

**KNOWN IN THE UNKNOWN: Not Alone in the Unknown (Genesis 37:17b-28 NRSV)**

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I've traveled to the country of Kenya many times as part of our church's partnership with a wonderful children's home. As part of the trip, we guarantee at least one unexpected adventure on those trips. It is the part of the fun of international travel.

Due to flight patterns and schedules, we always arrive late at night to the Nairobi airport in Kenya. Often it is 10 or 11 pm after we finally get our bags and pass through customs. Then, we have close to a 2-hour drive at night to our basecamp where we lodge. Some of the journey is highways and main roads, but the last 20 minutes is on a bumpy dirt road through fields and the bush home to all kinds of creatures – human and animal. In daylight, we've seen gazelle and zebra and cape buffalo, one of the most feared animals there. Even leopards have been spotted in those bushes. And at night, you cannot see anything unless it crosses the path of your headlights because it is pitch black.

On one of our trips, on that very first night along this stretch of darkened dirt road, we had a flat tire. We pulled off to the side, and everyone gets out to be of help .... even if that help is simply to lighten to the load. Some of us held flashlights for the guys changing the tire. Some of us held flashlights aimed at the bush and all the unknowns lurking there. Guys ... I'm telling you. You never feel more small, more vulnerable, more like Sunday's lunch special than when you are standing in utter darkness armed with nothing but a small plastic flashlight and a vivid imagination. I swear you see two dots of glowing eyes everywhere you look. Either there are tons of animals out there or one, fast-moving creature who finds delight in playing with its food before devouring it.

As one who hates the dark, the only thing that kept me from curling up in a fetal position was that I was not alone. Now, it wasn't because I knew there were others I could outrun if danger pounced, although that is also a decent strategy to survival. No, the comfort was knowing even though I was surrounded by the unknown, I was not alone.

There have been times this past year where I have felt like I was standing once again on that dirt road, in the middle of darkness, surrounded by unknowns. The unknown can be thrilling, and it can also be terrifying. I imagine most of us are facing some unknowns. Health, relationships, finances, jobs, the future of our nation, there is at least one area of your life with some serious unknowns right now. If this past year has taught us anything, it is this: we can't always know what is coming. But even though we may be surrounded by the unknown, we are not alone.

Today, we're beginning a six-week series on the life of Joseph from the Bible. Joseph, from the Old Testament, endured many challenges in his life where his future was not only unknown but even questionable! Yet, God was at work throughout Joseph's story. And while we have the

benefit of knowing how Joseph's entire story plays out and what God was doing, Joseph did not. Joseph was in the dark, and in today's story, literally in the dark, surrounded by the unknown.

### **MEETING JOSEPH**

Before we get to our text today, we need to set the stage, because today we're dropping into a very tense family moment for a young, seventeen-year-old Joseph. Joseph comes from a long line of brothers who didn't get along with brothers. It is a family cycle of disfunction they chose not to break generation after generation.

Joseph was born to Jacob and was the great-grandson of Abraham. Joseph was the 11th of 12 sons of Jacob, but he was Jacob's favorite. Jacob's favoritism of Joseph is not something we gather from reading between the lines. The text literally says in Genesis 37:3, "Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any other of his children." And out of this favoritism, Jacob made a very special robe of many colors just for Joseph. So, we know Joseph was his favorite. And Joseph's brothers knew it, too. You can imagine how that went over in the family.

This favoritism was just one reason there were issues between the brothers. Joseph also tattled on his brothers, telling his father when they weren't doing what they were supposed to be doing. But the most damaging part seem to be the dreams. Joseph was a dreamer, and he had at least two dreams while growing up that appeared to predict his brothers and even his parents one day bowing down to Joseph. Joseph's mistake wasn't that he had the dreams. His mistake was he told the dreams to his brothers and to his dad. No one wants to hear a sibling or child tell you they had a couple dreams saying one day you'd bow to him, that one day he would be greater and more powerful than you.

The tattling, the coat of many colors, the dreams .... They were all too much and when we enter the story today, the brothers have had enough. And who could blame them? As one scholar remarked, "God's future agent and mouthpiece in Egypt could hardly make a worse impression on his first appearance: spoiled brat, talebearer, braggart."<sup>i</sup>

It is in the middle of all this seething and growing hatred that we join the story today. Joseph's father, Jacob, has sent him out of town to see how his brothers were doing while out in the fields tending to the family's animals. Let's pick up the story there in Genesis 37:17b. B indicates were starting in the last half of this verse.

