

## ***What's it Like Being in the Pit?***

**Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28**

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There are a couple of stories floating around clergy resource sites on the internet. The first is about a farmer and his aging donkey. The donkey has outlived his usefulness to the farmer. The farmer decides to put down the donkey—he digs a large hole in the ground and pushes the donkey into it. The farmer picks up his shovel and begins to toss shovel after shovel of dirt into the hole to fill it. Right about now you might think this story is awful; however, we tend to look at this story from the farmer's perspective--from the donkey's perspective the story changes. The donkey's master dug a big hole and threw him in, but he isn't sure why. The donkey looks around the giant hole for a way out, but there isn't one. Then some dirt falls on him.

The donkey shakes off the dirt and steps on it. As the dirt rains down on him, he continues to shake it off and step on it. More dirt, more shaking, more stepping. Then after enough dirt has been thrown down into the pit to bury him, the donkey finds himself close enough to the top of the hole to step out of the pit.

Holes of this size are not plentiful in the Middle East but when Carl and I were over there in 2000 our tour guide found several and showed them to us. They are called cisterns. Cisterns are bulbous shaped holes in the ground used to catch and store the small amount of rainwater that falls in the desert. Nomads passing by would draw the water up as if it was a well.

Joseph's brothers put Joseph into just such a cistern—it was a hole in the ground with no visible means of escape. It is here that the perspective of the story needs to change—it is hard to read this story without identifying with Joseph. Poor Joseph--what an awful thing for his brothers to do to him. After all, each one of us has been mistreated at some point in time. We can relate to this story. We have all found ourselves caught in situations from which there is no obvious means of escape.

For instance let's revisit a mining accident in Quecreek, PA July 28, 2002—you probably remember it: 9 miners were trapped in the mine for three days before they were rescued. Six years later we can still identify with the fear and anxiety of those nine men, even as we can identify with Joseph's fear and anxiety in the pit. We want to jump to their rescue each time we hear the story. BUT, and that is a capitalized BUT...when we switch into that rescue mode, we miss a whole lot that is going on in the story.

Let me tell you the other internet story: there is a small town on the banks of a river. One day a young man was rescued from the raging waters. Just as soon as the rescuers had him on the riverbank, another man floated down the river. Then another, and another, and another. This scenario played out for two more days. Some of the townspeople wanted to build a rescue station. Others wanted to train special swimmers to stand guard in the water waiting for the next victim. Still others wanted to build

shelters where the rescued swimmers could recover. An entire industry was about to develop around the rescue operations.

The problem was, the townspeople were focusing on the victims just like we focus on Joseph and the miners. However, one wise townspeople insisted the better means of treating the problem would be to send a team of people upstream to investigate what was causing so many people to fall in the river in the first place.

If we look at the story from this perspective we would investigate/look into the reason for Joseph's demise in the pit—but this is too easy: Jacob, Joseph's father, created a monster in his son by bestowing special affection on him. This in turn caused the eleven brothers, and perhaps the one lone sister Dinah, to think their father's blessing belonged only to Joseph the favored one, not Reuben the firstborn, or the others. So, the question I ask this morning is: what kind of people were Joseph's brothers, and do they exist in today's society?

It might be easy to see ourselves that is our nation, as Joseph, victimized by the world because we are so successful. The harder truth is to see how we as a nation are more often like Reuben or Judah or even Simeon and Asher. Why is that you ask? Time does not allow me to go into the many reasons, so I will select one: in a market economy we claim to encourage freedom but in reality we encourage a form of modern-day slavery by purchasing only the lowest priced products.

Take Wal-Mart for example: in every area Wal-Mart opens its doors, local businesses have closed theirs because they cannot compete. People would rather save money than support local businesses with higher prices. Our wallets make decisions rather than any sense of commitment to community. In the end, rather than support several small businesses and their families, we push those same families into the pit by making them work for minimum wage at Wal-Mart.

Another example has to do with the very substance that keeps much of America going in the morning: coffee! Coffee growers in Columbia seldom get more than \$.30/pound for their coffee. Many of us grumble at paying \$4-\$5/pound for a can of coffee, we willingly pay over \$7 for Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts coffee. Our United Church of Christ has encouraged churches to intentionally purchase "Fair Trade Coffee," coffee that guarantees the Columbian coffee grower at least \$1.26 a pound and is available to us at about \$7/pound. Louise Beach looked into this and offered it to us last year as a means of supporting the Columbian farmers. The truth is, our spending practices prefer to push coffee farmers into pits along with Joseph. Some people argue that on the world's stage America acts like the spoiled child who deserves to be thrown into the pit—I do not necessarily disagree—I believe the truth is we have put more people in the pit than we care to admit we do.

Reuben was Jacob's oldest son. By tradition and custom Reuben would inherit the mantle of authority from Jacob. However, Reuben thinks he knows the real truth, that his father will do as he did with his own father and brother. You might remember the story:

Jacob and Esau were twins. Esau was the firstborn and was to receive his father's blessing and all that went with it. Jacob tricked their father into believing Jacob was Esau—thus Jacob, the second born, received that blessing. Reuben figures the scenario will play out the same for him. The truth is, Reuben will receive that blessing; so will Judah and Simeon and Asher and all the way down to Benjamin, the youngest. God made a promise to Abraham, and in faith, Abraham accepted and believed the promise to be true. It was a promise that was to last throughout time.

Yet, with each generation there was a crisis when it came time to pass the promise on. Abraham had a difficult time passing it on to Isaac. Isaac had a difficult time passing it on to Jacob, and now Jacob has a hard time passing on his faith in God's promise to his children. This same crisis of passing on the faith from one generation to the next is a crisis that continues to be true in the church today. In the past we have addressed it in Sunday school and youth groups, but the crisis is ages old and must be faced by and dealt with in every generation.

In the case of Joseph and his brothers, the crisis came in the form of jealousy over who would inherit the promise. That jealousy exists today, even in our churches; jealousy over who will determine the shape and nature of the church's ministries, or what kind of worship services will be held, or how the pastor's time will be allocated.

Metaphorically speaking Joseph's brothers were the ones in the pit, not Joseph. Reuben and the others thought there was no way out of their predicament. They saw their young brother as the favored son—they wanted to be included in the promise and they figured the only way to get there was to deny Joseph access to it. They overlooked the possibility they ALL could inherit it. They did not see how each of the twelve brothers could play their own role in receiving the promise and passing on the faith.

In actuality, not one of them would inherit God's promises—they would all inherit them or no one will. And maybe that is the message we need to hear and remember today. The answer does not need to lie in the tossing of Joseph into the pit or sold into slavery. The answer lies in the same place Jacob found an answer: trusting in the promises of God, standing on the promises of God! God will provide the answer!

Those miners in PA almost lost hope as the days passed. They didn't know, they couldn't know, that the drill that was boring a hole to reach them had broken. Had the drill not broken, the miners would have drowned when the waters were released. The new drilling operation allowed more time for the water to be pumped out—in the end the long wait proved to have the safest results.

God was at work with Joseph and his brothers. God was at work with the miners. God is at work with us whether or not we realize it. When we cling to God's promise we find ways to work with other people rather than against them. When we recognize God works in our midst, we can allow even the most obnoxious "Joseph's" in our world to find their places as we find our own places and roles in the kingdom of God.

