

“Keep Dreaming, but Don’t Miss the Boat”

By Anita Calcagno

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There is a well-seasoned story about a man who finds himself in rising flood waters. Being a faithful, trusting child of God, he refuses the first SUV that shows up to take him to higher ground, and saying: “No, I’m fine. I trust in God; He will save me.” As the waters rise, a boat comes by to get him, but again he refuses, saying: “No, I’m fine. I trust in God; He will save me.” Finally, a helicopter comes and the pilot urges him to take the rope to safety, but he again says: “No I’m fine, I trust in God to save me.” This is not a bible story; this is New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. He drowns and goes to heaven, where he asks God: “Why didn’t you save me?” to which God replies “I sent you an SUV, a boat and a helicopter! What were you waiting for?”

So what does this old story have to do with the story of Joseph and his brothers?

I first have to say that this story has always been special to me, partly because my late husband was named Joseph. We listened to the Bible on tape cassettes back then and the one with Joseph was the first to self-destruct from over use. Then and now, I marveled at the good heart and capacity for forgiveness that Joseph showed.

I wonder what his brothers were thinking after they had sold Joseph into slavery. I wonder about Reuben, the oldest brother, who at first made a mild objection-(Don’t kill him because he is our flesh and blood.), but did not object to selling him into slavery. What would have happened if Reuben had protected his young brother? And I wonder what Joseph’s first thought was when he realized what was going on, sitting in that pit. It must have seemed like more of a nightmare than a dream to that young dreamer.

But-These were different times, times when lives were cheap, when slavery was part of the economy, when siblings fought over the love of a parent, when greed seemed to be the fallback excuse for murder and other crimes. I am always surprised by the absolute cruelty in the bible stories, particularly in the Old Testament.

So, what does this have to do with us in 2020? We don’t have slavery in this country any more, but it’s a pretty recent development in the history of civilizations because we are, relatively speaking, a young country. Slavery was abolished in 1865, over a hundred years ago, yet we have managed to institutionalize racism through fear, greed and ignorance.

Redlining, the process of designating areas where African-Americans lived or lived nearby as being too risky to insure mortgages has been with us and has been supported by our government-examples like Levittown in NY in 1946, which was supposed to provide housing for veterans returning from WWII but was closed to black veterans. This wasn’t changed until 1968 with the Fair Housing Act.

We recently watched a black man murdered before our eyes by a policeman with a look on his face that said “I can do this and you can’t stop me because he doesn’t matter and I am protected.”

I have watched siblings sue each other in court over the estates of their parents with our conception of what is “fair”.

It doesn't seem like we are all that different from the people in the Old Testament; we have simply managed to use our legal systems to perpetuate our fear and ignorance and we are slow to change what was once invisible but is now impossible to deny.

So what did Joseph do? Spoiler alert: this is part of next week's reading, but I know you've heard it before. It seems that he simply went on being told to do what he was supposed to do: he worked as an Egyptian slave, always obedient, and rose in the status of the king's household. How could he after being treated this way?? He must have lived in his dreams to continue living like this, far from his home and family, from those who treated him so hatefully because of their jealousy and fear. You all know how the story goes;-he is put in charge of the king's granaries and saves not only the lives of the king and his people, but the lives of his brothers when they come to beg for grain, the very brothers who sold him into slavery. No anger, no “I'll get you back for this;” he helps them and then reveals who he is. Could you have done this? I don't know that I could. The still, small voice in his soul must have grown to overtake his hurt, his anger, his fear. He believed in the dreams God sent him; he spoke his dreams and they changed his life and the lives of all around him. He saved his family and the families of his captors.

So, here we are in Grand Ledge in 2020. What are your dreams for this place in time? We cannot ignore the injustice, the evil that still exists. We can pray in the abstract or we can also pray with our actions. We can be part of the solution and not part of the problem. We can take the truck, the boat or the helicopter (depending where we are in our lives) and take others with us. We can work the dream, we can live the dream, and we can be the dream. Let us dream and pray and act together. Amen.