*"So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 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. (Gen. 37:17b-19)*

Notice how the brothers refer to Joseph. It is not the tattler nor the favorite son. It is "Here comes the dreamer." As author Victor Hamilton writes, "The brothers are infuriated ... especially by his grandiose dreams. They identify Joseph not as a favorite of their father, nor as a bearer of tales, but as a 'master dreamer'. It is his dreams that their plan will sabotage."<sup>ii</sup>

The brothers view Joseph's dreams as a threat to their own dreams. Out of this perceived threat and insecurity, fear is planted. And the fear is nurtured and justified and cultivated until it grows into an immense hatred that deems murder of another – even a brother – warranted and defensible.

*20 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.” 21 But when Reuben (the oldest of the twelve sons) heard it, he delivered Joseph out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” 22 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. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24 and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.*

I've often wondered if Joseph had any idea how his brothers felt, any inclination at all of the growing hatred and envy among them. My guess is that a spoiled, tattling, bragging seventeen-year-old probably was oblivious because that would have required thinking of someone other than himself. More than likely, he strutted up to his brothers with his colorful, special robe of favoritism, believing he was in control and with a known future of privilege in his family. Then, he got a flat tire in the dead of night. He was thrown into a deep well surrounded by darkness and the unknown. The fact that the pit is dry is both good and bad news. The good news is that Joseph won't drown. The bad news is that he will die of thirst after a few days—a truly miserable way to die. Meanwhile after the deed is done, the brothers ... enjoy a bite to eat.

*25 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. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 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. 28 When some Midianite traders passed by, they (the brothers) 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.*

The brothers, minus Benjamin who was the youngest of the twelve and still back at home, sold Joseph and then took his coat of many colors, smeared it with the blood of a goat they had killed, and took it to their father, Jacob. They told him they found the coat and assumed their brother was dead, torn to pieces by some wild beast. The aged father, grief-stricken, mourned the loss of his son. In the meantime, Joseph was taken to Egypt by the Ishmaelites and sold in the slave market to an officer of Pharaoh, an Egyptian named Potiphar.

I do not know how long the journey was for Joseph from that pit to the slave market in Egypt. Best estimates are that it would have been at least 15 days of walking – Joseph most likely tied up, following behind the camels and donkeys of his new owners. Joseph, a boy who had only known the safety, love, and privilege of a father's devoted love. Joseph, a dreamer who had dreamt dreams of greatness and power and believed them. This Joseph, almost overnight, now finds himself enslaved, powerless, headed to a place he has never been, and all at the hands of

his brothers. I can't imagine what those 15 days were like for Joseph, but I do imagine he was consumed with at least three questions on that journey:

- 1) Why did this happen?
- 2) What will happen now?
- 3) Where is God?

Why did my brothers turn on me? What are these people going to do to me? Will I ever see my father again? God ... where are you? Why did you allow this to happen?

Perhaps in the past or even right now you have asked one or all of these questions: *Why did this happen? What will happen now? Where is God?*

Someone turned on you, something outside your control changed your plans or dreams. You don't know why you heard the words, "You have cancer". You don't know what is going to happen next with your job or our nation. You're tired of worrying if you or someone you love will get covid and wondering when life will return to some kind of normal, when you can simply hug people again. And sometimes it feels like God is silent, maybe even absent from all the mess of life. It can feel like a flat tire on that dark, dirt road in Kenya. Or like a naïve young boy facing the harshness of life for the first time and find himself on a journey he didn't want to take to a land he doesn't know – all at the hands of people he thought he could trust.

We have the luxury of knowing the rest of Joseph's story and how God was at work in all these messy parts of his life. And in the next five weeks, we'll tell these stories together and see how God brings good from the unknowns in Joseph's life. You won't want to miss it. Ironically, the brothers' plan to throw Joseph into a pit and then "see what will become of his dreams" ultimately serves God's plan to bring fulfillment to those very dreams. But today, I want us to just sit with Joseph in the unknown, to walk with him on the road to the unknown, and not rush to the happy endings because that isn't real for most of us when we face unknowns. Most of the journey is in the dark ... wrestling with the questions and wondering if we are still known to God or if God left us. The journey is often as Eugene Peterson describes it, "a long obedience in the same direction." It is taking one step forward at a time in faith trusting God is with us and ahead of us even when we cannot see where we're going.

When Joseph was in the dry pit, he was not alone. When Joseph was on the long journey to be sold, he was not alone. When Joseph was surrounded by unknowns, he was always known by God even if it didn't feel like it. We may not know what tomorrow will bring for us, but we can trust we are not alone. No matter what unknown you are facing, you, my friend, are known by the One who loves you and is for you. You are known in the unknown, and you are not alone.

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<sup>i</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Reprint edition, 1987), 98.

<sup>ii</sup> Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1995), 417.