

**Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday August 10th 2008 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“The Storms of Resentment”**

“The Storms of Resentment”...

“The term "soap opera" was coined by the American press in the 1930s to denote the extraordinarily popular genre of serialized domestic radio dramas, which, by 1940, represented some 90% of all commercially-sponsored daytime broadcast hours. The "soap" in soap opera alluded to their sponsorship by manufacturers of household cleaning products; while "opera" suggested an ironic incongruity between the domestic narrative concerns of the daytime serial and the most elevated of dramatic forms. In the United States, the term continues to be applied primarily to what is broadcast fifty hours each week... the defining quality of the soap opera is its serial narrative” – The Museum of Broadcast Communications... and there you will find doctoral dissertations in abundance all to help us understand the “soap opera”!

Well, today’s reading from Genesis (chapter 37) begins thirteen chapters of what is sometimes called the Joseph Saga... and, may I be forgiven, this saga has about some of the qualities of a “soap opera” – it is definitely serial in nature and it, most definitely, introduces profound themes of human life (love, betrayal, murder, deceit) into the amazing stories of Joseph! These final chapters of Genesis present us, as it were, with Joseph meets Guiding Light, All My Days and General Hospital all combined!

Now most readers do not immediately find Joseph an attractive personality... he brings home unfavourable reports of his brothers, he is a sneak (though whether this is due to a malevolent meanness or simple naiveté is unclear); without any sensitivity or awareness of what is appropriate, he shares with brothers and father dreams that indicate one day he will be their senior and to him will they bow, offer service and respect. Oh my, Joseph, this is not the way to create a highly functional family system!

And how do the brothers react to this tattletale naïf? Well, a resentment begins to brew which finally breaks out into a storm... a storm that includes talk of murder (“they saw him from a distance and... they conspired to kill him”), a storm that includes talk lies (“let us kill him, throw him into the pit and say that a wild animal has devoured him”) and a storm that includes talk greed (“come let us sell him to the Ishmaelites... and they sold him for twenty pieces of silver”).

Resentment has been described as “a powerful poison in our systems”... and see how this poison begins to invade and affect the lives of Joseph’s brothers... hatred, murder, lies and greed!

And just when we think that we understand, though not approve of, the brothers’ resentment... the writer of Genesis provides us with the real reason for the brothers’ dysfunctional behaviour... it was not because Joseph told tales, it was not because he shared his dreams in an insensitive and thoughtless manner... it was because (Genesis 37:3) “Joseph’s brothers saw that their father loved him more than all the other brothers”. Ah, here is the cause of such a poisonous, rotting, enslaving resentment... their security, personal worth was threatened and so they responded... yes, indeed “the storms of resentment”.

Bill Wilson (co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous) writes, “It is plain that a life which includes deep resentment leads only to futility and unhappiness. To the precise extent that we permit this, do we squander the hours that might have been worthwhile... for then we shut ourselves off from the sunlight of the spirit” (AA, pg. 66)... he writes, “Resentment is the number one offender... it is a primary cause of relapses into drinking” – imagine this, the one who is trying to live a life of healthy sobriety, all that is put at risk if he/she entertains resentments! And would this not also apply to the one seeking to live a life of healthy, productive Christian discipleship?!!

Resentments “shut us off from the sunlight of the spirit”.

And yet most of us, from time to time, have carried (if not nursed) resentments... though of course we use all our intelligence and wit to justify and make rational their presence!

From personal, pastoral and professional experience I have come to believe that resentment is, indeed, a number one offender in causing emotional, physical and definitely spiritual sickness. And that for some resentment indeed grows into a “storm”... a storm reminiscent of the one recorded in today’s Gospel from Matthew.

It is here we read of a storm that suggests isolation from security and from God (“when evening came they were far from the land”); and it is here we read of a storm that causes fear and a sense of powerlessness over forces that seem set to do them harm (“battered by the waves, the wind against them”).

And is not all this similar to the storm of resentment? We sense, increasingly, our isolation, our distance, from others and especially from God! We feel paralyzed unable to move forward, at best we sense we tread water – at worse, we feel we are being pushed backwards. We begin to feel afraid and, in moments of clarity, feel powerless over the forces that seem to be possessing us and taking us captive.

And then... just as we face being drowned, overwhelmed we cry out to the Lord and we realize how near He has been throughout all our struggles, storms... waiting, waiting, waiting for the cry, “Lord, save me”... and then “immediately” (how thankful I am for that word), “immediately he stretches out his hand and catches me”.

There are storms in our lives that will not be calmed by therapy, by rationalization, by psychological techniques alone. There are storms in which we can only be rescued by divine intervention... by God’s hand reaching out and grasping us tightly.

Note it is not when Jesus grasps Peter’s hand that the storm ceases; oh no, it is once in the boat, once back in community, “that the wind ceases”. There may well be resentments from which we will not be rescued at once, but in which we will know we are kept safe by and in the hands of God who loves us, who loves us dearly with a love “beyond our wildest imaginings”.

Friends, Jesus does not promise us freedom from human struggles and conflict with fears... but he does promise that we will reach out, catch us and never let us drown in the storms of our resentment. And we have this promise... that once back in community... the wind will cease!

Next week, as you have read and heard, we introduce into our Sunday worship opportunities for prayers for healing (all done in, I think, a very modest, discreet, Episcopalian way!)... God wants us to be healed, to be whole... He definitely wants to set our feet on the path to health and this must include the acknowledgement of resentments and the wise desire to be rescued from their storms.

Friends, rescue is never far from us... it is very near us, it is on our lips (if only we let them speak), it is in our hearts (if only to them we will listen)... for “everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” – we will be rescued no matter how chronic, we will be rescued no matter how tragic, and we will be rescued no matter how painful the storms of resentment... Amen, So Be It, Amen.