

From Pit to Well
Genesis 37:1–11, 18–36
Sunday, August 2, 2026

Let us pray: May we hear, Lord, not just with our ears and our minds, but with our *hearts*, that our lives might be transformed by your word, in Christ. Amen.

For the past two months, we have been following the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, these three great ancestors of our faith. And we have seen how their stories have been *anything but* easy or heroic. They are messy, flawed individuals who make a lot of mistakes that hurt themselves and others. They don't always get it right, and it's almost like we learn more about what *not* to do from them than we learn what *to do*. Well, we're going to shift gears this morning into the story of Joseph. (Just so we're all on the same page, this is *not* Joseph the father of Jesus. This is Jacob's son Joseph, who lived over a thousand years before Jesus. But Joseph is *so important* to the story of our faith. We can't get to *Jesus* without *Joseph*.)

Joseph was the eleventh of twelve sons born to Jacob. But he was the *first* son born to Rachel, the wife that Jacob loved. We talked about this a few weeks ago. Jacob loved Rachel and wanted to marry her. But Jacob's father-in-law Laban tricked him into marrying his *other* daughter Leah first. For the longest time, Rachel could not have children. Jacob had sons with Leah, which made Rachel jealous, so she said, "Have children with my servant Bilhah," and he did. That made *Leah* jealous, so *she* said, "Have children with *my* servant Zilpah," so he did. He has ten sons with three other women before he finally has Joseph and Benjamin with Rachel. And because they were his sons with the wife that he loved, Jacob loved Joseph and Benjamin *more* than his other children. He loved Joseph most of all, and he did not hide that.

Jacob gives his son Joseph a long robe with sleeves. So many times we think of it as a coat of many colors or an Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, but that comes from what scholars think was a mistaken

translation in the King James Bible. Regardless of what *color* it was, it was a long robe with sleeves; it went all the way down to his ankles and all the way to his wrists. The reason this matters is because if you wore a robe like this, you would not be able to do physical, manual labor, in comparison to the *shorter* tunics that Jacob's *other* sons wore. In giving Joseph this robe, Jacob was basically saying, "You do not have to work hard like your brothers."

Well, you can imagine how the others felt about *that*. It says that they *saw* that their father loved him more, and they *hated* Joseph for it and could not speak peaceably to him. And the matter is only made worse by these *dreams* that Joseph has; dreams that imply that he will be lifted up and exalted, so that the rest of his family will bow down to him. If you have dreams like that, you're probably better off keeping them to yourself. But Joseph tells *everyone* about it, and his brothers hate him even more.

The time comes when they have had *enough*. They see Joseph walking across the pasture to them, and they devise a plot. They will *kill* Joseph, throw his body into a pit, and say that a wild animal killed him. Joseph's older brother Reuben sticks up for him and says, "Throw him in a pit, but don't *kill* him." This was not out of kindness of love for his brother. Reuben is thinking, "I can rescue Joseph from the pit, and then dad will love *me* for saving his favorite son!" So they take Joseph and throw him in a pit, but before Reuben can "rescue" him, they decide to *sell him* into slavery. They kill a goat and put some of its blood on Joseph's coat, and they tell their father Jacob that a wild animal has killed Joseph, while Joseph is carried off to Egypt as a slave.

But let's back up for a moment and talk about that pit. Obviously, they did not have indoor plumbing back then, so if they wanted water, they had to dig a well. But in some places, they couldn't *find* water by digging wells, so what they had to do was dig these big pits that they used to catch rainwater. They could bucket up the rainwater and use it for drinking, cooking, irrigation, whatever. Joseph's brothers are out

tending sheep by one of these pits that is *empty*, so it doesn't have any rainwater in it, and they throw Joseph in there.

The Bible actually talks about pits like this all over the place, especially in the Psalms. There are all these cries for help from people who have fallen into pits. "O Lord, save me from the depths of the pit!" If you fell into one of these pits, you were in pretty big trouble, because they were so deep that there really wasn't any way for you to get *out* on your own. Unless there was someone else *with* you who had a long enough rope or ladder, you weren't getting out of that pit. You were going to die there.

Because of that, "the pit" becomes associated with death. When people talk about dying, they talk about "going down to the pit" (the same way we would say, "going down to the grave."). It was deep, it was dry, it was desolate, there was no hope. The psalmist cries out, "To you, O Lord, I call; do not refuse to hear me, for if you are silent to me, I shall be like those who go down to the pit" (Psalm 8:1). Another time it says, "My soul is full of troubles...I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more...You have put me in the depths of the pit" (88:3–6). Or "answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me, or I shall be like those who go down to the pit" (143:7).

