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God's Intervention

Genesis 45:1-15

Matthew 15:32-39

Human beings live on one planet, but all experience life differently. Depending on where one lives and the circumstances of one's life, two realities depict a sharp contrast of the conditions of human life in the world. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens describes it as follows:

*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair"*

Dickens contrasted life in Paris with life in London in 1775.

Dickens description focuses on the contrasting perceptions of how people view their life. In 2011, many people might merely exclaim: *"It is the worst of times."* And it may cause people to wonder: Where is God in desperate times?

Desperate times are the backdrop of people's lives in the biblical stories. Desperate times require decisive intervention. The witness of Scripture depicts faith in the providence of God who provides a way out in the worst of times in our lives.

Around 4000 years ago, Jacob's favorite son Joseph, at 17 years of age, had been sold by his jealous brothers to Midianite traders who brought him to Egypt. It was the worst time for Jacob, because his sons told him that Joseph was killed by a wild animal. It was the worst time for Joseph who was in prison having been falsely accused of attempted rape by the wife of an Egyptian official. It also was the worst time for Pharaoh who had a dream about 7 fat cows and 7 lean cows and 7 full ears of corn and 7 withered ears of corn. None of his advisors understood it. Only Joseph offered an interpretation that impressed Pharaoh. Joseph said the dream predicted seven years of prosperity to be followed by seven years of famine.

As a result, Pharaoh appointed Joseph at 30 years of age to be governor of Egypt to be in charge of preparing for the impending famine. Joseph's plan called for 20% of the grain harvested during the best times of prosperity to be stored and made available for sale during the worst times of famine. As predicted, a great famine spread from Egypt to Canaan. In Genesis 41:54b, we read: *"There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread."*

During the first two years of the famine in Canaan, Jacob's sons were sent on two trips from Hebron to Memphis, Egypt's capitol, to purchase grain. It was a 300 mile journey that would have taken about 3 weeks. In their meetings with Joseph, they did not recognize him. Joseph was a youth when they last saw him 15 years ago.

In today's story, Joseph no longer is able to hide his true identity from his brothers. He commands every one of his attendants to leave so that he can be alone with his brothers. Then Joseph reveals himself to them.

In Genesis 45:4-5, we read: "*Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came close. He said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.'*"

2. In the worst of times – a desperate time of famine – God had intervened with providential care to provide a way out for the people of Egypt and Canaan to obtain food to preserve their life. Joseph was God's instrument of grace to mobilize the resources of the wealthiest and most powerful nation in Northern Africa to provide food to save his family, but also to save others from starvation.

Famine is the reality facing close to 12 million who live in the countries that make up the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya. The U.N. has declared the region to be a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, 30% of the population is dangerously malnourished with about 3 million children at risk of dying of starvation. This famine is the result of the worst drought in 60 years, the rising cost of food that now consumes 80% of family income, half of whom live on less than \$ 1.25 per day, as well as the lack of long-term development and planning for future crises.

It is a desperate situation that requires decisive intervention. In the worst of times, God's intervention is witnessed in the action taken by national governments, NGOs - non-government organizations, and religious communities. The U.N. has appealed for \$ 2.5 billion for emergency food assistance. Of this amount, \$ 1 billion has already been received from numerous national governments.

God's intervention in the Horn of Africa has been impressive because of the many NGOs already on the ground whose work is coordinated by the U.N. Commission on Refugees such as: International Committee of the Red Cross working in cooperation with the Somali Red Crescent Society; Doctors without Borders; Save the Children; International Rescue Committee; and Mercy Corps.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) works in partnership with ACT Alliance ("Action by Churches Together"), an ecumenical, international organization of 111 member denominations and religious organizations operating in 140 countries. ACT Alliance is seeking 12 million dollars to aid 100,000 drought-affected households.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has already given \$100,000 from the *One Great Hour of Sharing* offering to provide basic needs including food, water, flour, and cooking oil in 3 refugee camps operated by ACT Alliance member Lutheran World Federation. These camps are within the Dadaab refugee complex in Kenya that houses 360,000 refugees with 9,000 arriving weekly. Families arrive hungry and exhausted following a journey of more than three weeks on foot from Somalia. They come with few belongings or only their children. Presbyterian World Service and Development also will be in Kenya, like Joseph, to develop and implement plans for helping refugees make sustainable changes "*to preserve life*" against future droughts.

God intervenes to provide a way out through individual and collective action of those who are moved by compassion to help people in desperate need. In Matthew's gospel, a great crowd of people

gathered on a mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee. They brought people who were in a desperate state of health seeking Jesus to cure them and save their lives. In Matthew 15:32, we read: *“Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.’”*

The disciples’ response to Jesus indicates they recognized the desperate situation of people who were hungry, but felt their resources were inadequate given the magnitude of the problem. In Matthew 15:33, we read: *“The disciples said to him, ‘Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?’”* In verse 34, Jesus simply asks: *“How many loaves have you?”* The disciples had seven loaves of bread and a few small fish which Jesus blessed and gave it to them to give to the hungry crowd. And there was enough to feed everyone.

When moved by compassion to relieve the suffering of others who are in a desperate situation of starving to death, baskets will overflow with resources when we give whatever we can *“to preserve life”*.

Rev. Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), expressed concern about future deficit reduction negotiations in Congress. The recent law passed, he said, *“places the burden of deficit reduction on programs that not only serve low-income and vulnerable people in the U.S., but also that provide international humanitarian aid”* Although the U.S. has been generous in giving \$ 580 million for famine assistance for the Horn of Africa, will our nation decide in the future that it no longer can afford to be so compassionate?

In a 5th century sermon, Bishop John Chrysostom proclaimed:

“To allow the hungry man to remain hungry would be blasphemy against God and one’s neighbor. It is for the love of Christ, which belongs as much to the hungry as to myself, that I share my bread with him”

As we come to share communion with one another, let us extend the Lord’s Table into the world to share bread with others as God’s people to intervene in the name of Jesus *“to preserve life”*. AMEN.