

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
August 10, 2008

South Plains
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Pit Was Empty

NBC news carried the story of a young woman living in a New York City apartment who wanted to show off the city skyline to a visitor. From the roof of her building, they could see almost everything. She wanted more, so she climbed the ladder up to the top of the furnace chimney. Maybe the view was a little overwhelming because she lost her balance and tumbled into the chimney where she fell straight down 14 stories. She might have dropped into burning smoke, or sharp cinders, or hard brick. In the providence of God, she landed in two feet of fine, powdery soot that cushioned her fall, leaving her filthy, but with absolutely no broken bones.

Young Joseph in our story from Genesis was almost as lucky. His brothers, bitter with jealousy, threw him into a cistern, a pit dug into the earth to catch rainwater where shepherds would water their flocks when the streams ran dry. He might have drowned. But, Genesis 37:24 says the pit was empty. Joseph was safe, at least temporarily. But, when his brothers saw a caravan approaching, they decided to capitalize on Joseph's predicament. They sold him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver. If that transaction sounds vaguely familiar, you are right. Jesus was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver.

The story of Joseph careens from a life of blessing to a life that seems cursed: We meet him as a beloved son who becomes a smart aleck. And, we follow his career from freedom to slavery, from a responsible position in Potiphar's household to prison, and from prisoner to prince of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. But, throughout that erratic progress, the eyes of faith can also follow the providential purposes of God at work by means of adversity and dreams. In the end, Joseph will be the person who saves the people of God from a famine and who lays the foundation for an even greater story of salvation when the Lord leads them out of slavery in Egypt and into the promised land.

Those of you who have been around South Plains a lot longer than I have, know about adversity and dreams. For 175 years, South Plains either had a part time pastor or no pastor at all. Some years, the records indicate that the session never met. Despite adversity, the people persevered. They persevered and dreamed about the opportunity to serve this community with an additional building. I wish I could tell you when we will break ground for Kirk Hall. That day is coming, but we have significant hurdles to cross as we get our money together, as we get the necessary approvals from Albemarle County, and as we get a contractor. I can tell you we are making progress despite adversity. We will build it. We need to keep dreaming, just as Joseph kept dreaming even when he was imprisoned. And, like

Joseph we will keep overcoming adversity by the grace of God.

The story of Joseph is an interesting study in how God's providence works in a world where adversity is the norm. Next week, we'll continue with the dramatic conclusion of Joseph's triumph and reconciliation with his brothers. But, today, while Joseph waits in the empty pit to be sold into slavery, perhaps we can notice some things about the story that will encourage us as a church that knows about adversity, and as individual Christians who face adversity and discouragement.

Notice first that Joseph is neither a model son nor a model brother. He is one of the younger sons in a family of twelve boys (the girls were not counted). At the age of seventeen he brings a bad report to his father about his older brothers' behavior while they were supposed to be shepherding the flock. He was a tattletale. That may be typical of younger brothers, but tattling doesn't help his relationships.

He is also a dreamer, an arrogant dreamer. When he foolishly tells his family about the dreams, the interpretation doesn't require a psychotherapist. He dreams of lording it over his brothers and over his mother and father. Small wonder his brothers hated him for his ambition. Genesis says that Jacob, "his father kept the matter in mind." Despite all these faults, God managed to use Joseph for his purposes, the same way God can use you and me.

Jacob should have thought long and hard about what was happening in his family. The second thing to notice is that this family is dysfunctional in the way many families are dysfunctional. Actually, this is quite a modern family. It's a blended family with children by two different wives. Jacob, or Israel as he is now called, plays favorites with his wives and with his children. He loved Joseph more than the other children, and he shows his favoritism by giving him this flashy robe that either had many colors or extra long sleeves.

I hope the fathers and grandfathers and great grandfathers here today will take hope from this collection of dysfunctional males. With all this testosterone, favoritism, jealousy and arrogance, God still manages not only to use this family, but to make them the seedbed for the nation of Israel.

