

Living With the Worst Day Of Your Life

Genesis 45; Luke 6:27-38

A sermon preached by Zac Koons on February 20, 2022 at St. Mark's, Austin

Joseph is someone who knows what it's like to live with the worst day of your life every day of your life. Despite being born eleventh of twelve children, Joseph, we know, was his father's favorite son, and that, combined with his tendency to dream arrogant dreams, meant that he was also the object of intense envy and frequent ridicule from his other, older non-favorite brothers. The worst day of Joseph's life was the day his brothers decided to put an end once and for all to their father's favoritism. They threw Joseph in a well, then sold him into slavery in Egypt. Then they faked his death by presenting their father with a bloodied coat of many colors. This awful thing, this awful thing that Joseph had no control over whatsoever, changed his life forever. Joseph would never outrun the shadow of this day.

But he would try. To his credit Joseph tried to make the best out of this life that he would have never chosen. He quickly rose from lowly servant to new favorite adopted son to an Egyptian master, appointed head of their household, until he was tricked and betrayed and thrown into another pit, this time a prison, for yet another thing he had no control over. Only for Joseph to try again; only for Joseph to pull himself up by his bootstraps and rise the ranks again, this time beyond head of a household all the way to second in command of the entire Egyptian empire. The first son of all Egypt. That worst day in his life was still there in his memory, but by then it was buried so deep inside his heart there were days he could almost, almost forget it ever happened. That worst day was so hidden away that no one in his now-known universe even knew the story. And they didn't need to. Joseph had attained such wealth, such power and privilege that that worst day didn't need to define him anymore. Wealth is very good at hiding one's wounds. His family of origin didn't need to define him anymore. He had carved out a new name for himself, a new expertise, a new reputation. His secret wound lie dormant in the depths of his soul.

Until one day ten hungry brothers knocked on his door and that wound which he thought was tiny and hidden and no longer even had the power to hurt him anymore flamed back into wild and raging life in an instant. Our reading picks up at the very climax of the Joseph story, what is surely one of the best pieces of writing to survive from the ancient world, so perfect a picture of dramatic irony that this is probably the literary invention of it right here. Remember the context of this moment: there is famine across the ancient world and Egypt is the only place equipped to survive it. Why? Because they had Joseph, the dreamer of prophetic dreams, ever the favorite of whoever was in charge, the friend of God and the friend of Pharaoh,—the most valuable human asset in the world. And who is asking for help but precisely those who cast that asset aside, their own brother. Their positions are reversed. Now Joseph has all the power. The brothers are utterly vulnerable. Joseph could cast them into a pit. Joseph could sell them into slavery. Joseph could make them *his* slaves. Joseph could take their coats, one by one, cover them in animal blood, and send them back to Jacob on camelback.

And most dramatic of all - Joseph is the only one who sees it. His brothers don't recognize him in all his Egyptian garb. And so Joseph not only has all the material power, he has emotional power too. He has the power not only to give them what they came for, to feed them, but he has the power to make sure they never go

hungry again. He has the power even to restore their broken family. He has the power to bring someone back to life they assumed by now to be dead. But he also has the power to crush them. Not only to starve them but to break their hearts. Like any sibling, he knows exactly the sensitive places to poke. Joseph is presented with the opportunity that every jilted and wounded person dreams about. He can get pay back for that worst day of his life. They are literally at his mercy. His enemy is vulnerable. And they don't even know it.

And what does Joseph do? Somehow, Joseph forgives them. Joseph's deep wound, by some miracle, hadn't hardened over into resentment and hatred such that punishment and revenge felt like his only options. Somehow, he rises above his baser instincts that no one would blame him for indulging. And instead of a dormant volcano erupting into rage and violence, it erupts into an outpouring of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Joseph does everything Jesus says in Luke 6. *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

Joseph is the very picture of the golden rule. It's called the golden rule for a reason. It's plain and easy-to-understand and yet it contains an entire ethical worldview. But his story illustrates the depth to which the golden rule remains counter-intuitive. Understanding something is a world away from putting it into practice. In order to do to others as you would have them do to you, you have to imagine the world through someone else's eyes. And there is almost nothing more difficult than that.

