

“Joseph: When you hit rock bottom”

Genesis 37:23-28

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So you think you have it bad? I could just imagine Joseph talking to us here in the year 2021. We have fallen into a pit. The pit is the Coronavirus Cavern, a deep and seemingly all-consuming abyss. Abandon hope all ye who enter. You will face quarantine. You will have much of life canceled. Your travel plans will be halted, your social life cramped, your family time crushed, your church calendar completely disrupted, and that is to say nothing of racial unrest, political turmoil, ones who have faced the loss of jobs, some two million Americans who have contracted the virus and nearly half a million who have died. We have landed in a pit. The pit is deep. The abyss is seemingly all-consuming. We have been tempted time and time again to abandon all hope. And here in the pit of the year 2021...no, the virus did not magically disappear...no, here we are ten months into it, one month into the new year, struggling to find a way out of the pit, and here in the pit we meet up with a man named Joseph, a man who is also trapped in the pit. Joseph listens to our litany of lament, but instead of being impressed with our heartache and disappointment, this guy named Joseph says to us, “So you think you have it bad?”

I can just hear Joseph say something along the lines of, “You don’t know the half of being in the pit.” Just in chapter 37 Joseph experiences one of the most dramatic falls from grace imaginable. The chapter opens with tremendous affirmations of Joseph. Joseph is loved by his father Jacob. Joseph is loved more than any of his eleven brothers. Joseph is the favorite. The sign of favoritism is a richly ornamented robe his father made just for him. Not for any others of the brothers...no, the robe is only for Joseph, and the message is clear. Joseph may be number 11 in the birth order, but he is number one in his father’s heart. And that is not all. Joseph also has some dreams that magnify his place in the family. Twice he has dreams that end with the result of Joseph raised up while his brothers bow down, and in the second one even his father and mother bow down. Sporting that fancy coat of many colors, Joseph was literally living the dream.

And yet somewhere between verse eleven of chapter 37 and verse 23, the dream turns to a nightmare. His brothers do not share the enthusiasm of Joseph for his favored place, in fact, they are jealous. When Joseph goes to visit them in the fields their jealousy turns to an act of vengeance. We read in verse 23 Joseph was stripped of his robe, thrown into the cistern, and left to wallow in his newfound

suffering and sadness. Joseph now knew what it was like to be in the pit. For the next thirteen years he will be in the pit in one form or another. He will be sold and sent to Egypt. After a brief rise in the home of Potiphar his fortunes betray him again and he ends in prison. Joseph endured more than a decade of suffering and shame, he was cut off from his family, and treated as if he was dead to them all. Joseph not only fails to rise above his brothers he sinks deeper and deeper into the pit. Now that we have landed in the pit, cast down by the Coronavirus Crisis, we might think we have hit rock bottom. Not so fast says the dreamer. Joseph is there to say to us, “So you think you have it bad?”

I can see some real value in Joseph asking us, “So you think you have it bad?” Sometimes it helps to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes. Nothing brings us up short quicker than to complain about how bad a job is only to have someone say, “At least you have a job.” Or when we are harping about unexpected home repair bills and we hear, “Must be nice to have a home.” When you are pulling your hair out because your kids are so unruly and someone says, “I was never able to have kids...or, I lost a child.” Maybe in this year of the Coronavirus we might find benefit from Joseph asking us, “So you think you have it bad?”

As helpful, and perhaps as necessary as that might be, something tells me there is more to the story of Joseph than just a reminder that someone always has it worse than us. I do think there are times in the bible when the message seems to be you don’t have it as bad as you think. Nevertheless, my reading of the scriptures tilts dramatically to a different response when the people of God face trials, whether it be the pit of despair that swallowed Joseph or the Canyon of Coronavirus that sucked us in. The overwhelming message that comes to us through page after page of scripture is that when the people of God land in the pit, God takes our suffering seriously.