The third thing that strikes me about the story is that at this point, with Joseph in the empty pit until he is finally sold to the Ishmaelites, the providence of God is no where to be seen. Providence is seen only in hindsight and only with the eyes of faith.

It's always dangerous to interpret providence prematurely. It is dangerous because we are often wrong, but also because we can hurt people unnecessarily. For instance, after Joseph is on his way to Egypt, the brothers soak his fancy coat in blood and tell their father that he was killed by a wild beast. Israel is heartbroken. Imagine his reaction if a well-meaning

neighbor told this grieving father, “Don’t be sad old man, after all, God will bring something good out of your son’s death.” Israel would throw the bloody coat in the neighbor’s face. We cannot prematurely interpret the providence of God.

But with the passage of time and with the eyes of faith, the people of God could look back and see how God transformed the violent jealousy of the brothers and the arrogance of Joseph into instruments for planning a nation. This does not mean that we can give free rein to our sinful impulses to foolish pride or hurtful violence toward other people. It does mean God overcomes our sin. It means God changes people. And, it means that evil conspiracies and stupid mistakes are no match for the good purposes of Almighty God.

In the meantime, while Joseph is being lifted out of the empty pit and sold into slavery, while we are dreaming of Kirk Hall and working through whatever personal adversities life has thrown our way, how are we to live?

We might follow old man Israel’s example in one respect and “keep the matter in mind.” In his case, he needed to keep in mind the conflict brewing between his favorite Joseph and his other children. Perhaps, he also pondered his own behavior that contributed to Joseph’s pride and the jealousy. I like to think he began to tilt his affections toward the other brothers. We can learn from our mistakes. We are not victims of our past. Just

because we cannot correct everything, that still leaves the possibility of correcting some mistakes.

For instance, the older brother Reuben does not act heroically in this story. He does not save Joseph. But, he did mitigate the revenge his brothers took against Joseph. He persuaded them not to kill the boy. He did not want murder on his conscience. Thus, he unwittingly kept the dream alive. It is neither simplistic nor irrelevant in our violent world to remind ourselves that murder is prohibited in the Ten Commandments. Jesus says that hatred is also prohibited in that commandment. He says that we must love our enemies.

This is a long story. It starts in Genesis 37 and will not be finished until chapter 50 ends the first book of the Bible. Adversity requires taking the long view of God’s providence. Kirk Hall will be built, not as quickly as we would like and not with all the bells and whistles some of us would prefer; but it will come up out of the ground right outside those windows someday soon.

In the meantime, South Plains is still called to be faithful to the opportunities for worship, witness and service that God has placed in front of us. Kirk Hall will be one instrument God can use to gather our neighbors for worship, to witness to the abundant life in Christ Jesus, and to serve the needs of the world. While we are waiting for construction to start, we can do more than dream.

We have not yet filled the pews for both worship services. There are people around us who need a worshiping community, but who will not come unless they are invited personally. We have not yet exhausted opportunities to bear witness to the gospel. There are Christian friendships we can nurture, learning of scripture we can promote, and even some of our acquaintances who are unfamiliar with the story of Jesus. Finally, it is true that even in good times, our community does not run out of needs. In this time when stories of economic hardship dominate the news, deeds of Christian compassion and service will always be in demand. While we're waiting, we can do more than dream.

For a short period of my life, I was designated as the campus minister of a community college. One day I learned that Dr. James, the president of the college, was hospitalized. I found him sitting up in his bed having an animated conversation with his roommate, a man whose opportunities in life must have been very different from a college president. They were both pleased with themselves because Dr. James had successfully taught his new friend how to balance a checkbook. Fund-raising, faculty appointments and construction projects were on hold; but the mission of teaching did not stop. The educator was still at work despite temporary adversity. We are still the church, and we need to be at work.

By keeping our vision fixed on the mission of Christ's church, and our hope anchored in God's

providence, we can keep doing God's work despite adversity. And, we can be sure God's ultimate goals will be accomplished.

We may not be exemplary Christians with model families. We may even fall into the pit of despair from time to time. But, God can and will use our adversity. God will accomplish his purposes through us and build his kingdom.