

August 13, 2017  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

### **Into the Pit**

Last Sunday in the Old Testament reading from Genesis we were at the river's edge with Jacob, where he wrestled, and received a blessing, and another name. Having passed through those baptismal waters, Jacob walks, with a victorious limp, into the rising dawn. On the other shore Jacob sees his estranged older brother, his twin, Esau, whom he had cheated. Esau had vowed to kill Jacob if he ever turned up again. They meet now, on the other side of the river—and they embrace.

And then Genesis tells of the next generation, the story shifts to the children of Jacob, now also known as Israel. If Jacob's character, or lack thereof, if Jacob's personality and past decisions gave us pause, wait 'til you meet his son Joseph. Joseph is doted upon by his father, the Bible explains that Joseph is the son of Jacob's old age, a detail which could prompt tender feelings in us, too—except that Jacob has numerous other children. Complicated Jacob has a complicated family: four wives, twelve sons (and a daughter). Jacob further complicates it by having a favorite among them, Joseph, to whom he gives a special item of clothing, a robe, or cloak, or coat. You may have heard about Joseph's amazing technicolor dreamcoat? It may have had many colors, or it may have been a long robe with sleeves (the translation we just heard), the ancient text is unclear—in any case, it was special, and Joseph wore it where his brothers could see him in it. Also, Joseph kept an eye on them, and their mothers, Joseph was quick to tell his father about what other family members were up to, Joseph was quick to give bad reports about them, to tell on them. Also, Joseph was quick to tell his brothers about dreams that he had had of them bowing down to him—just what older brothers like to hear from Dad's pet. This part was not included in the reading we heard, but is a key detail: Joseph dreamed that he would do something important and they would thank him for it, on their knees.

Joseph's complicated self—he has that in common with his dad—Joseph's story will dominate the rest of Genesis, all the way to its final, fiftieth chapter. But even here in chapter thirty-seven, as Joseph is introduced, even here we get a sense of his potential: all the gifts he's been given, the great dreams that he has—and the sometimes problematic ways he employs them: tattling, preening, announcing. Not only that, though, we also see the outsized punishment Joseph receives as a result, the consequences that befall him, harsh consequences which are also wildly changeable. Joseph may not be particularly endearing, but does he deserve to die? Do we rejoice that, with the interventions of a few of his brothers, he is instead sold into slavery?

All of this, all of Joseph's story, is a narrative masterpiece. In its focus and expansiveness, it is something of its own novella in the book of Genesis—but it's also the story of humanity writ large. With Joseph, we humans are spectacularly gifted, but so often we use those gifts to one-up one another, prompt ill will, even murderous rage. And we suffer the consequences—consequences which are traceable back to ourselves, and to our fathers—but also, so often, consequences that seem all out of proportion, consequences that include death. Sometimes it is barely, temporarily averted. That's the best a few can do, stave off death for a bit, trade for something that's maybe not so bad. That's the best a few can do in life's story of brothers who meet dreamers with brutality. In Memphis, in front of the Lorraine hotel where Dr. King was assassinated, there is a plaque that quotes Genesis 37: “They said one to another. Behold, here cometh the dreamer... Let us slay him... and we shall see what will become of his

dreams.” And they stripped Joseph of his robe, and threw him into a pit, and collected some silver in exchange.

It’s a dark story, without much hope, without much sign of God. That’s how it is in life, if we are realistic: nasty, brutish, short. Something happens, and your life is changed, brutally. Maybe you could you have seen it coming. Maybe you even contributed to its occurrence. Maybe now you feel that’s all life is: a pit, utter darkness, as is the future, which gives little reason for hope. Joseph wasn’t killed, but he was sold into slavery in a foreign land. Realistically, we can’t see anything good can come.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann had this to say about the future and realists. Moltmann said, “Anyone who trusts the living God does not just see the world in terms of its reality. Realists do that and they always arrive too late. Anyone who trusts the future sees the world according to its potential.” I want to read that quote again, but first I want to tell you a little bit more about Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann was born in 1928 in Hamburg, Germany and had a secular upbringing, was not part of a church. As a teenager, he was drafted into the German army, it was the very end of World War and they were desperate for more soldiers, for young men who would kill, and be killed. Moltmann was sent to the front lines in the Belgian forest; he surrendered to the first British soldier he met. He became a prisoner of war for three years. First he was in a POW camp in Belgium, where he lost all hope. Thinking of the concentration camps, he despaired of humanity. But he met a group of Christians in the camp, and he was given a copy of the New Testament and Psalms by an American chaplain, and he read it, over and again. Moltmann was then transferred to a POW camp in Scotland, where he was moved by the hospitality shown to him, a German prisoner. Then Moltmann was transferred yet again to a camp in northern England, where he met students of theology. Eventually, after he was released from prison, Moltmann himself became a student of religion, he earned his doctorate, taught systematic theology, received innumerable honors, wrote books on suffering and ontological possibility, books with titles like *The Crucified God*, and *Theology of Hope*. A couple years ago I saw Moltmann’s name pop up in the news, he had become pen pals with an American woman on death row; she was studying theology.

Moltmann is still living. He is now 91 years old. That quote was from a speech he gave just this past June, when he said: “Anyone who trusts the living God does not just see the world in terms of its reality. Realists do that and they always arrive too late. Anyone who trusts the future sees the world according to its potential.” Realists see the world as it is, but in doing so, they fail to, they cannot, see the future. Faith in the living God trusts the future, sees the world according to its potential, according to God’s dream for the world.

Joseph was thrown into the pit—but that is not the end of his story. God is with Joseph, in the pit, in slavery, in Egypt, where Joseph is taken, and where God works through Joseph, through his dreams and his gifts, as he uses them to secure a future for himself, and for all of Egypt, and for his brothers, too.

And there’s another story that the Bible tells, in another testament, a story that picks up parts of Joseph’s story. This one, too, is a story of a beloved son, who has a robe stripped from him, who is sold, betrayed, for some pieces of silver. It is the story of Jesus. It is the story of God entering fully into human life, even into the pit of death. It is the story of God crucified and risen. It is the story of God’s love for humanity writ large. It is God’s great gift to us, God’s dream for us, our present potential, and our promised future.