

Psalm 40:1-5

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.
Happy are those who make the Lord their trust,
who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.
You have multiplied, O Lord my God,
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us;
none can compare with you.
Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted.

Genesis 37:18-33

They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.' But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him'—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. He returned to his brothers, and said, 'The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?' Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, 'This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not.' He recognized it, and said, 'It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.'

Joseph and the Goat Rev. Charles Schuster January 20, 2008

Two things about this sermon – let me say some things before I speak – you know what I mean. Two things about this sermon: First of all, I didn't write it. I don't mean somebody

else did, of course. My pen was on the paper, it came through my head, but this sermon took off in a direction that I did not anticipate. It seemed to write itself, and that's a problem for me, because I'm not a mystic, I'm a confused rationalist. Secondly: I want you to know that it's easier to preach this sermon than it is to live what it says, because I speak with confidence about how we address suffering and death. And you may notice the sense of confidence. Don't believe it. When it comes to suffering, I'm a coward. I have a very low pain threshold. When it comes to death, I'm expecting to die kicking and screaming and people standing around my death bed saying, "Thank God he's gone." So keep all that in mind.

I remember the year that we were on a trip across country, and we were on the way home, and we were driving through Kansas, and our daughter, who was five or six, said to us, "Well, it's beautiful, it's just that there's so much of it." And it was Kansas little Tyler, King Duncan tells us about little Tyler looking out the window of the car saying, "Boy, it's so flat out there you can see – I've got to get this right – little Tyler said, "You can look further than you can see." You can look further than you can see. This morning we continue looking at the story of Joseph. It will be my hope that we will be able to look further than we can see. Last week, "Joseph and the Coat." This week, "Joseph and the Goat." Next week, "Joseph Got to Gloat." It rhymes.

What we see when we look is, what there is knowing that we are looking at the story of Joseph from the perspective of Jesus, and that makes a difference. Reverend Everhart is teaching a class. The material being used in her class is material written by one of her professors at the Iliff School of Theology, Pam Eisenbaum is a Jewish – get this – New Testament scholar. And Pam Eisenbaum is looking at the Christian faith from the perspective of a Jewish woman and if you take that class on Wednesday, and please do, it's excellent, lots of people come and there's room for more, I think you will look further than you can see. There are two ideas in the story of Joseph and the coat and the goat and the pit, two ideas that this story helps us to consider. First, it makes us look at suffering, and second, it helps us look at death.

Humphrey Lee, a Biblical scholar, said about this part of Genesis, he said in a few short sentences, "The narrator has sketched out an unusually complex world of ill-fated familial stratification, relations, and emotions. Youth versus old age, infra-familial, societal hierarchy, concealed realms of discourse. Rivalries are there. Betrayal is there. Obsessive love is there. Ill-considered gifts of passion is there, hatred is there, shunning is there." And the Humphrey Lee says "The balance all of it reflects a system presented leaving us in the stories no heroes and no villains." No heroes, no villains, just people who live their lives as best they can, just people who go to work in the morning and go to bed at night. Just people who stand behind a desk or a stove, people who tend a flock or a bottom line, people who do their best and sometimes it's not so good. People who are rewarded for what someone else has done and who take the credit for it. Good people who should and could strive to be a little better. Good people down on their luck. No heroes, no villains, just people who know that to live is to suffer and die. What do you do about that?

Joseph suffered. They took his coat of many colors. They stripped him of his most prized possession. What would that be for you, your most prized possession, they take it? They threw him in a pit, and it wasn't gentle. If we look further than we can see, we might add, they got his goat. They got his little goat, and he suffered. The text didn't declare the origin of the goat. I think it was Joseph's goat. I think it was his goat that he had trained to come when he called. It was his goat, that he loved. I think the goat that lived with him, part of the family. It brought him the newspaper in the morning, on his second cup of coffee. It passed obedience class, unlike some of our dogs. It learned to roll over and pay dead, and was excellent perimeter defense against burglary. It had a name. No, I don't know the name of the goat. Herb, okay? It had a place in Joseph's home, a place in Joseph's heart. They got his goat, and he suffered. They got his goat. Did you suffer when you lost a pet? Life gets our goat sometimes, and we suffer. We suffer. Everybody does.

Rachel Naomi Raymond spent her life working with people who suffer. An oncology doctor spent her days working with people who suffer. She's written several books and she is an excellent speaker. She's a wonderful human being. In the church I last served, in Arvada, we had attending our church a retired Presbyterian pastor and his wife, Joe and Nancy Willis. There was a period in Joe's life where the suffering was intense, and Nancy called up Rachel Naomi Raymond in New York, and Rachel talked to Joe about his suffering, and it brought a sense of calm and peace. That's the kind of person Rachel Naomi Raymond is. Her approach to suffering is unusual. She believes we can lean into our pain. In fact, she thinks illness can become part of our spiritual journey. For her it is. She says, "If one genuinely and unflinchingly meets the difficulties of an illness, especially," she says, "a serious illness, the person you are at the end can be larger than the person you were going in." And, she says, "All those people around you become larger people and live deeper lives as well." It's easy to say that, but she lives it. She says, "I was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease. Fifty-two years ago I was diagnosed. I haven't been well for more than half a century" She says, "Sometimes it take a lifetime to learn this, but what else is there to do with a lifetime? What's more important?"

