

The Upside of Down Economy

Psalm 33:13-22

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The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth— he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds. A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you. (Psalm 33:13-22)

Introduction. When you read the sermon title this morning, "The Upside of Down Economy," you may think of me as a father who had a child who was an incurable optimist. The father was determined to show his son the realities of life so he would have a balanced view. So for his birthday, the father took his son to a stall in a barn filled with horse manure. Quickly the child surveyed the room, found a shovel and began digging. His eyes brightened, a smile covered his face and began whistling with joy. His father asked, "Why are you so happy?" The boy responded, "With all this manure, there has to be a pony in it somewhere!"

The majority of us gathered here have never seen a recession as deep and as widespread as the one we are presently experiencing. This recession at 18 months and counting is now the longest in our history since the Great Depression.

During that period of time, the stock market has experienced significant losses that have resulted in investors like you and me, charities and institutions like

our church to have lost between 20-40% in the value of investments. Most real estate values have declined and the housing market is slow. Most businesses have experienced significant declines which placed pressures on many to either close the doors, downsize or seek a lifeline from the government. Unemployment has reached 9.5% and is climbing. Foreclosures are up. Bankruptcy is on the increase. A few weeks ago, the national debt exceeded \$1 trillion. We are not immune to the consequences that these factors produce. They are realities that have some level of impact on all of us. Some of our church family have felt the huge impact of these economic factors with job loss, home ownership in danger, their businesses are struggling, etc.

So in approaching this message, some of you might want to warn me, "Hey, Dwight that silver lining you are looking for in these dark clouds is a 747 that is headed toward us."

Well I do tend to be an optimist and I do look for silver linings in dark clouds. So I want to explore what is the upside of this down economy for us as people of faith.

Benefit One: Reflecting about Life

Long ago in Judah, a famine struck the land. Elimelech and his wife, Naomi and their two sons moved to the land of Moab in order to survive. While they were living there, Elimelech died and the two sons married Moabite brides. After living in Moab for a decade, the two sons died. Naomi decided it was time to return to her home because she heard things were getting better there.

As she prepared to leave Moab, her two daughters-in-law sought to go with her. But she urged them to stay in Moab where they would find more security and perhaps another husband. One remained in Moab, while the other, named Ruth, was determined to go with her mother-in-law. In her plea to Naomi, Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried" (Ruth 1:16-17).

In that story, did you overhear what the hard times produced in Ruth. She was moved to reflect on her condition and to consider what were the important things in her life? She contemplated, "What do I truly value?" She valued her relationship with Naomi more than her personal security.

In times of recession, many of us are prone to *reflect* about life and how we are living life. If any of us can contemplate on the question, "*What are the truly important things,*" then we can benefit from a recession.

Recently in a conversation with one of our members, he told me that the recession has had a significant impact on his business. As a result, he has less to take home. But he went on to say that he and his wife had reflected about what they have and what they do. He said that had been good and they had moved toward simplifying their lives. For most of us, simplifying our lives would lead to much healthier and less stressful existence.

At times, going through a recession can impact justice issues in positive ways. Nehemiah was a great leader in ancient Israel who led in the rebuilding of the walls and city of Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile in the 5th century BC. In a situation that was already depressed, a famine struck the land. During that time, some of those who had resources began taking advantage of those who lacked. (Does that sound familiar?) They were forced to put up their homes and land in order to purchase food. They were being charged exorbitant interest on their loans. When Nehemiah learned about it, he was outraged. He was moved to action and the system was changed. Justice rolled.

While there are some who seek to profit on the misfortune of others, down times reveal injustices. Think of this, "Had it not been for the recession, how much longer would Bernie Madoff been able to swindle others?" Many others who were caught up in cycles of greed in how they conducted their business that was not illegal but less than ethical have come face to face with its consequences.

Reflecting on life is leading many in our time to understand the importance of living within their means. Instead of

seeking everything wanted, people are more hesitant to buy or to go places. Personal savings has actually increased during this time of recession.

Greater level of generosity.

Not only does recession tend to lead us to reflecting about life, it can also have an interesting financial impact on us. Levels of generosity tend to increase.

The ancient Middle East was in the midst of one of its most severe droughts. People were getting desperate. One of the preachers among the people was getting hungry and felt as though God was leading him to go to the town of Zarephath. There he met a woman and he requested a meal from her. She told him she only had enough flour and oil to make one more meal for her and her son. Elijah convinced her that God would provide. She made the bread and shared with Elijah. God did fill her jar of flour and her bottle of oil and they survived the famine. During the most difficult of times, the woman shared what she had.

During times of economic recession, common reason would expect that giving to non-profits, charities and churches would decrease. History has shown this is not necessarily the case. In some situations, total number of dollars may decrease but usually the per capita giving increases.

Stats for giving

Do you know in what year in recent history recorded the highest per capita giving? In 1933 – during the height of the Great Depression. Do you know which states annually vie for the highest per capita giving in the US? Arkansas and Mississippi. Do you know another distinction they share? They are the two poorest states in the nation.

Dr. Ruby Payne in her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, asserts that lower, middle and upper economic classes live by a different set of unspoken rules. She maintains that the in living in poverty live by an unspoken rule of sharing. When they come into some windfall, they will share with one another. They also share out of their poverty.

In the present recession, we have seen some falling off of the amount of giving to non-profits. Yet giving to the church has not been hit as hard. Some churches find that giving has not decreased. Through the first half of 2009, this congregation has a better financial standing than the past two years – giving is up and our spending to budget is down. Your leadership and staff have been careful stewards with the resources given without sacrificing our levels of ministry and you as a people have been faithful.

I suspect that many givers do reflect on their giving when times of recession come. They consider what organizations they believe in and love. For most believers, their church is at the top of that list.

Benefit three: a deeper trust in God.

A third potential benefit for Jesus followers going through tough economic times is developing a deeper relationship with God. While some may equate God's presence and grace with life going great and prosperity, many find that difficult times drive them closer to God. Often it is the midst of life's greatest struggles that we find God's presence most profound.

Late in the reign of King David's reign, a famine came upon the land. Listen to the verse that describes this event and David's response: "*Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord*" (2 Samuel 21:1). Famine drove David to his knees and he sought God for direction and help.

When things get bleak, people, especially God's people, pray. Like David, we tend to turn to the Lord to see why things are as they are. We turn to the Lord as a source of comfort. We look to God to help us through things.

When things are going great and we have all we need and more, our tendency is to begin relying on our own ingenuity and resources for what addressing our wants and needs and providing us with meaning. In the parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus said the weeds that choked out the seed that had been planted was like the cares of life choking out the Word of God planted in our

hearts. Often during times of prosperity, we become self-dependent.

The psalmist spoke of this in our text. He shared that the king is not saved by his army, the warrior by his strength or his horse. The author asserts that it is God who saves and delivers. It is the Lord who provides for his people.

Times of recession bring many back to the place of understanding the need for One greater than we are. Our hope, security and physical and spiritual resources for life are gifts from God. We are dependent on the Lord because we cannot control our world and destiny. The psalmist proclaimed, "*Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord.*"

The table that is spread before us is a portrait of God's provision for people and evidence of his love. The bread points us to Christ's body broken for us. The cup tells of his blood, his sacrifice for us. Through this table, God offers what we need spiritually to be healthy and whole. If God is willing to give us such a great gift at such a high cost, will he not take care of us in providing life's essentials? At this table Jesus is present.

One of the great hymns of scripture tells of God's presence even in the midst of turbulent times. Listen to Romans 8:37-39:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Christ, we will make it through these economic days as conquerors. What all we will face, regardless of how painful and difficult, God will be with us. Amen.