As humans, we tend to compare suffering. When we land in the pit with Joseph, and with all the other biblical figures who have similarly sunk deep in the mire, we are tempted to create a scale of suffering. Joseph, you had it bad, you are way down here, way close to the bottom. Your suffering was deep. And Job...Job you know what it’s about. But Esau, you sort of deserved what you got. You sold your own birthright for a bowl of soup. We mark Esau pretty high up. He didn’t know the depths. And David, who created his own chaos when he chased after Bathsheba. Yeah, yeah, you’re in the pit, but you’re not as deep as some real sufferers. Elijah, running for your life from Queen Jezebel, you know suffering. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and Daniel, ye of the fiery furnace and the lion’s den, that’s deep, that’s deep. Peter, starting to submerge as your faith failed

you while walking on the water, you didn't even get in over your head before you were rescued. Wedding at Cana...sure it would have been embarrassing to run out of wine, but really, that doesn't even tip the scale of suffering. Noah, so what if you didn't have an umbrella, God gave you an ark after all. You suffered a little, you suffered a lot, let's rank this thing called suffering.

If we can resist our human desire to rank things, to number things, to compare things, I think what we will find with God is that no matter how we rank the sufferings of life, God takes all of our suffering seriously. Because God really does take all of our suffering seriously, what we find in the story of Joseph is good news. This is not a story about whose suffering is worse and whose pit is deeper. The story of Joseph doesn't create classes and orders and bragging rights. Through the story of Joseph, we encounter the good news of the gospel that says no matter what pit we are in, no matter how deep it is, whether it is something as small as a stubbed toe or a skinned knee, a failed exam or a flat tire, something more difficult like a struggling marriage or an estranged child, a terminal illness or a sudden death, no matter what pit we are in, God is with us.

God is with us, but as is so often the case when we are in the pit, we don't always know God is with us. Not right at first. You can read chapter 37 of Genesis front to back and back to front, and you will not find the affirmation that God is with Joseph. But let the story move on a bit, on to chapter 39 when Joseph gets to Egypt and we read, "The Lord was with Joseph..." (Genesis 39:2) From his arrival in Egypt as a slave and all through his journey from prison to Pharaoh's penthouse, the underlying message is that God was with Joseph. When Joseph resists the advances of Potiphar's wife and ends up in prison, we are told, "But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him." (Genesis 39:21) It's a good thing the Lord was with him, because Joseph's struggle was long and drawn out. For more than twenty years he suffered the cruel agony of knowing his own brothers had betrayed him. For more than twenty years his father Jacob mourned with bitter tears and painful heartache because all Jacob knew was that his beloved son was dead. When he met his brothers after those twenty years, God continued to be with Joseph. We get the sense that because God was with Joseph, Joseph was able to forgive his brothers. By the time the story ends in Genesis 50 we hear an absolutely amazing affirmation from the lips of Joseph. Speaking to those very brothers who had thrown him in a pit and sold him into slavery, Joseph says, "You intended it for harm, but God intended it for good."

As the curtain falls on this epic biblical drama, Joseph affirms that God was with him, every step of the way. And it is one of the highlights of the bible when Joseph testifies that he is with God. Joseph knows God has been at work. Joseph

forgives because God was at work. Joseph realizes his dreams came from God, and his dreams came true because of God.

Friends, when we are in the pit, and we will be in the pit at some point, whether a virus becomes a pandemic or an x-ray shows a suspicious spot, whether a relationship is broken or a loved one is lost, when we are in the pit, let us hear the good news that is proclaimed in the story of Joseph: God is with us.

Here in the story that leads the people of God into Egypt, Egypt which will become a notorious pit of despair, where the people of God will be oppressed and treated ruthlessly, here as the people of God head into Egypt, there is a powerful affirmation that God is with us. Hundreds of years later, after God has rescued the people out of the slavery of Egypt, after God has rescued his people from the pit, they will stand poised to enter the Promised Land. At that critical juncture in the journey of faith, God will say not once, not twice, but three times that he will always be with his people.

