in the pit for this year's anniversary reading. It's about pain. It's about suffering. Some would say it is about inhumanity. And I will get to the details. This story is about an evil moment whose touch lasted for years. And yet the fact is God redeemed even these moments.

You know, most of you know, last winter Barbara and I journeyed to Israel. A desert country. And so even in the lush greenery of the Galilee area water is precious. I walked through tunnels carved in the rock to funnel the flow of rain water...when it comes...if it comes...into cisterns hewn out of the rock. At Qumran, where the Essenes dwelt withdrawn from the world and its evil empires, we saw cisterns carved out of the rock, and aquaducts carved out of the surface to funnel the occasional rains into storage

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chambers against the drought.

In Jerusalem I climbed down with a number of the other folks on our tour into the cistern that was the holding cell in the house of Caiphas for the prisoner Jesus during the night that followed his betrayal. It was empty and dry and that is why we could climb down into it by a stairway made for the purpose of letting pilgrims visit the place where Jesus spent his last night. Where Jesus looked forward to trials and

whippings and finally the cross. And all of that because He was committed as God's precious Son, to saving you and I from sin and death and the grave.

Joseph was cast into a pit by his brothers. The pit was not a hole dug into the earth, it was one of these cisterns carved out of the rock. And they were not gentle about the process. They stripped him and bound him and threw him into it. In fact they wanted to kill him. So strong was their hatred for this favoured, and favourite younger brother, that throwing him down into the cistern seemed a merciful way of storing him while they had lunch.

The Bible is blunt about this point. Evil is real. Bad things happen all the time. Pain is felt and experienced every day of the year. Physical pain. Mental anguish. The pain of loss. The pain of failure. In work. In relationships. Our health fails, or the health of a loved one fails. Preacher, pastor and author, Max Lucado says the story of Joseph is in the canon of Holy Scripture to remind us, and to remind all of us, I'm quoting Max Lucado here... "You'll get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime don't be foolish or naive. Don't despair either! With God's help, you will get through this."

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Joseph's family was really a messed up household. Jacob favoured his youngest son. Was sinfully careless about his favouritism. And that favouritism becomes the acid that literally eats away any feelings of love that ought to have existed between Joseph and his brothers. Now, Joseph did not help the situation either. When he had these dreams that appeared to foretell his rising importance in world affairs in the future, he did not hesitate to rub the noses of his brothers and even his father in the images of those dreams. And we cannot underestimate the hatred that arose among them, and led to the terror at the bottom of the cistern. The only reason they did not kill Joseph is this. They saw the chance to make some money. So they sold him to the passing Ishmaelites whose caravan was passing the spot. They sold him into slavery.

Here is a singular insight into hard times, dark times, times

we wish we could avoid but seem to inevitably find us. Remember what Max Lucado commented? It won't be painless. And it won't be quick. You can almost count on the fact that it is going to get worse before it gets better. At the opening of the Joseph story we are told several times that his brothers hated him. They could not stand being in his presence. They could not talk to him without being spiteful. That leads to the plot to murder Joseph. That leads to his being thrown in the pit. While he screams for help they have a picnic. Years later they would confess, "We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen..." They heard his screaming and their reaction was....pass the pizza. Then slavery in Egypt. Then imprisonment for a crime he did not commit, for intentions he had tried to guard against.

It is clear from the account in this book of Genesis,

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Joseph did not see any of this coming. And is that not the way with every crisis we experience. Who gets up in the morning and says this is the day. I am going to lose my job, or my family. This is the day my health will crack like an egg dropped from kitchen counter. The reason we call them shattering experiences, is they seem to come out of nowhere. And they hit us like a 10 ton truck.

I want you to notice something else. It is at the bottom of the cistern that the awakening of Joseph to a deep relationship with God seems to begin. He has had dreams and visions before any of this. But it is in Egypt, as a slave he begins to testify to the presence and the power and the love of the Lord His God as being a central part of his nature. At the bottom of that cistern Joseph really begins to discover who he is, and who he is, is a servant of God and therefore, ultimately the saviour not only of his family, of his brothers, but an entire generation that comes to look to Egypt for food in a time of want and famine whose tentacles seem to reach through most the whole of the area from Egypt to the Mediterranean basin.

Here is a view of reality. We are either in crisis, emerging from crisis, or we are heading into a crisis. That's life. The Bible does not sugar coat that reality. And yet.... the refrain echoes through the halls of the generations. You will get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. When Joseph's brothers confessed their sin to him here is what Joseph replied, Genesis 50:20

“You meant to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” The word translated meant and intended is the same word and it comes from the idea of weaving cloth. You wove strands of evil to harm, but God took those very strands and wove

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them for good...the saving of lives.

Marvelous theology. Satan the destroyer is out to destroy. Who are Joseph and his brothers?

They are the great grandsons of Abraham, the sons of Jacob. What Satan is trying to do is to destroy the line that was promised Abraham that leads to David and Rahab the harlot, and to Jesus who is the Christ. If he can wipe out this line he can frustrate the purposes of God to redeem by means of grace received through faith. And God takes what Satan does and reweaves it so that the line remains intact....marvelously intact. So that Jesus is born of the line of David and Abraham and redemption, saving grace beomes as real as the earth we stand on or the air we breathe. Hard times? You will get through this. It won't be pain free and it won't be quick. But this is also true, not a moment of the time will be wasted. God did not waste the time Joseph spent in the cistern. Nor did he waste the time Jesus spent in the cistern in the house of Caiphas. What was meant to bring harm, HE transforms to bring a greater good.

There are no electric lights in the cisterns of Israel...unless they have been added so that pilgrims can enter. As a result there is only one way to look in a dark pit. Up. Up to the light. Joseph would be first to tell you that life in the pit stinks. Think of Jesus in the cistern in the house of Caiphas. He is battered. He is bruised. And it is definitely going to get worse. The cross is less than 24 hours away. And yet the cross represents everything HE came into this world to accomplish, namely the saving of you and the saving of me. And by the grace of the Father, the Son gets through it.

That is always the lasting lesson of being in a tough spot, a hard place, a place of darkness. God can trump every evil in this

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world. He can. And you and I, we are His children. You will get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for

good. You will get through it.

Let us pray;

Lord we thank you for your word and for the work of your Spirit in nourishing both our minds and our souls. Be with us we pray in the midst of our circumstances. Thank you for the privilege of being your children where we are. Fill us with hope through faith in Jesus Christ.

Amen