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In Deep

Genesis 37:23-24

Sports stations are on a lot at my house—games, play-by-play recaps, even sports news—it's all on at my house. This is usually annoying to me or, at the very least, boring to me but I happened to hear an interesting story the other day. It was about Richard Jensen, how he had wrestled in high school and got to be pretty good in fact. He could have had scholarships to college. Everyone thought his future looked bright. Instead of college Jensen chose to join a fishing crew on a boat in Alaska. Though only gone a couple of years he came back from the Bering Sea an entirely different person. Jensen came back home to Oregon addicted to meth amphetamines. For the next fifteen years he struggled with this demon. He tried to quit and then would find himself addicted again. He stole for this drug. He beat people up and even held some hostage for this drug. He broke the hearts of his friends and family, especially his mother who was his fiercest defender. His addiction landed him in jail for six years and he lost everything. When I heard Jensen's story I turned to my husband (hence why we were watching sports news) and said, "It must be so difficult to be able to look back at your life and point exactly to the moment everything went wrong. That one decision to go to Alaska and to take drugs there changed everything and there was no going back. It must be so difficult," I said again, "to look back at that decision, knowing now how it will sink your life."

Though Joseph's brothers probably did not realize it at the time, that lunch they enjoyed sitting next to the pit that held their brother was THE MOMENT for them, that poisonous moment they can never come back from. For even though Joseph is the one in the pit, it is his brothers who are in deep. You probably remember the basics of the story: Jacob has fathered eleven sons and Joseph is his youngest and his favorite. Because of this treatment Joseph has quite an ego. He dreams that he is better than his brothers. He likes to tell them of these dreams. In short, he is a brat. Brat or not, his brothers' plans for him go far beyond sibling rivalry. They decide to put him in a hole, perhaps it was a prank at first—just to scare him—then the idea doesn't seem so bad. They wrestle him to the ground, he fights them off, but what chance does one have against ten? They throw him into the pit with no water, no food, no way out. After this is when they got out the sandwiches. As they were resting from their meal some travelers pass by and the brothers think, Why not make some money off of this situation? So rather than kill him they sell him for the dough. They cover his coat in animal's blood and march home to their father with the sad news of his son's death. Their in deep, alright. These brothers watch as their father ages before them. He tears his clothing. He wails and mourns. No one can comfort him. Perhaps it is then that the sons get their first glimpse that they have dug themselves a hole from which they cannot escape. This one moment of foolish jealousy and unchecked anger will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

We read further in Genesis that a decade or more passes and yet when the brothers meet any kind of misfortune—like when they meet Joseph again, not knowing it is him, and he questions them about their motives to get food from Egypt—they don't respond to the unfortunate questioning in the present but as if they still have the remnants of that fateful lunch in their mouths. "This must be punishment for what we did to Joseph!" they say. "This is our judgment for all we've done," they confess. Over a decade later and they are still sitting next to that pit in a hole far deeper, a hole they

have dug for themselves. All that has happened between then and now has been but footnotes to that moment they cannot escape from. The moment that has doomed them.

Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever felt that you have messed up so royally that you are in deep? Have you ever felt like something you've done has gotten you into a hole you cannot dig yourself out of? If so then you are not surprised that the brothers cannot forget it, even many years later. You are not surprised that every encounter they have links back, in some way, to their actions that terrible day. That it has become the entire story of their life. Many of us can understand that. Many of us have something or, honestly, many things, we have done that we cannot come back from; things we cannot make right. For some of us it is that one terrible action we never should have taken; words that should never have been said; a relationship we never should have started, a relationship we never should have ended. For others of us it is not so obvious as that. It is, rather, years of inaction or indifference that we can now see were more damaging than we ever took the time to realize. No matter what brings us to the pit, the one we put ourselves in, many of us know what it looks like in there, how impossible it is to come back to the surface.

All I can say is thank God for the witness we have in Scripture because if Joseph and his brothers teach us nothing else they teach us that no matter what we do we cannot mess up the will of God. Let me say it again: No matter what we've done or said or taken on or let go, our sin does not—cannot—keep God from working in the world, from fulfilling every promise God has made. These brothers who are in too deep—who cannot fix what they have done—God reunites them with Joseph who actually greets them with tears and love and says God made it all work in the end, even their criminal act God made work for good in the end, he says to them. The brothers never could fix what they had done. They could not take it back; some things can never be fixed or taken back. That doesn't mean God's will cannot work through it. Crazy as it may seem God even takes these eleven brothers, twelve since Benjamin has been born in the intervening years, and God reunites them to become the twelve tribes of Israel. They become the tribes of a great nation of God's covenant people.

So what does this mean for those of us who find ourselves in way too deep? It means we must ask God for forgiveness and, after that, we must change our path. Forgiveness is a tunnel out of the hole we've dug but it is not to be taken lightly or carelessly. Forgiveness means we live a different life than we did before. Once we have done these things we come to the hardest of them all: we must move on. You must forgive yourself and move forward for you have been called to more than a life of regret. That wrestler I mentioned when I began, Richard Jensen. He cannot take back the things he stole, the hurt he caused, the fifteen years he spent on drugs. He cannot change that his mother died of cancer without him because he was in prison at the time. There is no fixing it but there is forgiving it. A couple of years ago Jensen entered Clackamas Community College in Oregon as a 36 year old freshman. He also made the school's wrestling team, over weight and over age. No mistake he made could keep God's will from working. No hole was so deep that God could not bring him out. Like Joseph's brothers, Jensen had to change his path and he had to move on. If you find yourself in deep, with your sin closing in on you—God can change your path too. God can forgive you and then you must forgive yourself. For God can still do great things through you. What relief and joy it is to know that from Joseph's brother Levi came Moses and from Joseph's brother Benjamin came Esther and King Saul. From Dan came Sampson and from Judah came Daniel and King David and Jesus. If God can take such brothers—these sinners who are in so deep—and create such faithfulness from them, what can God do through you?

Amen.