

10th Sunday after Pentecost

“Down in the Pits?”

13 August 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

1 Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. 2 This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.... 12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." 14 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, 15 and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" 16 "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 17 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. 18 They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20 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." 21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 22 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. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24 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. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 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 (Gen 37:1-4, 12-28).

A guiding principle as we look at Bible texts is simply that “Things are not as they seem.” Partly this is because human perception is often imperfect. But our theme also alludes to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, *A Psalm of Life*:

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

The overall lessons from Genesis this summer have this in common: any human success is surprising and grounded in the marvelous grace and mercy of God. Now is a good time to remember all that God has done and continues to do for God’s people. For this 10th Sunday after Pentecost and although we will explore Genesis text, it is well to note that the lesson from Matthew is the story of Jesus walking on the sea and Peter’s attempt to do likewise. Jesus then utters an important question of Peter: “You of little faith, why did you doubt” (Matthew 14:31)?

After reading Genesis 37 I heard a preacher ask the congregation: “**Have you ever felt down in the pits?**” The preacher then proceeded to preach a sermon about depression and mental health issues and addressed an important topic. No doubt we need to help folks who suffer from depression. In fact, I know of a church judicatory that offers support to people through what they call the “Depression Network Team.”

Yet the objection to the preacher’s otherwise fine sermon was simply that this Genesis text has nothing to do with being depressed or “being down in the pits.” Perhaps a more appropriate text to address a mental health issue of might be 1 Samuel 16:14: “*Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.*” The Genesis text instead has to do with an odd and large family that has difficulty with jealousy and status within a patriarchal family. Perhaps more than anything else our Genesis lesson for today reminds us that “Things are not as they seem.”

Next week’s Genesis lesson addresses the much later reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers. For now, we merely suggest why there was such enmity between the brothers that they would plan to murder Joseph, and then fortuitously decide to sell Joseph instead into slavery—as

if this were a praiseworthy alternative. From the beginning, Joseph had the reputation as something of a dreamer. In fact, Genesis 37 tells us that the young Joseph had two dreams—dreams that he recklessly shared with his family. The first dream related to binding sheaves in the field. The many sheaves bowed down to the one sheaf. Joseph let his brothers know that he was the sheaf before whom they bowed. The second dream is like the first, only this time Joseph, according to his dream, reveals that “the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” Joseph would have done well to keep his dreams to himself. He no doubt contributed to the wrath of his brothers.

But Joseph was not alone in bringing his brothers’ “fire and fury” down on himself. Today’s text also reminds us that “Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:3-4). Thus, not only did Joseph create the bad blood between himself and his brothers but the father Jacob did his part as well.

We all have trouble in our human relationships. Sometimes our difficulty is because we communicate poorly with other people—or they have difficulty communicating with us. Sometimes we have problems in our human relationships, especially ones within our own families. This can be particularly troublesome when a third party enters in and muddies the already turbulent waters of family life. Counselors call this “triangulation.” Triangulation occurs when a person, one who is not part of the conflict at hand, becomes privy to the disagreement. He or she sometimes exacerbates the disagreement by either trying to help or intentionally goading the combatants into further and escalating disagreement. This triangulation scenario plays itself out in places as diverse as the playground or the corporate boardrooms of big business or the family breakfast table.

Yet, at the end of our story and despite the brothers’ complete and well-documented hatred of Joseph, there does appear an element of grace. This element of grace is another instance of the Bible’s tendency to remind us that: “Things are not as they seem.” The benevolence may be small, but nonetheless, grace is indeed there. The brothers decide to sell Joseph rather than to kill him. (As I said, it may not be much). But it is enough to keep the story of Joseph moving along. Near the end of Joseph’s story, eventually Genesis reminds all of us of one of the greatest

truths of scripture (a paraphrase from Genesis 50:20): “Although you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.”

I like that part best—as God continues to do for us today! When things look bleak remember that a God who can resurrect Jesus from the dead is a God who can make a world in which “Things are not as they seem” . . . and then say . . . it is good, indeed very good.

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