

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Called to trust God through suffering"
Dr. J. Dent

August 7, 2011

During the recent postal interruption, the following letter from God was intercepted, and I would like to read you some key passages, but not the whole letter:

My dear son,

I have been wanting to talk to you about your life and how you have come to be who you are for quite a while now. It has been hard to take the time with you, because it is always difficult to talk about the deeper things of this life than we think. I know you have been busy and are constantly on the go. I know that you often tell your family how tired you are and that you find it difficult to listen to them, as you often find it difficult to listen to me. This is not to criticize you but simply to emphasize why I need to write you at this time.

Please be reassured of my absolute and unconditional love. It is this love that motivates me to communicate and to help you understand what you are going through, and some of what you have gone through. Some of things I will tell you will not so much be satisfying but rather an attempt to get at what lies behind what you have experienced.

But enough of preamble and any excuses I might bring to the table, you have gone through much, and in that way you are like everyone else. While your shoes and your feet are unique, many have worn similar footwear, and trod a similar path.

When you were young and your father held you down and tickled you until you cried, when your brothers rejected your offers to play and hurt you physically in many ways, I saw you and put my arms around you. When you felt alone in school, I was there. When the bully beat you up, and all you remember is being on the ground and a crowd around you, I was there to lift you up and put you back on your feet. When you reached out to your mother and she said she could help you, neither in the case of your father or your brothers, I was there. I felt alone with you.

When you went to the dermatologist and he dealt with the disfiguring cystic acne you had, I was with you. When all those specialists looked at your body and couldn't figure what had gone particularly wrong in your skin, I felt your embarrassment. When you fell asleep under the sun lamp, and received second degree burns to your face and chest, I was close by. Through the pain of your migraines, I have felt with you all that you have gone through.

Through your relationship losses, I have been with you. I saw your heart and heard your reflections, when your earthly father died. I have felt your pain along with you. I cannot convey to you now why you have had to go through all that you have gone through to get to this point in your life. Some day I will give you a fuller explanation. Meanwhile, I need you to know how close I have been to you through the worst and the best moments of your life. I also cannot explain to you why some people go through so much and why others seemingly go through so little, in terms of suffering. This is a great mystery in this life.

I need you to know that I am with you. I love you. I will not leave you alone, no matter what. My presence will give you what you need to go on, to do and to be what you need to do and be.

Sincerely yours,
Dad

What would your letter sound like, if God were to write to you about your suffering? I believe he would use specific language and talk to you about things that have deeply affected your life, your identity and your sense of self. He would talk to you about things that only he and you know about.

As for those in the Bible, we have lots about their stories, their journeys, even if we don't have personal letters from God written to them. We have something of how Saul, later Paul met the Lord, even as he was trying to put followers of Jesus in jail, until he was blinded, had his sight restored and became a follower of Jesus himself.

We have Joseph's story, which is extraordinary. He was the youngest of eleven brothers. He was his father's favorite. He was his brothers' least favorite. He was not too bright when it came to communicating. He had had dreams where his brothers had bowed down to him. This wasn't so bad

or even all that unusual, but he unfortunately decided to share them with his brothers. Bad move. He also had the same dream about his mother and father bowing down to him. Everyone around him would bow down to him. So his brothers decided to get rid of him. They had had enough of him.

They stuck him in a dry well, a pit, and later sold him as a slave to some men who were going from where they were down to Egypt. They told his father that he had been killed by a wild animal. If God were to write him a letter in the pit, what would it sound like? I'm sure he was wondering in that pit whether God cared for him at all. He probably wondered if he would even survive being there in the desert in that pit. Do you or I wonder sometimes if we will even survive what we are going through? Through the pain, the difficulty, through the challenges?

Joseph would go through many more difficult and challenging circumstances after being sold into slavery. He endured the pit. He would also learn many lessons in Potiphar's house, in prison following that, where he was wrongfully imprisoned, and then finally as Prime Minister of Egypt. You know the story from Genesis 37 to 50. God's letters to him would sound very different, when they came to him in the pit, and when they came to him in Potiphar's house, and when they came to him in prison, and quite different again when they came to him in his office as Prime Minister.

How has God's voice come to you and his messages through the various seasons of your life? How has God spoken to you in the midst of your suffering? Through the most difficult times of our lives, God has wanted to communicate to us. The simple question continually is: What is God saying to you?

At seminary, this kind of question is called "theological reflection." At home, this kind of question is more around how you understand and practice prayer. Part of what God wants us to understand is that our ongoing relationship to him does not answer all our ongoing questions. Certain questions are answered but others not at all.

What we can know here and now is how much we are loved, how much God loves us. We cannot know why he allows us to go through the levels of difficulty that we go through. In video games, you choose your level of difficulty, but not in life. Much of what we go through is beyond our

control. The only question then is how we will respond to what we are given.

This perhaps is the key question for all our lives. Will we be grateful for what we have, what we are able to do, and what we choose for good? Or will we be constantly complaining and whining, not only about the weather, which deserves complaint, but about our health, about our relationships, about our church, about our community, our neighbors, our co-workers and so on.

Today we are encouraged again to be the people we would want to be with, to have the honesty, integrity, grace, and love that God shows us in Jesus Christ. We are also to show that same love, the love of God to our children. Deanna and Jonathan have taken promises to do this with Cairbre here and in Massachusetts where they live.

We are encouraged not only to show that love, but also to receive it from God. Because we cannot give what we have not received. Just as we cannot receive forgiveness if we are unwilling to give forgiveness. A wall that we build to protect ourselves cuts us off from the bad, but it also cuts us off from the good. So as we are considering the suffering and difficulties we have gone through in this life, let us also consider the suffering and difficulties of those around us. Sometimes we can only handle this in small doses.

As we grow in compassion and gratitude, let us listen to God, and trust God together for his best for our congregation and all who are here.

Let us pray.