

THE PIT AND THE ROPE

Genesis 37:12-28

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on August 13, 2017, the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled “In the Beginning.”

Now [Joseph’s] brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. And Israel [Jacob] said to Joseph, ‘Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.’ He answered, ‘Here I am.’ So he said to him, ‘Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.’ So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, ‘What are you seeking?’ ‘I am seeking my brothers,’ he said; ‘tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.’ The man said, ‘They have gone away, for I heard them say, “Let us go to Dothan.”’

So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’

But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, ‘Let us not take his life.’ Reuben said to them, ‘Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him’—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

The liturgy we are using today comes out of the 1990s from a group called “The Wild Goose Worship Group.” It is a liturgy we use once or twice a year, for it is beautiful, accessible, and lyrical. When we do so the entire liturgy is focused on the Lord’s Supper, and we always select “Be Thou My Vision” as the opening hymn, for its lyricism matches that of the liturgy. We usually get several expressions of thanksgiving for using it.

But it comes today in some moment of trepidation, as we are fearful, or saddened, or numb, or perhaps emboldened, by escalating rhetoric between our nation and North Korea, and by tension, violence, and now death the city that is has provided one or more degrees to many in this congregation, memories of love gained and love lost, of friendships formed, and history learned up close. Though I have lived in Virginia nearly fourteen years, I have still not made it to Charlottesville. Morgan and Tim Johnson were in worship last Sunday to say their goodbyes; they moved to Charlottesville this week, for what they described was hope for “a slower pace, a less pressured life.” I hope Charlottesville finds some peace; I hope our nation does; I hope our world does.

Depending on the degree to which one watches the news – physically watches – it is difficult and rare to find peace, to feel lyrical. In addition, the text for today is one of two glances the lectionary gives us on the life of

Joseph, who is in many ways a lovely character. But what happens to him in today's text is not so lovely; in fact, it is one of the less peaceful stories of the Bible.

A bit of background:

- Joseph is the eleventh of twelve sons of Jacob, the oldest of two Jacob fathered with the woman he loved deepest, Rachel.
- When Joseph's full brother Benjamin was born when Joseph was thirteen, his mother died in childbirth.
- These factors played into Jacob's absolute love for Joseph and his preference for Joseph over his other eleven sons and one daughter.
- As you probably know, when Joseph was seventeen, Jacob gave Joseph a prized possession, a coat with long sleeves, a coat of many colors, depending on how you translate the Hebrew, but one of the best known garments in Biblical or secular literature.
- To add insult to the injury of his brothers' pride, Joseph dreams that one day he will rule over them, and shares his dream with them.
- When our text opens, the brothers are tending their father's flocks in the field, and Jacob sends Joseph to check on them and report back. Joseph never returns, for when the brothers see him coming, they quickly plot to throw him into a pit, kill him, and tell their father that he has been devoured by a wild animal.
- They get as far as the pit, but one brother doesn't want blood on his hands, and another brother decides they might as well get some money out of Joseph, so they sell him to Midianites, or Ishmaelites, it's hard to tell, who take Joseph to Egypt.
- It is through Joseph that the people of Israel get to Egypt as slaves, a condition and location in which they will spend over four hundred years, until Moses leads them across the Red Sea to freedom.

The text becomes its darkest when we pay attention to three lines in the middle. I ask you to listen, and then we will come up:

*So when Joseph came to his brothers,
they stripped him of his robe,
the long robe with sleeves that he wore;
and they took him and threw him into a pit.
The pit was empty;
there was no water in it.
Then they sat down to eat...*

A seventeen year old boy, wearing a gift from his father, stripped of that gift, taken and thrown into a pit, that is empty even of water. Those who place hands on him are his older half brothers. It is Cain and Abel all over again. Isaac and Ishmael. Jacob and Esau. And then they sit down to eat. They must have ice in their veins.

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That is when Joseph is *seventeen*. If research and chronology reconstruction is accurate, over the course of *nine* years Joseph, though enslaved, rises in the court of Potiphar. Potiphar's wife takes a liking to Joseph. He's only *twenty-six*, but in the name of loyalty both to Potiphar and God, Joseph rebuffs her. She accuses him of accosting her, and he is imprisoned, once again, his garment stripped from him. Because of his power to interpret dreams, Pharaoh consults him about his own dreams, which Joseph interprets as warning of an upcoming famine. Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of food storage and distribution, so the nation will be spared. The text quotes Pharaoh as saying: "I have set you over all the land of Egypt." "All the land of Egypt." By now, Joseph is *thirty*.

