

Last Sunday we entered into the story of Joseph and how he ended up in Egypt. (recall whole story to this point). He was in jail when he was summoned by Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to interpret a dream for him. Joseph interpreted this dream to say that there would be 7 prosperous years followed by 7 lean years and that the Egyptians needed to store up grains during good years in order to survive the drought.

Read Genesis 41: 46-57

Last week I talked a little about what it is like to live during the 7 lean years. But many of us here know a whole lot right now about living during lean years. For many of us, we are currently in the midst of the leanest years of our lives.

Many of us are living lives right now that we did not anticipate. Lives where family members are unemployed or struggling to maintain our businesses. Lives where we are putting off new purchases. Lives where we hear our parents say, “no, we can’t afford that,” all too often. Living life in the midst of the lean years reminded me this week of a period in our nation’s history where some of our American forefathers and foremothers lived during the leanest of times.

When pioneers began to migrate across the country in the middle of the 19th century, they were in search of ideal farmland. What they saw, in the vast expanse of prairie in the Midwest, was a promised land. The grass that covered the plains stood six feet high and stretched all the way from Canada south to Texas. Homesteaders flocked to the grasslands, certain that they had found the richest soil in the world and the ideal place to settle down. People began to clear the land — using the endless prairie to grow wheat, and the trees to build houses, barns and outbuildings.

In 1930, there was no better place to be a farmer than in the Southern Plains, where men and women had turned untamed prairie into one of the most prosperous regions in the whole country. The rest of the nation was struggling with the initial effects of the Great Depression, but in wheat country, farmers were reaping a record-breaking crop.

With the onset of World War I, the demand for wheat had been astonishing. Farmers were paid record prices. Thus, to the farmer, it made sense to turn every inch of the Southern Plains into profit. During the war, the land produced millions and millions of bushels of wheat and corn, which helped to feed America as well as numerous nations overseas.

The farming practices that made the plains so productive were beginning to take a toll on the land, however. The grasslands had been deeply plowed and planted. During the years when there was adequate rainfall, the land produced bountiful crops. However, as a drought that started in the early 1930s persisted, the farmers kept plowing and planting with increasingly dismal results.

In 1930 and early 1931, the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles were known as the most prosperous regions in the nation. For plains farmers, the decade opened with prosperity and growth. But in the summer of 1931, those farmers would face the most difficult eight years of their lives.... The rain simply stopped.

It had taken a thousand years for God's creation to build an inch of topsoil on the Southern Plains, but it took only minutes for one good blow to sweep it all away. The water level of lakes dropped by five feet or more. The wind picked up the dry soil that had nothing to hold it down. Great black clouds of dust began to blot out the sun. In some places, the dust drifted like snow, darkening the sky for days, covering even well-sealed homes with a thick layer of dust on everything. Dust storms engulfed entire towns.

The primary impact area of the Dust Bowl, as it came to be known, was on the Southern Plains. One hundred million acres of the Southern Plains were turning into a wasteland. Large sections of five states were affected — Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico.

In 1932, the national weather bureau reported 14 dust storms. The next year, they were up to 38. The dust was so thick that people scooped up bucketsful while cleaning house. Dust blocked exterior doors; to get outside, people had to climb out their windows and shovel the dust away. Dust coated everything.

One woman from Kansas City described it this way. She said, “all we could do about it was just sit in our dusty chairs, gaze at each other through the fog that filled the room and watch that fog settle slowly and silently, covering everything including ourselves in a thick, brownish gray blanket. When we opened the door swirling whirlwinds of soil beat against us unmercifully.

The door and windows were all shut tightly, yet those tiny particles seemed to seep through the very walls. It got into cupboards and clothes closets; our faces were as dirty as if we had rolled in the dirt, our hair was gray and stiff and we ground dirt between our teeth.

Nevertheless, farmers kept on plowing, hopeful that the rains would return in a matter of days, or perhaps months. In the spring of 1934, the massive drought impacted 27 states severely and affected more than 75 percent of the country. It was the worst drought in U.S. history.

Families survived on cornbread, beans, and milk. People were beginning to give up hope, and a mass exodus — the largest migration in American history — ensued from the plains. Many families packed their belongings, piled them on their cars and moved westward, fleeing the dust and desert of the Midwest for Washington, Oregon and California. They were willing to work for any wage at all, planting and harvesting other people's lands. But as they arrived out west, they realized that they were not wanted.

So how does one survive the lean years? In the text of Scripture that we read, Egypt survived their lean years because they had someone blessed by God to supply the needs of people who were hungry. Joseph, the one who had been betrayed and sold off into slavery by his brothers and then thrown into jail by a false accusation becomes the one that God uses to maintain Egypt and Israel during one of the most difficult droughts in their history. During lean years, God chooses people to take care of those who do not have.

So who is God calling out today to help others through these lean years?

I know that many of us are struggling to make payments on our bills but I pick up the insert this week and I read where you are helping to feed through second harvest, where you are giving blood through the red cross, where you are collecting a peacemaking offering, where you are adding handicapped railing, where you are collecting funds for home repairs, where you are collecting food and serving homeless in Charlotte, where you collected around \$400 last week through Dimes for Hunger to care for the hungry here in our local counties and around the world, where you are directly or indirectly helping to build affordable homes in Gaston County, where you are volunteering at Moss Justice Center, where you are responding to floods in Pakistan, where you are teaching Scouts and preschoolers.

What does it mean to be a community of faith during the lean years? This is what it means to be a community of faith during the lean years. It means caring for those who have less than whatever we have.

I was surprised to see Stephen Colbert called to testify before a congressional committee this week. Some of you know Stephen Colbert is a fake news character on Comedy Central who uses political parody to entertain and challenge leaders. Colbert has a heart for migrant workers and was called to testify on their behalf. It's interesting for Colbert to care about migrant workers since he was raised in an upper class family in Charleston who could afford to send him to a very expensive private school.

One of the congresswomen asked Colbert why he cared about migrant workers. He said, "I care about those who do not have power. And migrant workers are the ones with the least power because we ask them to come here to do our hardest work and then tell them that they have to leave. As you have done to the least of these my brothers you have done for me," Colbert then quoted from Scripture.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus tells the parable of Lazarus, a poor man with sores and a rich man with many things. The rich man chooses to ignore Lazarus who sits at the entrance to his gated community while they both live on earth. Eventually the rich man and Lazarus both die but it is Lazarus who ends up in heaven while the rich man ends up in torment. Does this story by Jesus not, therefore, challenge us during lean times to care for those who have less?

I pray that God continues to open our eyes to use whatever resources we have to care for God's people in need locally and around the world.

To care for those with less is a very important way to be a community of faith during the lean years. AMEN.

-"The Dust Bowl," <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1583.html>

-http://books.google.com/books?id=8fM-ZWXPe_QC&printsec=frontcover&dq=dust+bowl&source=bll&ots=tepj-Oyb9_&sig=IcJXpNT8xCQ2Ek97aaihyVdVv9s&hl=en&ei=JdicTlzMFsGAlAej-d3rCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=15&ved=0CFsQ6AEwDg#v=onepage&q&f=false

-Text: Genesis 41: 46-57; Luke 16: 19-31

-Given: Sept. 26, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)