Job, in the midst of his pain and anguish and struggles with God, says, "the pit is my home, and I have no hope" (Job 17:13–15).

When the people of Israel are in exile, prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel talk about them being like a people that has been thrown down into a pit. They have no hope. They are as good as dead.

This is where we find Joseph. In the pit. In the depths of despair. Hopeless. Feeling like he has been abandoned. Like he is as good as dead. And even though he gets out of the *physical* pit, he still has to go be a slave in Egypt, so he remains in this mental, emotional, spiritual pit. And when the brothers tell their father Jacob that Joseph has been killed, he is inconsolable and says, “I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Sheol is what they understood as the place of the dead. Everyone who died went there. And a lot of times, Sheol is associated with a pit. Jacob is saying that he will spend the rest of his life mourning, until the day he dies. So Jacob, too, is down in a pit. He is in the depths of despair over the death of his favorite son. He is saying, “Nothing is ever going to be okay again.”

But the thing is, Jacob is wrong. He is so overwhelmed by grief and pain and sadness that he cannot see anything else. He cannot see any hope. When you are stuck down in a pit looking up, you can only see a limited view of the sky; you can't see the whole thing. Jacob can only see the grief and pain of the present moment. What he *can't* see is the *truth* that Joseph is still alive, and that he will go to Egypt and rise in power until he becomes Pharaoh's most trusted advisor, and Joseph will end up saving Jacob and the rest of his family from famine. What he *can't* see is that nine chapters and 22 years later, he will see his son Joseph again. This is not the *end* of Joseph's story. It is only the *beginning*. Everything is going to be okay.

Singer Andy Gullahorn wrote a song called, “Grand Canyon,” in which he talks about visiting the Grand Canyon and taking a picture. But the picture only captures a fraction of the beauty and majesty of the Grand Canyon. And he uses that as a metaphor for having hope in the midst of our struggles. He sings:

There are endless tears and suffering we can't explain.
There are dark grey clouds that never seem to drift away.
There's despair in the morning that will tie us to the bed,
but the story isn't over yet.

There's a white flag raised saying we can't bear anymore.
There are silent nights because nothing's like it was...
And our dreams retell the sadness, so we cannot forget,

but the story isn't over yet.

I took a picture of the Grand Canyon, so I could remember that day.
Oh, but the beauty of the Grand Canyon stretches way beyond the frame.¹

Sometimes, like Joseph and Jacob, we find ourselves down in a pit. We are swallowed up by grief or pain or fear or problems, and we don't see any way that things are ever going to work out or get better. All we can see is the pain of the present moment. What we *can't* see is everything that lies beyond the frame. What we *can't* see is how God is already at work in our lives to bring about healing and hope and new possibilities. That whatever pain or sadness or problems we are facing, it is not the *end* of our story. It is only the beginning. Everything is going to be okay. Even if it's *not okay*, it's going to be okay.

That is not just wishful thinking or denial, ignoring our problems. It is trusting that, as long as you are alive, God is not done with you yet. And even when this life *ends*, there is this whole other life that stretches way beyond the frame, so that even if it is not okay in *this* life, this life is not all there is.

Zechariah was a prophet in the Old Testament, when the people of Israel were going through some incredibly difficult times. And God says this to the people through Zechariah, "Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit" (Zechariah 9:11). *Because of the blood of my covenant with you.* We share in the covenant of God, the *promise* of God, through the blood of Jesus Christ. And what Jesus shows us is that God is in the business of healing and hope and resurrection and new life. Jesus was in the pit of suffering and death. There did not seem like any way that things would be okay. The story was *over*...until it wasn't. Because Jesus rose up out of that pit to live a new life. And he can raise *us* up out of that pit, too.

¹ [Andy Gullahorn, "Grand Canyon," from the album *Beyond the Frame*](#)

Through Jesus Christ, God sets us free from the pits of pain and fear and suffering and despair that we find ourselves stuck in. It might not be today. It might not be tomorrow. It sure wasn't with Joseph. Joseph had to endure a lot before he was set free from his pit. But as we're going to see next week, God was with him every step of the way. And God is with us, too, even in the pit, even when we can't see it yet.

Julian of Norwich was a theologian and mystic in England in the 1300s during the Black Death, which killed up to 50 million people across Europe. When she was around 30 years old, she became very ill and was on her deathbed. In the midst of that, she had a series of visions in which Jesus appeared to her. At one point, she asked him how sin and such terrible suffering could exist if God is all-loving. Christ answered her by saying, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." That same promise echoes in all of the pits that we find ourselves in. Yes, there is sin and evil and suffering and death, but *all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well*, because the story isn't over yet. Amen.