You learn there's something more important than your illness when you're in pain, and suffer. It's wholeness. You learn that to live is to suffer in life, but the only question is how, and what we will do with it. You learn that suffering needs not define you. You're defined by the person you are becoming because of it. Suffering is a part of what it means to be alive. Suffering that has purpose is one of the most important things that happens to us. We lean into our pain. We're not defined by what hurts us. We're inspired when we know we can face it, and when we approach a state of holiness, that is when we take suffering as something that could benefit somebody else.

Last week, Denver Nugget basketball player Nene from Brazil had surgery for testicular cancer, and we saw the Nugget players rally around them. Maybe you heard them say, as they began to realize, what we do is, we play a game. What's going on with him is real life. And then you heard his coach, George Karl, stand up and say his words of comfort, and George Karl has as you probably know had prostate cancer and is a survivor, and he has a son Kobe who has had cancer and has apparently survived it and plays for the

Nuggets, plays for the Lakers. Life will take our coat and get our goat. It'll beat us up. We will suffer. But let's look further than we can see. What does Christian faith tell us about our suffering? It tells us something. It says something about suffering that's a little different. Our faith is put in a crucified savior. That's significant. Most saviors are not so vulnerable. Most are protected. Most are inspired, godlike saviors whose words are divine. God speaks when they open their mouth, and there's some of that. Most saviors are miracle workers and they gather a following by what they say or by the way in which their acts, miraculous, suspend the laws of nature. Our savior suffered. Our savior doesn't save us from suffering but is with us in our suffering.

After my shoulder surgery in late October, I was sent to a clinic where they did physical therapy on my broken shoulder. I still have to go. The first day I went to therapy it was seven in the morning and another patient was there who had the same thing, I know that because he had the same kind of brace. Several of you here have had that same surgery and have had to wear that. We're going to have a brace burning in the south parking lot. He had his arm in sling, and his surgery was two weeks before mine, and he was full of advice. He was an old guy, bossy, probably a Methodist. Maybe a bishop. In the waiting room, I get an earful from him. You know, "You pay attention to those therapists. You do everything they tell you," he said. I didn't ask. I'm married to one of them. On and on he talked until we were both called in for therapy. He didn't stop talking. He's on the table next to me. He said, "Some people think these therapists are sadistic." Yeah. "They're wonderful. I love my therapist. She's a personal friend to me now." It's been two weeks. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for her. She saved my life." He goes on and on, and his therapist begins working with him and he kept talking. And then he stopped in pain and said, "Jesus!" I said, "Huh." The pain was so great, he was calling on Jesus.

You and I suffer. Life gets our goat. But you see, we who believe in Jesus, we believe in the things Jesus believed, and he believed suffering can be redemptive. He thought we can be healed even when we're not cured. He knew if we're willing to face the pain and to see purpose in our pain, we can defeat the pain and face it. He didn't run away when there was a death threat on his name. He made himself vulnerable. He let them arrest him. He didn't deny his mission when they put him to the test. "Are you God's son?" He stayed faithful that all people are children of God, would not back down from that. And he didn't ask someone else to carry his cross, but when someone else asked to carry it, he let him, so we'd all know how heavy it was. So we'd all understand that we'll never suffer more than he did. And now we know our savior will be with us when life gets our goat, and we can take it. He suffered, and so do we, but we look further than we can see, and we see Jesus the savior who gave suffering meaning, telling us, when we suffer, we can take it, and make it mean something.

They threw Joseph in a pit. He was left there to die. The psalmist knows all about the pit, the psalmist writes "I wait patiently for the lord God. He inclined to me, heard my cry, drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet on rock" Every now and then it happens to us, maybe a health problem that reminds us to change our ways, perhaps it's death of a loved one that reminds us how precious every moment. Sometimes it's when we lose everything only to discover that the thing we didn't lose

when everything was gone was the only thing that mattered. It could be disappointment beyond what we're prepared to accept. It's a wake-up call. It's life in the pit. It's a reminder of death.

