

Joseph Meditation

There are good years. And bad years.

I readily admit: There was much *good* in my life this past year, but in the rougher moments of lockdown fatigue... I can't help but agree: this was a *bad* year.

One of stress, uncertainty, worry, loneliness, depression, anxiety, depletion.

A year, where even the best moments couldn't patch over the underlying exhaustion - mental and physical - for very long.

There are *good* years and *bad* years.

All those who've had many good years... to store up joys, and wealth, and health, and safety nets... they're coming through fine.

But all those who were struggling already - their struggles have been amplified.

These last twelve months have been a year of *splitscreen* reality.

- With new appreciation for abundance and privilege taken for granted.
- And unbelievable vulnerability and suffering for far too many.

The story of Joseph is full of such splitscreen realities.

He is privileged amongst his brothers by his father. This brings envy. They suffer of neglect while Joseph can do no wrong.

Joseph is oblivious and takes his position for granted. They disabuse him of that notion by abducting him and selling him.

He goes from top to bottom in no time. But their violence brings them no peace. And they have nothing stored up from the good years when the bad years come, while Joseph had managed to reinvent himself.

He'd worked his way back to the top, becoming a trusted advisor of the Pharaoh in Egypt. And unlike his brothers, Joseph and the Pharaoh did store up wisely in the good years and are prepared for the bad.

Joseph's prophetic dream shows extraordinary intuition for the ups and downs of life. Maybe because he lived it personally.

A famous campaign consultant in the US is known to say: "You're never as good as you look when you're winning. You're never as bad as you look when you're losing."

Joseph learned that the hard way. He isn't surprised by ups and downs. He factors them into his daily habits and life. And this makes for great advice. Joseph has matured.

And then his brothers come. They violently took their place at the top. They didn't learn to plan for the bad times, they just took violently what they wanted. And now they're unprepared for the hard times.

Begrudgingly, they have to accept: they are now at the bottom.

It's like Jesus said: "Whoever fights to find their life will lose it, and whoever is willing to lose their life for my sake will find it." (Paraphrased Matthew 10, 39)

They violently forced their way to the top, and they lost everything.

They come to Egypt to ask for food. And then they realize: they're asking Joseph.

Knowing they deserve punishment, they're afraid of retaliation. But Joseph has matured.

He knows what it's like to be at the very bottom, beaten and afraid.

He remembers. He knows.

And this gives him great strength. It gives him a mighty power. The power of empathy.

Jens Spahn said last year: "Wir werden einander in ein paar Monaten wahrscheinlich viel verzeihen müssen."

We're likely gonna have to forgive each other a bunch a few months in - he couldn't have been more right.

We need a source of forgiveness now more than ever. Including forgiveness for Spahn himself, whose management does not always hold up under the brutal scrutiny of our weary people.

But self-righteous condemnation isn't the way of Jesus. As Matthew 7 points out:

“Do not judge, or you too will **be judged**. For in the same way you **judge** others, you will **be judged**, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why **do** you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

Or John 8: “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone.”

Or Romans 14: “let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.”

Joseph had stopped passing judgment long ago, when he finally met his brothers again.

He chose not to put any of the stumbling blocks that his brothers had put in **his** way into **theirs.**

He overcame evil with good.

So Romans 12 asks of us: “Repay no one evil for evil ... If possible ... live peaceably with all. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Joseph forgives his brothers. He, who has been alone and isolated for years, will never take their special presence for granted.

He rises above all his grievance and forgives them, because he appreciates their very presence.

They have nothing to give, they can do nothing for him, and he chooses generosity.

As the saying goes: “Character is what you do for people who can do nothing for you.”

It's **this** spirit of generosity and forgiveness that we now need most.

We're all exhausted. Our mental and physical resources are depleted. We need relief.

From our own feelings, our anger, our desire to blame, our self-righteous mind, our own abyss.

All we really can do in this state is trust in God and God's ability to show us a path out of ourselves... to have empathy again, to feel and reach out beyond our own, and to see something larger than ourselves.

The Tutu children's bible summarizes Joseph's spirit of generosity to his brothers and has him say to them:

"What you intended for harm, God intended for good. ... Bring our family here so they will be safe."

So, with Tutu, we can pray today:

Dear God, let my love be stronger than my anger.

Give me a spirit of forgiveness and generosity.

Amen.