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6)

And again, “The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:8)

And yet again, speaking to Joshua as Moses has now met his great reward, “I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Joshua 1:5)

Those verses about never leaving nor forsaking, there is something really significant about them. Three times in the space of a few chapters as the people prepare to enter the Promised Land, God says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” These are all Old Testament verses. So are the verses about Joseph, the verses that tell us the Lord was with Joseph. But the New Testament is not silent about the presence of God. In a chapter at the end of Hebrews, a New Testament book, the chapter at the end of Hebrews, under the heading, “Concluding exhortations”, we find the exact same verse as we found three times at the end of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Joshua. One of the concluding exhortations found in the New Testament book of Hebrews says, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

You start to think that for a people who end up spending a lot of time in the pit, that our God wants us to know something. God wants us to know he is with us.

And then there was the time that God decided to let us know just how completely he was with us. And then there was the time that God decided to let us know how he had completely abandoned himself to us, to be with us. And then there was the time an angel spoke to a man named Joseph...and oh, by the way, this all happened in a dream, and in a dream the angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph and said Joseph's engaged bride Mary would have a baby and the baby was to be named Immanuel, which means...can you hear me down in the pit...can you hear me as this Coronavirus rages on and our Capitol is attacked and the struggle for racial justice and equality continues in hard fought ways...and people lose jobs and families lose loved ones and medical workers and front line workers and essential workers are pushed to the limits of their resources...can you hear me down in the pit...as you enter the 11th month of social distancing and isolation and loneliness and despair...can you hear me down in the pit? His name shall be Immanuel, which means, "God is with us."

One of my favorite television shows told a poignant story twice. Each time the story was told, the situation was different. But in both situations, someone was in the pit. One was when a man was dealing with the challenges of addiction, the challenge of being an alcoholic. The story was also told when another man was dealing with post-traumatic stress, a painful and violent memory that kept being relived. Each one, in their own way, was inviting us to imagine all the ways that we human beings end up in the pit. Knowing that we all fall into the pit at one time or another, I tell you this story, one of my favorite stories. At first the story sounds sort of silly, but if you listen to the end, I think you will find this is a story that speaks to those in the pit. In other words, this story is deep. Here it is:

A man was walking down the street one day when he fell into an uncovered manhole. He landed at the bottom, and realized he was stuck. A physician walked by and the man called out, "Hey doc, can you give me some help?" The physician obliged. He wrote a prescription and dropped it in the manhole. A while later a pastor walked by. Again, the man called out, "Hey pastor, can you give me some help?" The pastor, he obliged. He bowed down and said a prayer. Later, a friend walked by. The man shouted out in desperation, "Hey, can you give me some help?" The friend said sure. A moment later, the man stuck in the hole heard a loud thud. The friend had jumped into the manhole with him. The man cringed with frustration and said, "Are you crazy? Now we are both stuck in here." The friend looked at him and said with a smile, "We're not stuck. I've been here before, and I know the way out."

That is a story about friendship, about someone who would not leave their friend alone. The person jumped right into the pit to be with their friend. Both times this story was told on a television show, I got tears in my eyes. Now imagine if that story is not just about friends. Imagine people like you and me, people through the ages, people from the bible like Joseph and Elijah, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, people like Peter and people like Paul, who have fallen into the pit, and they cry out to their God for help. What did God do for them? What does God do for us?

Thud! God jumps right into our world. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He wrapped himself in his very own name, Immanuel, and he became the God who is with us. God will never leave us and God will never forsake us. Friends, that is the Good News of the Gospel.

The Apostle Paul declares that very truth in the closing verses of Romans 8.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38,39)

God doesn't stand above the pit shouting down to us. God is in the pit with us. He is with us to hold us and comfort us and strengthen us and lift us and restore us and rescue us. Today, to anyone who is in the pit...to everyone who is in the pit, God wants us to hear the Good News. “I am with you...and I will never leave you...never...no not ever...no never.”