

“A Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day Bible Story”  
Using “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good,  
Very Bad Day” by Judith Viorst

Genesis 37: 12 – 24

August 13, 2017

Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

One might say that brother Joseph was having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

In order to understand that day, we need to have an understanding of some of the family dynamics, the family function or better said ‘dysfunction’. Some of you may remember this history from Sunday school classes but if you are like me, that was long ago and details are kind of muddled.

Joseph was Jacob’s favorite, born during Jacob’s latter years to his favored wife Rachael. Being the favorite of 12 sons probably had its advantages. Jacob gifted Joseph with a long robe with sleeves, the ‘coat of many colors’. This probably didn’t go over too well with the other eleven sons. Nor, I would imagine, did the time when Joseph was a tattle tale, when he ‘brought a bad report to his father’ of how the boys were tending the flock. But the clencher? When Joseph told his brothers a dream that he had. What possessed him to tell his brothers is beyond comprehension, for it was a dream about how he, Joseph, would one-day rule over his brothers. Then he had another dream! Oh, Joseph, keep your dreams to yourself but, no! Joseph told not only his brothers but his father as well, about how they all would one day bow to him. And the eleven hated him even more.

Which catches us up to the part of the story read today, that terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

I would imagine that the day started pleasantly enough for Joseph. After all, his brothers were all out tending their father’s flock so he had the house to himself. None of his brothers around to glare at him, he had the food pantry all to himself with no need to share with eleven other mouths. But then his father ordered him to go find his brothers and bring word back about how they and the flock were doing. So off he went to Shechem where he thought they would be but wouldn’t you know it? Not only did he have to leave the comforts of his home but then his brothers were nowhere to be found and he wandered and wandered until finally meeting someone who told him, “Oh, your brothers? They’ve moved on to Dothan where the grass is better.” So off Joseph went, his journey increasing in time and distance. He could tell, it was indeed turning into a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

Little did he know what lay ahead! His brothers saw him from a distance and plotted against him. “Let’s kill him and throw him in a pit!” “No, let’s not have blood on our hands, let’s just throw him in a pit and leave him there to die.” Which they did. Up walked their brother wearing his coat of many colors, gifted to him by their father. They stripped him of the coat and threw him in the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. The terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day suddenly took a turn for the worst.

But the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day continued! The brothers saw a caravan of foreigners passing by and came up with the idea to sell their least favorite brother Joseph to the travelers, put blood from an animal on the coat of many colors, take it back to their father and tell him that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. The father was deceived, Joseph sold as a slave and taken to Egypt. Most likely not how he had imagined his day would go when he first woke up with the house all to himself. It had been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

Joseph's story doesn't end in darkness. He goes on to use his dream interpretation skills to warn Pharaoh of a coming famine, saves the land and gains the Pharaoh's favor. He's put in charge and while in charge, his family who had suffered from the famine in their land as well, came begging for food from the storage bins in Egypt, not realizing that they were bowing down before Joseph, now in charge of the Pharaoh's land. Joseph could have taken his revenge for that terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day long ago. Instead, he offered forgiveness, with the story ending in reconciliation between brothers and father.

The Joseph novella can be read as a children's story paralleling Judith Viorst's book that we read earlier. We can just leave it at that, which would be fine for a number of those who are younger sitting in the pews today. But for the rest of us, I invite us to look a bit deeper than the Sunday school lesson of long ago. And after the last two days of news from Charlottesville, we all need the depth that this text brings.

When we pick up the Bible and turn to the book of Genesis, the beginning, we enter into its pages remembering that this is not a book of historical analysis or recorded fact but a book of a people's journey, a faith journey, a theological statement, what the writers are trying to say about God. Biblical scholar Richard Lowery writes that, "Genesis is a nonstop, action-packed series of adventures, a multigenerational road story about struggle, grace, forgiveness and the companionship of God." (*Chalice Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 29)

We can hold the Joseph story in its totality of a dream given and in the end, a dream realized and of *God's presence with the people throughout the journeying*. Theologian Walter Brueggemann refers to this as the 'the hiddenness of God', (*Interpretation: Genesis*, p. 293) how, through exile to promised land, God does not desert God's people but continues on to the day of promise, even as many of those who were recipients of that promise did not live to see the day realized.

We, as a people of faith, read the Joseph novella knowing that it is not just a story of one terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, or one character but a story of a people and their understanding of their God. Read, if you will, with a bird's eye view or a view from the balcony of life looking down at all that is going on, taking in the bigger picture rather than a set moment or time.

Yesterday was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day not only in Charlottesville VA but in our country. Three dead. Nineteen injured. KKK leader David Duke given the stage. Young white men waving confederate and Nazi flags. The hate of white supremacists, the hate of anti-Semitism, racism let loose and NOT denounced explicitly from the White house. 12 different hate organizations gathered together under the umbrella of white nationalism – that is what is happening in our country right now, hate groups gaining power, feeling empowered by the silence from the White House, the silence to name those very groups as evil. Clergy and counter

protesters beaten with baseball bats and brass knuckles. It is so very easy to give up right now, or to turn away in apathy, to just take care of our own. Or, as Alexander in our book today, just want to move to Australia.

The Rev. Dr. William Barber helps us as a people of faith regain our view from the balcony. He stated that if we think today is the worst we've ever seen, we are negated the trail of tears of our Native American brothers and sisters and slavery. We as a country have seen many terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. This story and the Joseph story, reminds us of the presence of God in the midst of those days, a presence to see us through to the other side. And in saying this, I am not implying that our role is to sit patiently and wait for a better day. We hold onto a faith that tells us God is with us in the ugly days. We also follow a Jesus who did not sit patiently waiting for another day, but walked with those who were suffering, those who were oppressed, the marginalized, the hated – and we are called to do the same. We are called to speak truth to power, those powers in our government. When our President remains silent after a mosque is bombed, when our President does not specifically denounce 'white supremacy, or alt right or white nationalism or Nazism' when we have members in the White house who are bedfellows with these groups, we need to speak truth to power and name very clearly the racism that is so rampant in our country. In these terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days in which we find ourselves, we hold onto the bigger picture of a God of love moving in history while at the same time being agents of that love by standing for inclusion, compassion, standing for dignity, respect and rights of all of God's children no matter what color, nationality, sexual orientation or religion.

This past week I was gifted with being able to chat a bit with my friend Rabi Moshe Smolken from Ohavey Zion Synagogue. Our get together wasn't due to today's text but while together I couldn't resist asking him how he would, in one sentence, interpret the Joseph story. Without pause he said, "It's a story reminding us of God's faithful presence with us all of our days."

If we find ourselves in a terrible, horrible, no good day in our own lives, or similar time in our collective life as a people of faith or even, may I say, as citizens of our country, we can carry this story with us as we continue to live and work for a better day and time; that bigger picture that includes, even during those days and times of struggle, God's faithfulness.

Even during those terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days...because some days and sometimes, are like that.

Invitation to the Table.

And our faith story continues the story of God's faithfulness, born in a baby in a stable who would be called 'the Emmanuel, God with us', and through him, people then and people throughout the ages and people even today have experienced the powerful presence of a loving God who would not let them and will not let us, go.

From stable, to lakeshore and mountaintop, to temple and table, Jesus, the Emanuel, revealed God's faithfulness to the world that God so loved...

So, come, eat. You are invited to share bread and cup at this table whether you are having a joy filled excellent day or whether it's terrible, horrible, no good and very bad because God is here, now, ready to meet you where you are, no matter the day, extending forgiveness and grace.

Because *God* is like that.