

**9 August 2020**

**West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood**

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-14a, 17b-28

Hymn: CH4 550:1-3

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**READING**

**Genesis 37:1-4, 12-14a, 17b-28 (NIV)**

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.

<sup>2</sup> This is the account of Jacob's family line.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

<sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. <sup>4</sup> When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

<sup>12</sup> Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, <sup>13</sup> and Israel said to Joseph, 'As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them.'

'Very well,' he replied.

<sup>14</sup> So he said to him, 'Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me.'

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. <sup>18</sup> But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Here comes that dreamer!’ they said to each other. <sup>20</sup> ‘Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.’

<sup>21</sup> When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands.

‘Let’s not take his life,’ he said. <sup>22</sup> ‘Don’t shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don’t lay a hand on him.’ Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

<sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe – the ornate robe he was wearing – <sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

<sup>25</sup> As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

<sup>26</sup> Judah said to his brothers, ‘What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.’ His brothers agreed.

<sup>28</sup> So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

## **MESSAGE**

This week the schools are starting again – after probably the strangest summer we’ve ever had...

I am sure that most parents are excited about this: about getting some sense of routine and normality back into their lives... André, for one, is counting the sleeps!!

But at the same time, I'm sure parents and kids alike are feeling a little unsure about all this. It feels strange to think that the kids will be at school after almost 5 months at home.

What will it be like? Will they be safe? What will parents and grandparents' lives look like now? Will we have to keep a distance again just in case kids are now more exposed and can maybe compromise vulnerable people's health?

It's all so uncertain. And uncertainly doesn't sit well with us. We like to know what to expect. We like to plan. And we feel safe when we feel in control. But unfortunately, since March, uncertainty is about the only thing we can be certain about!

But you know, this isn't a new thing. Even all the way back to Biblical times, people experienced uncertainty, and they felt uncomfortable with it.

Look at Joseph for instance. We all know his story well.

He was his dad's favourite. And his dad made no secret about that! His dad's life took a lot of unexpected twists as turns, but when eventually his first love gave birth to a son – Joseph – Jacob couldn't be happier.

In retrospect he probably would have done things differently...

Jacob showed Joseph how special he was to him, by making him a beautiful robe – colourful, with long sleeves.

Now to us that might not mean much, but in Biblical times most people only had one set of clothes, very basic. Men wore an undergarment, which was a simple piece of clothing, worn around the hips, almost like an apron. And this was often made from animal skin. Then there was the outer garment, which consisted of a large rectangular piece of rough, heavy material, like wool or flax, crudely sewed together so that the front was unstitched and with two openings left for the arms. This would also serve as their blanket at night.

So basically – everybody looked the same. Except Joseph. Coloured garments were rare and very expensive. So no wonder his brothers were jealous of him!

But to want to kill him because he was their dad's favourite was taking things too far. Especially if you read this story with 2020-eyes. Please remember that they lived in a society where an "eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth" wasn't just an expression; and where your honour and standing in society were worth more than gold.

The eldest brother, Rueben, realised that they were taking things too far, and he was stalling to hopefully do the right thing in secret later. They listened to him – because he was the eldest and therefore had authority over the rest of them.

So, instead of killing Joseph, they threw him into a dry cistern. It never rained during the summer, and at this point in history they haven't yet mastered the art of waterproofing wells, so the well was dry.

It could well look like an accident – he could have fallen in and nobody would hear his cries for help.

But then traders passed by, and with Rueben not with them at the time, the brothers decided to sell Joseph to them as a slave. Slaves were treated as property, as objects, and not as fellow human beings in those days. So Joseph's life was about to change drastically.

I guess the upside is that it could have been worse – they could have killed him.

I wonder what went through poor Joseph's head? He was part of a big family. He's been spoiled and treated like a king all his life; and now, all of a sudden, the people who were supposed to have his back under all circumstances, threw him in a pit. In the original text it states that he was naked. He would have still had his undergarment on, because only wearing your undergarment was considered as being naked in those days – but the one thing that distinguished him from others, his colourful robe, was taken away from him.

His brothers threw him in there with the intention of letting him starve to death, all by himself; but then his lot changed, and he was sent to Egypt.

That would have been rough. He was still very young, grew up shielded by his dad, and he would have had very little life experience. These

traders wouldn't have treated him well. He was taken to a foreign country with a foreign language and foreign customs...

Can you imagine what must have gone through his mind? The uncertainty would be eating him up from inside.

He probably wished that he was dead – lying there at the bottom of the well...He must have felt sick with longing. Missing his dad. Wishing he did things differently. Wishing he could see it coming. Wishing he was better prepared. Crying tears of fear and anger. Wishing that the darkness around him would just swallow him so it could all be over.