Gary Shandlin's a comedian. He has this idea about wake-up calls. He said, "Here's a little tip from me to you. I'm a traveler, I travel a lot. Wake-up calls, it's a terrible way to wake up. The phone rings, it's too loud, it jars you from your sleep. It'll mess you up. Here's what you do. This is what I do. I leave the number of the room next to me at the desk, and then it rings and it's kind of quiet when it rings, and you hear the guy in the room next to you room say, "What are you calling me for?" And then you get up and take a shower, and it's great. Wake-up calls come to us down in the pit. When life's in the pits, Joseph left to die, a wake-up call, it's harsh. It's hard. When life gives us a wake-up call, it puts in motion an awareness of something we never forget for us as Christians, and what that is, is hope. It's the idea that there's nothing to fear. It's the feeling of optimism knowing that things will improve, and that people are okay even when it doesn't seem that they are. It's an internal understanding that there is always a solution and time will not only tell, it will provide a path to take, if you wait. It's an overall belief that there are no blank walls. For every wall there's a door, we've just got to find it, and for every pit there's a set of stairs, we've just got to climb them.

There's a movie that I suggest you see. It's about two old men in a hospital room, and the doctors tell them they're going to die. The movie's *The Bucket List*. Edward Cole is played by Jack Nicholson, he's a millionaire who happens to own the hospital. He's been married four times, and he says that he liked being married, and he likes being single, and he's made a mistake from time to time, doing both at the same time, and among other things, that it's cost him his relationship with his daughter. Carter Chambers is an auto mechanic who always wanted to be a history professor, played by Morgan Freeman. Chambers and his wife have a non-marriage, and his life has never lived up to his hopes. And the two of them, knowing they're going to die, decide to make a list of things they want to do together before they, as they say, "kick the bucket." And so they get up out of the hospital, out of the pit, and they travel to faraway places. They see wonderful sights, and they live more fully dying than they ever were living, when in their living they didn't realize the intensity and importance of life. That's *The Bucket List*, a great movie. It'll make you laugh, it'll make you cry. It'll put you in a pit, facing death, with a wake-up call telling you "It's time to climb."

In the pit, plan a palace. In exile, seek the exodus. In facing death, know resurrection. If we look further than we can see, which we must, we will find hope. Always, there is hope. When they put Joseph in the pit, did he think he would be an advisor to the King of Egypt, the pharaoh? When they put the apostle Paul into prison, did they imagine the kingdom of God would emerge? When they put Dietrich Bonhoeffer in jail, did he know what would happen to his letters and papers, that they would be considered some of the most dramatic and articulate literature ever written? And when they threw Martin Luther King Jr. in the dungeon in Birmingham, did he know we'd still be reading what he wrote? He did overcome, and is still overcoming. And when they threw the body of our savior,

crucified, into a tomb, did the Romans have even the remotest understanding that they would have a resurrection to deal with?

Minietta Millard – we as a church have benefited from Kent Millard, he was here a couple of years ago, and he told us what we need to become as a church is a permission-giving church. We listened to him, and he was very helpful. Well, his wife, his spouse, Minietta, has written a book entitled *A Closer Look: A Theology of the Ordinary*, and she tells us when you hit the bottom, are in the pit, that's when you know the foundation is firm. She says, "All that's happened to me has been for me a perfect chance to grow, a chance to trust in a power beyond myself and the journey, letting me know when it's time to let go of control and put my life into the hands of a purposeful God. I know," she said, "I know that things happen that I cannot explain. I don't know why they happen as they do, but I know there is purpose and that I can be part of creating it." You build a palace when life puts you in a pit. You begin to conspire toward things that really matter when faced with the fact that some day death will come. You plan a world the best you can for those who are left behind when you see that you may be leaving them. It's a wake-up call. It reminds us of our finitude. This is the great Christmas gift that members of the church gave me. I hang it in my office so that I look at it all the time. Charlie Brown, look on his face. Lucy, look on her face. Lucy's saying, "He thinks he's going to kick it, but he isn't." Charlie Brown's saying to himself, "I'm going to kick it this time." Never, ever give up. Never, ever give up. And he will try. And those words speak volumes.

Robert Schuler has one thing right when he talks about the Christian faith and says, "We are to become hope-aholics." Yesterday is where it was, today is where it is, tomorrow's where it's gonna be. In the pit, plan a palace. There will never be another day like tomorrow, and nobody can see it coming. So plan a good one. If life thinks it has us down in the dumps, it better get ready, because we're coming up and we're coming out. If death thinks it can hold us, and forever keep us quiet, it needs to look at the last four chapters of the four Gospels, and then it will see that crosses and tombs never defeat the power that always rolls away even the heaviest of stones. Joseph got a wake-up call. Life put him in a pit. He thought he would die. When life puts us in a pit, we plan to build a palace. If we look at Joseph's story as Christians, looking further than we can see, looking with the eyes of faith, then we'll know two things. Suffering – when life gets our goat, we believe in a savior who suffers with us, we can take it. Bring it on. Death – When life gives us a wake-up call, we are not going to live forever, that we believe in a God who is the instigator of hope. Every day has a tomorrow, even our last one. We can face it. When Christians read the story of Joseph, we will look further than we can see, and we know suffering, death, we can take it. We can face it. We are not afraid.