And this would be one way to preach this story. Be more like Joseph! Rise above your baser instincts, imagine the world through the eyes of your enemies, and do good to those who hate you. Do to others as you would have them do to you. That would be a fine sermon I suppose.

But the truth is, when most of us read this story, we are not standing in Joseph's shoes as much as we are standing in the shoes of Joseph's brothers. That is, if I asked you what was the worst day of your life, for many of us, I would guess, it's not a day when something was done to us, it is a day when we did something to others. And we have been carrying around our own wound from that doing. A wound of guilt and regret. A wound that has created its own kind of shadow many of us haven't been able to outrun. This is the condition of the brothers as they stand before Joseph. They are standing vulnerable and guilty before the very person they wronged who simultaneously is the one with the authority to be their judge.

You have got to understand that 99 times out of 100, this story goes the other way. With whoever is in Joseph's shoes punishing whoever is in his brothers' shoes. Watch any movie. Read any script. And this story almost does. Another part we don't get to read is Joseph tricking his brothers into returning to Israel to bring back the one still younger and replacement favorite brother, Benjamin, so Joseph can see him. Only for Joseph to frame Benjamin for stealing and consequently demanding he keep Benjamin as his slave as recompense. You see what's happening here: Joseph is offering his brothers an opportunity to repeat their ancient sin. Sending the favorite son into slavery so that they can walk free. But faced with that prospect, Judah, the oldest brother, the ring-leader, offers himself in Benjamin's place. And that's the moment everything changes for Joseph. Because that's the moment he sees that that day long ago was not only the worst day in his life, it was probably the worst

day in his brothers' lives too. They have been living in the shadow of that day too. They have lived with a front row seat every day to their father's grief. They are wounded too. And Joseph decides to give them not what they deserve but what they need: forgiveness, love, and reconciliation.

I wonder what was the worst day of your life. I wonder how that day still lives with you. Whatever it is that comes to mind, hear the second sermon that comes from this story. We are not Joseph. We are the brothers. We are guilty. We tend to operate with an inverted, skewed version of the golden rule like Judah. Judah is standing before Joseph saying not "Do to others as you would have them do to you," but "Do to me what I did to you back then. I cast you into slavery. Now send me to the same. I did a terrible thing to you. I deserve a terrible thing in return." But Joseph is not playing by human-to-human rules. Joseph offering forgiveness to his brothers is a picture of Christ offering forgiveness to you and me.

The worst day in the life of humanity was the day that humanity decided to put to death God's only Son. And on that day humanity stood guilty and utterly vulnerable, before the Christ who we rejected who was simultaneously the God who was our Judge. And God in that moment gave us not what we deserve, but what we needed: forgiveness, love, and reconciliation. God in Christ embraces us and weeps with us at the release of tension in the depths of our soul. A release that knowing oneself as forgiven can accomplish. And God doesn't stop there, just as Joseph doesn't stop there. Joseph says to his brothers don't just take this food, don't just take this forgiveness, come back and live with me. We have yet five more years of famine to endure. Now that you have experienced the power of forgiveness, love, and reconciliation, live no longer in the world of scarcity. Come into my kingdom of abundance, where your sins, your mistakes, where the worst days of your life are a distant memory and no longer have any power over you. Come live in the light, in a land of no more shadows, where every wound has been healed.

And what God accomplished in Christ 2,000 years ago on a cosmic scale for all humanity, God in Christ offers to us individually still today. God can take the worst day of your life, and turn it into an occasion of grace. God can take the worst thing you have ever done, and make it into a vehicle through which you come to experience forgiveness, love, and reconciliation. All you have to do is come and knock on the door. With God, the worst day never wins. Humanity's best attempts to screw things up will not and cannot stand against the healing power of God's forgiveness.

I like the second sermon better. I hope you do too.

Amen.