That cistern became a pit of despair...

Luckily, we all know that this is not where his story ended. He certainly didn't know it at the time, but things were going to change for him for the better.

God turned his bad situation into a good one. Eventually, through Joseph, God saved all his people from famine.

In this story we see Old Testament wisdom literature illustrated at its best. In Proverbs 29:23 we read: "A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honour."

Joseph's pride brought him to a fall. But then he became humble, and eventually this restored his honour.

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But now you might be wondering what the significance of all this is for our current situation?

Like every single story in the Bible, this story too is layered with meaning, and there is so much we can learn from it:

- We should treat all people in the same way.
- Jealousy is wrong.
- Pride comes to a fall.
- But most importantly – God is always with us.

Through all the twists and turns, ups and downs of our lives – God is always there. He was there for Joseph. And for his brothers. And for Jacob.

He forgave them. He taught them. He made them stronger. He prepared them. He used them. And even when they made mistakes, or when things completely out of their control happened to them – he never left their side.

And in the end, this story had a happy ending.

But what I want to focus on this morning – is how Joseph felt in that pit...

Because I don't think I would be wrong if I compared our current situation to what he went through.

I know that at the moment lots of people feel as if they've just been sinking deeper and deeper into a pit of despair. A pit they've been thrown into by the coronavirus, with no warning whatsoever, and now

fear, uncertainty and isolation are just making them sink deeper and deeper...

But you know - to feel like that under our current circumstances, is completely normal. The secret to surviving this, though, is to NOT stay in there...

I know the days have been dragging into weeks and months, and it feels as if things are never going to get better.

But don't you think that is *exactly* what Joseph felt like at times? And look how his story turned out!

Covid19 caused a very unexpected twist in our life stories, but we won't be stuck in this deep, dark, depressing pit forever.

God is not only with us during this difficult time, he will walk all the way with us towards our futures too.

I know the uncertainty can be very difficult to cope with – but there is one thing we can be certain of, and that is that God is with us.

We might not be able to understand why all this is happening. It might never make any sense to us. But if we keep our eyes focussed on God – the darkness won't be able to swallow us.

If the only thing you can be certain about at the moment is the presence of God in your life – then you are okay!

May God surround every single one of you with his love – today, and always.

Amen

## **PRAYER**

### **Written by Rev Alison Quilter**

Almighty Father, we give you thanks that you have revealed your power and your glory through your mighty acts of creation. We thank you that there is no situation or experience that is beyond your power and presence.

Our confidence is in you, loving God, mother-like you brought us to birth, father-like you watch over us, protecting. You are the source of life and faith alike and we rest our hope on you, in you we trust.

Loving God, you have called us to be a people of prayer – to continue the ministry handed on to us by Jesus Christ himself and so we come before you with confidence, bringing our prayers for the world you love. We pray for people who, like Joseph, find themselves deeply wounded by people they love – people they thought they knew and trusted – and who are struggling to know how to respond.

We pray for those who feel overwhelmed by events and circumstances. Those who have lost their jobs; those who suffer the loss of a loved one; the anxious, lonely and depressed and those who don't know where to turn.

We pray for people who feel abandoned or ignored by the world around them, those without food, water or shelter and who seek to escape the misery and find routes to a better life where they can live in a place of safety and in peace.

Through the life-giving power of your Holy Spirit make your sustaining presence known to all who are in pain or need, so that they too, may know your love and comfort and peace.

As schools return this week we ask that councils, teachers, support staff in all roles are guided by Your wisdom to create safe places of learning for children and young people as they return to school. As seeds of learning are sown, may too, the seeds of your love and guidance be known to them too.

Loving God, we are easily discouraged when life takes unexpected turns and our carefully laid plans and dreams come to nothing. We thank you for your faithful love to us. Open our eyes to recognise Your leading in our lives – to listen for Your gentle whisper when we least expect it. And then give us courage to step out in faith into the unknown, trusting in Your leading and powerful love, even when we cannot yet see the outcome. These things we ask through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

## **HYMN**

### **CH4 550:1-3**

**Music by Catriona and Maggie Lachlan**

As the deer pants for the water,  
So my soul longs after you.  
You alone are my heart's desire,  
And I long to worship you.

*You alone are my strength, my shield,  
To you alone may my spirit yield.  
You alone are my heart's desire,  
And I long to worship you.*

I want you more than gold or silver;  
Only you can satisfy.  
You alone are the real joy-giver,  
And the apple of my eye.

*Chorus*

You're my friend and you are my brother,  
Even though you are a King.  
I love you more than any other,  
So much more than anything.

*Chorus*