For *seven years* of plenty Joseph devises ways for the Egyptians to store food, ways they implement and follow. When famine comes, the whole world comes to Egypt, to seek Joseph out, for the basics of food and nourishment. Among those who come are Joseph's brothers, who do not recognize him until he chooses to reveal himself to them. "I am your brother, Joseph," he says when he is ready, "whom you sold into Egypt." At that point, reconciliation begins, but that is next week's story, next week's text.

At this point of reconciliation, *Joseph is 39*. It is been *twenty-two years*¹ since his brothers threw him into the Pit. Because of reconciliation with his brothers and reunion with his father, Joseph will enjoy his father for *sixteen* more years, and Joseph himself will live to be *110*. Thus the abuse he suffers at the hands of his brothers occurs relatively early in his life, and the resolution, reconciliation, and reunion occur before life's midpoint.

How has Joseph handled the abuse he suffered, the grief he knew, the family fracture that took so long to heal? What kept him going and what held him back? Is there anything he could have done differently once the breach occurred?

I want to point briefly to five things that Joseph did over the course of twenty-two years dealing with what had happened to him. While Joseph's experience is one of violence, abuse, and family fracture, I think his life can be a model for us in any number of experiences of grief we have. At least I hope that that is the case.

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The first and most obvious thing that Joseph does is throw himself into work. As soon as the narrator tells us that Joseph was sold to Potiphar, the narrator tells us of what by all appearances is a combination of worldly success and divine blessing.

- The Lord was with Joseph
- He became a successful man
- His master saw that the Lord was with him
- The Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands.

These and similar refrains are repeated throughout Genesis as Joseph interprets dreams, navigates court politics, devises a system for the entire nation to prepare for famine in time of plenty. Under Joseph's leadership, Egypt becomes the breadbasket of the world.

Work and achievement is a great balm to pain. It can get us up out of bed and keep our mind off our sorrows. But it can also be an escape. Only we can decide which it is for us, or when it is one and when it is the other. But the most overriding characteristic of Joseph's life between the time he was thrown into the Pit and the time he reconciled with his brothers was success that at least the narrator attributed to God's blessing.

¹ <https://thelukejourney.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/timeline-joseph-through-joshua.pdf>.

Second, something which balances the deep commitment Joseph makes to work, Joseph also acknowledges that a terrible thing has happened. While Joseph was still in Egypt, in charge of the food planning program, he brought two sons into the world through Asenath. He named the firstborn “Manasseh,” which means “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house”; and he names the second “Ephraim,” which means “God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes.” Joseph seems to acknowledge the reality of what has happened – “hardship,” rupture with “all [in his] father’s house,” “land of misfortunes” – but he remembers in the context of always looking to the future: “God has made me forget my hardship”; and “God has made me fruitful.” It is a delicate balance this remembering and forgetting. Joseph seems to strike it.

Third, Joseph only tells his story when and where and to whom he chooses to tell it. Nowhere in the thirteen chapters that cover Joseph’s life, and the eight chapters that cover the twenty two years of estrangement from his family, does Joseph refer directly to what has happened to him.

- He doesn’t tell the two prisoners about what has been done to him.
- He doesn’t tell Potiphar.
- He doesn’t tell a co-worker, a friend, a spouse, or the local bartender.
- There is not even a record of Joseph telling God, or God speaking to Joseph about what has happened.

Yet when Joseph is moved to speak, speak he does, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.” His speaking does not dwell on the specifics of violence he has suffered (it is neither graphic nor pornographic), but his speaking is necessary for reconciliation to occur. One writer says that speech – in his own time and place – is the rope by which Joseph pulls himself out of the Pit.

Finally, these three factors lead, I believe, to the characteristic for which Joseph is honored and most remembered. Though the narrator uses extensive religious language to describe the Lord’s blessing of Joseph, Joseph himself is circumspect in its use.² “Even though you intended to do harm to me,” Joseph says to his brothers, “God intended it for good.” That is about all Joseph says, but he says it enough times we realize, in reading his story, that it is true for him, in his situation, in his suffering, in his reconciliation with his family. “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God’ intended it for good.”

I personally do not believe this is something that we should feel compelled to believe or say about all human suffering and loss. There is suffering and loss in which the hand of god is nowhere near apparent, and in which we would not want the hand of God to play a part. But when we are able to look at our own situation and say “You intended it for harm but God used it for good” because it seems *true*, then the truth of that statement and our ability to verbalize it can provide us and those around us with the same tremendous perspective for healing it provided Joseph and all those who have learned his story since.

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² In reading the story, Joseph’s outburst of self-revelation and tears seem natural, such as in 45:1-3 and then again at the end of that scene in 45:14-15; but the long speech between these verses (45:4-14), invoking God, forgiveness, and making arrangements concerning his father seem less natural. Joseph is at his best when truth comes forth, simply, beautiful, and eloquent.