

Hope for Lean Times

Genesis 45:1-15

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I don't know about you, but I am tired of bad news. I hardly turn on the television anymore because I just do not want to hear it. I fancy myself an educated, well-informed woman. I like to think that I can talk smartly about current events and political goings-on. But lately I have preferred to stick my head in the sand where there is no more double-dip recession, no more helicopter crashes, no more debt crisis, no more mainline church decline, no more cancer. I am tired of bad news. If I do not know about it, maybe it will not touch me.

We live in a place like the ancient near East where Joseph warned Pharaoh that “the plenty will no longer be remembered in the land because of the famine to follow” (Genesis 41:31). That's the difficult thing about famines or recessions or bad news times. They make it impossible to remember the time of plenty. Like the cows in Pharaoh's dream, the bad stuff just swallows up the good stuff. The better days seem impossibly out of reach.

Let me catch you up a little bit on the Genesis story. Last week, Joseph's brothers conspired to teach their bratty younger brother a lesson. They finally agreed to sell him into slavery and tell their father that the favorite son Joseph had been eaten by a wild animal. After several years of captivity in Egypt, Joseph favorably interprets Pharaoh's dream and rises to a prominent place in Pharaoh's court. Because of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, Egypt is able to prepare for the seven-year famine that lies ahead. So while Joseph is technically still a foreigner and slave of Pharaoh, Joseph has become quite powerful. Where we pick up in today's reading, Israel and Egypt are two years into that seven-year famine when Joseph's brothers come to Pharaoh's court for the second time seeking help to make ends meet after a second difficult year.

Only Joseph knows that these aid-seekers are the sons of his father. So far, Joseph's actions have been cunning and revengeful. On the first visit, he sent them home with food, but only after requiring that Simeon be left behind in Egypt and that the brothers return with the youngest son. When his brothers finally return with young Benjamin, Joseph frames his youngest brother for stealing a silver cup. The brothers now fear for the very life of the youngest and for their own survival if they must return to Israel with nothing. Back home, father Jacob still grieves the death of Joseph and now fears that he will never see his young son Benjamin again. The story, to this point, is marked by cunning, fear, guilt, anger, and even grief. But in today's reading, something turns.

In a fit of passion and overwhelming emotion, Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers. No longer using his formal Egyptian name, he calls them close and says, “I am your brother, Joseph.” He weeps on the neck of Benjamin. With a word, Joseph resolves the grief of his father and overcomes the guilt of his brothers, and even his own vengeful anger. “I am Joseph. Do not be distressed because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

God has sent me before you to preserve life.

After years of imprisonment and servitude, grief and guilt, God reveals something to Joseph and his brothers that no one had been able to see before. In the middle of a famine, suddenly the bad stuff stops swallowing up all the good stuff. God has sent me before you to preserve life.

In Walter Brueggemann's words, in a moment everyone realizes that "the plot is larger than every player, including Joseph," second in command of Egypt.¹ In the middle of famine and fear and grief and anger, we realize that God's purpose for life "makes use even of the dark side of human action and planning."²

Anne Lamott tells a story about a time on her 49th birthday when she was feeling especially depressed about the state of the world and her own life. She writes that she "can usually manage a crabby hope that there is meaning in mess and pain, that more will be revealed, and that truth and beauty will somehow win out in the end."³ But on her birthday, it seemed that the bad stuff was swallowing up the good stuff. After a phone call with her friend, she eats a few birthday chocolates, asks God to help her be helpful, and heads to the grocery store. This is her story:

I flirted with everyone in the store, especially the old people, and I lightened up. When the checker finished ringing up my items, she looked at my receipt and cried, "Hey! You've won a ham!"

I felt blindsided by the news. I had asked for help, not a ham. It was very disturbing. What on earth was I going to do with ten pounds of salty pink eraser? I rarely eat it. It makes you bloat.

"Wow," I said. The checker was so excited about giving it to me that I pretended I was, too .

I waited ten minutes for what I began to think of as "that . . . ham." Finally the bag boy handed me a parcel the size of a cat. I put it with feigned cheer into my grocery cart, and walked to the car, trying to figure out who might need it. I thought about chucking it out the window near a field. I was so distracted that I crashed my cart smack into a slow-moving car in the parking lot.

I started to apologize, when I noticed that the car was a rusty wreck, and that an old friend was at the wheel. We got sober together a long time ago, and each had a son at the same time. . . . She opened her window. "Hey," I said, "How are you -- it's my birthday!"

"Happy birthday," she said, and started crying. She looked drained and pinched, and after a moment, she pointed to the gas gauge of her car. "I don't have money for gas, or food. I've never asked for help from a friend since I got sober, but I'm asking you to help me."

¹ Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis: Interpretation, Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. p.343

² Ibid. p.347

³ Anne Lamott. *A Ham from God*. <<http://dir.salon.com/story/mwt/col/lamott/2003/04/25/ham/index1.html>>

"I've got money you can have," I said.

"No, no, I just need gas," she said. "I've never asked someone for a handout."

"It's not a handout," I told her. "It's my birthday present." I thrust a bunch of money into her hand, all the money I had. Then I reached into my shopping cart and held out the ham to her like a clown doffing flowers. "Hey!" I said. "Do you and your kids like ham?"

"We love it," she said. "We love it for every meal."

She put it in the seat beside her, firmly, lovingly, as if she was about to strap it in. And she cried some more.

In the midst of stress and financial difficulty and sadness, God revealed something to Anne Lamott and her friend that neither had been able to see before. With something as simple as a free ham, suddenly the bad stuff stops swallowing up all the good stuff.

God has sent me before you to preserve life.

It titled this sermon "Hope for Lean Times," and I believe that the story of Joseph and his brothers gives us hope for these lean, bad news times we are in. The wonder, though, is not found in any sermon or explanation but in the telling of the story itself. Years before the famine ever struck Israel, God was finding ways to work good out of Joseph's imprisonment and slavery. Neither Pharaoh, nor Joseph, nor his brothers had a clue about God's life-preserving plans until the moment Joseph reveals his identity. Neither Anne nor her friend expected to meet their salvation in the parking lot of the grocery store. Not one was even a willing participant in those plans. And yet God was at work to preserve life.

We are living in bad-news times. Like Egypt we may have years left in our own time of famine. Like Israel we may not be prepared for the future that lies ahead of us. If there is any hope for the lean times, it is not the flimsy hope that things will always and only get better. It is the sure hope that even in the midst of famine or recession or sadness, God is at work to preserve life.

The world and the media will proclaim that the bad stuff has already swallowed up all the good stuff. But as people of faith we know there is another story to tell. It is the story of Joseph and his brothers, reconciled and surviving the famine. It is the story of Anne and her free ham, which she later names the "Ham of God". It is the story of an empty tomb on a Sunday morning. It is the story of our God, at work through the willing and even the unwilling to preserve the life of his people. And rooted in this life-preserving God, we can take our heads out of the sand and live with a new reality, a new hope even in these lean times. We can live to tell and show our world all the good stuff that the bad stuff can never swallow up. God is at work and has sent us to preserve life. May it be so.