

JOSEPH: THE PIT AND THE ROPE

Genesis 37:23-28

Genesis 41:51

Genesis 45:25-28

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on August 9, 2020, the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

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 it 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.

Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.”

So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. And they told him, “Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt.” He was stunned; he could not believe them. But when they told him all the words of Joseph that he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. Israel said, “Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die.”

I.

The story of Joseph is the longest in the book of Genesis, constituting fourteen of its fifty chapters. I have taught Joseph and preached a sermon series on him, but I still find him a hard character to relate to, a difficult nut to crack.

- Joseph is the favored son of Jacob, the first and oldest son of Rachel, the wife Jacob loved most but lost at an early age when she gave birth to Joseph’s younger brother Benjamin.
- Joseph receives a well-known “coat of many colors” from his father, but Joseph is frankly an obnoxious little brother: tattling on his ten older siblings, strutting around in his special coat, telling them of dreams he has had that he will one day rule over them.
- In a sudden act of domestic violence, his brothers throw him into a Pit, from which a band of Midianites draw him out and sell him to Ishmaelites who take Joseph into slavery in Egypt.
- The brothers then take his “coat of many colors,” add another color to it by dipping it in blood, present it to their father, and explain to Jacob that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal.

The narrator does not spend time describing what Joseph experiences in the Pit nor in the transition to slavery in Egypt, but the narrator presents Joseph as being a *phenomenal success* in all that he does, overcoming adversity that would undo most of us.

- Though enslaved, Joseph is taken in by Potiphar, the number two person in Egypt, who gives Joseph charge of all his affairs.
- Joseph develops a reputation for interpreting dreams, and when Potiphar's boss Pharaoh – needs some high-level interpretation of dreams that have been keeping him up at night, he sends for Joseph.
- Joseph tells Pharaoh that his dreams mean the Egyptians will enjoy seven years of plenty followed by seven years of want, and that he as leader had best devise a system for the nation to store food during years of plenty for years of want ahead.
- Pharaoh appoints Joseph to develop and lead such a national food policy.

Joseph succeeds wildly.

- Neighboring nations come to Egypt for food, including a band of brothers from Israel, whom Joseph immediately recognizes as his own flesh and blood, brothers who had thrown him into prison twenty-two years earlier.
- Joseph does not reveal himself to them but uses their need for food to find out if his younger brother Benjamin is still alive (he is) and if their father Jacob is still alive (he is as well).
- Without revealing his identity, Joseph devises a plot to get his brothers to bring both Jacob and Benjamin to Egypt, that Joseph might be reunited with them and that they might find a home in the country he now virtually rules.

II.

The story of Joseph appeals to us for several reasons.

- His is a rags-to-riches story of an immigrant, one in exile, slave, who makes good in a foreign land, an underdog who prevails.
- In addition, because it is said of Joseph: "The Lord was with Joseph, and prospered him in all that he did," we cannot help but think that in addition to the Rope of achievement, Joseph was also pulled out of the Pit because the Lord was with him.

We thus admire Joseph for both his human effort and his faith in God.

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Yet I think a *deeper reason* Joseph may *appeal* to us is that we are attracted to people who *suffer misfortune* but *don't dwell* on it; people who are *victims* but refuse to draw their *identity* from what has happened to them. We admire people who focus on the *future* and rather than the *past*, who keep their eyes on the *prize* ahead rather than on the *pain* of the Pit behind. We want to be like them, act like them, flourish like them. We want the Lord to be with us in prosper all we do.

III.

Despite Joseph's uncanny ability to pull himself up from the Pit with the Rope of success and achievement, there are a couple of places in Joseph's life where he seems to return to the Pit, to walk up to its edge, look over, peer at the pain of the past in a way that seeks to integrate the past into the present and future and make his life richer in the process.

I once knew a woman with whom I had a brief conversation that led her to call me on the phone. She said she had a recurring dream of standing at the top of the stairwell leading into her parents' basement. It was dark. It

was eerie. She didn't want to go down there but something told her she had to. Joseph may not be ready to go down to the Pit again either, but like the woman, he stands at the edge, preparing himself.

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One of those instances of standing at the edge of the Pit is the birth of his oldest son. Joseph names him Manasseh, which means "forgetfulness," and Joseph then explains: "For God has made me forget completely my suffering in the house of my father." He names his child for the *forgotten* of the pain of his past.

Yet ironically, in *remembering that he has forgotten*, Joseph *tr-opens the door to memory*. Ultimately, it is memory, not forgetfulness, that will bring Joseph to face the Pit again, to integrate it into a proper place in his life, so he can become his fullest self in God's world.

Eventually, I hope, the woman walked down the steps of her parents' basement. And whatever she found there, however painful, I hope helped her become her fullest self in God's world.

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A second instance in which Joseph recognizes his past life is when ten brothers come to ask him for food. They "bow themselves before him with their faces to the ground." When Joseph *sees* them bow, he recognizes them, and he remembers one of the dreams he had as a child that one day his brothers would bow down to him.

Nearly twenty-two years later, when Joseph sees his brothers bowing before him, he cannot hold back his memory of the dream and the swift action against him it prompted. As memory of dream and the Pit into which he was thrown because of his sharing of the dream. As memory of dream and Pit compete for Joseph's attention within his mind, he shuts the gates on his brothers, treating them harshly and accusing them of spying on the land, trying ever so hard to forget.

But even then, Joseph cannot fully close the gate on memory. When he hears the name "Benjamin" spoken from the lips of own of his brothers, Joseph breaks down. He cannot help but tear up at the thought of his younger brother, his only full brother, and of their mother Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin. Benjamin/Rachel – memories of his past lead Joseph to tears in the present.

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The third time the past breaks through for Joseph is when, on a subsequent trip back for food, his brother Judah, moves close to Joseph and tells Joseph that he, Judah, cannot bear the thought of going back without Benjamin and seeing his father's face.

When Judah says to Joseph: "I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father," Joseph "can no longer control himself." He "weeps so loudly that the Egyptians hear it; even the people in Pharaoh's palace hear Joseph weeping."

Then:

Joseph says to his brothers: "*I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?*"

And they are absolutely stunned into silence. They cannot speak.

It is only when Joseph "falls on Benjamin's neck, weeps, kisses all his brothers and weeps again." It is then that his brothers are able to talk.

IV.

There are times when Joseph couldn't keep the pain of the past from coming into the present:

- Naming his first-born son
- Hearing the name of his brother Benjamin spoken
- Imagining his father's grief over Benjamin's potential loss

But there is one time when Joseph himself seeks to bring the *past* into the *present* and *future*.

When Joseph sends all his brothers back to Canaan to tell their father that he is alive and to bring the family to Egypt, Joseph sends "wagons" in which to bring Jacob back. The narrator then says that "*when Jacob saw the wagons that Joseph had sent, his spirit revived.*" It is the *sight* of the *wagons* that makes Jacob believe that after twenty-two years, Joseph was still alive.

What's with the wagons?

Over the centuries, rabbinical commentators have tried to figure this odd detail out.

Several have noted that the word for *wagon* (*agalah*) and the word for *heifer* (*eglah*) vary only with one sound: *Agalah//eglah*. They sound almost identical.

These scholars conclude that when Joseph leaves his father to go into the field and check on his brothers – the fateful trip from which he did not return – Joseph and his father were reading a story from the Book of Deuteronomy in which a heifer is sacrificed to absolve a village of any potential guilt over the discovery of an unidentified body near it.

Some scholars think Joseph was sending "wagons//heifers" as a sign to say to Jacob:

*I am alive.
I am coming home.
But we need to go back to the day I left,
and talk about the wagons we were reading,
talk about the heifer that was slain,
whose body was left for dead.*

*I am that body.
I am that heifer.
I am that wagon.*

I remember it, now; and I would like to remember it together, with you.

Can we please talk about this, please?

I think Joseph and Jacob do talk about what happened, perhaps even in all its grisly pain. They may even talk about it fairly often, talking to the point of near resolution. For a few years later, after Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers fear that Joseph's welcome of them in Egypt may have been only to please their father, and that that welcome will dissipate now that their father has died. But Joseph reassures them that his acceptance of them represents a true change of heart on his behalf. "You intended it for evil," Joseph says, "but God used it for good."

In Proverbs 20:5, a wise sage writes:

*Counsel in the heart...is like deep water;
But a [person] of understanding will draw it out.*

The Rope by which Joseph was pulled out of the Pit was more than his own ingenuity coupled with God's blessing. It was also his willingness to look deep into memories of the waterless Pit into which he had been thrown – sometimes looking alone, sometimes with his father, sometimes with his brothers. Joseph found “counsel” within his own heart as he revisited the Pit. He drew out something that lay beneath the surface of parched, dry floor of the waterless Pit. Digging even deeper, he found the deepest of water: wisdom pure, clean, fresh, life-giving.

*Counsel in the heart...is like deep water;
But a [person] of understanding will draw it out.*

Amen.

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