

August 16, 2009
"Strike Three!" What Now?
Genesis 37

"The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day ..." begins the famous poem Casey at the Bat. In the ninth inning, down two runs, with "Johnnie safe at second, and Flynn a-hugging third, Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat ..." Casey is supposed to hit a three-run homer and win the game. He is the golden boy. But Casey, of course, strikes out. He strikes out!?!? No!!! It isn't supposed to end that way! But it does.

Life sometimes throws *us* nasty curveballs. We have everything planned and arranged - then a change up catches us by surprise. The retirement we had planned on is thrown upside down by health problems. The career we had built is shattered by downsizing. The relationships we had nurtured become complicated and messy. We are standing at the plate of life, ready to hit the home run ball - but like Casey we're left wondering what just happened. What comes next after "Strike Three!?" If that's where you're at this morning, let me introduce you to Joseph! Joseph is standing at the plate, expecting to be the chosen, golden boy of life ... but he's shell-shocked, wondering what slider just sent his life into a tailspin. What next?

Or maybe you're not Joseph. Maybe you're doing OK. True, you may not be hitting home runs, but you're managing to make it around the bases of life OK. True, you may not have everything you want, but life is no disaster either. Thankfully that's where many of us - perhaps most of us - are. Thank God for that! But I want you to meet Joseph, too. You may not be a Joseph. But you probably know a Joseph or two. You know someone who is going through hard times, who sees little hope, who is not sure what his future might be. You know someone who - likely through no fault of her own - is barely holding on. I want you to meet Joseph and ask yourself, "How can I be a friend to Joseph? How can I encourage Joseph? How can I help Joseph?"

Casey, in a uniform of many colours

Casey had it all - good looks, talent, a great swing, a wonderful personality, the admiration of all of Mudville ... Joseph had it all - youth, good looks, intelligence, insight ... and the good favour of wealthy and powerful father, Jacob (a.k.a. Israel). In fact Jacob loves Joseph so much he gave him a *"richly ornamented robe"* (37:3). Parenting 101 tells us that singling out one child over the others is not a smart move. But Jacob is not particularly a wise person much of the time - he makes several not-so-bright decisions over the years. He should know better than this - he came from a family background where parents played favourites - with terrible consequences. This particular not-so-bright choice - to favour Joseph - had predictable results: Joseph's brothers *"hated him and could not speak a kind word to him"* (37:4).

Joseph did not help himself by making good choices, either. He has two dreams which suggest he will end up ruling over his brothers. And he gets sadistic delight retelling the dreams to his older siblings. Common sense suggests you keep these kinds of dreams to yourself, but Joseph

just cannot resist strutting his own self importance before his brothers. The net result of Jacob's blatant favouritism and Joseph's lack of discretion is that the boy is left wondering, as he is carried off into slavery, what fastball just blew by him.

Our purpose today is not to pass judgment on these brothers for what they did or the lies they told - though we could. We are not going to spend time on Joseph's lack of wisdom - though we could. We are not going to critique Jacob's terrible parenting - though we could. We want to meet Joseph and *"walk a mile in his sandals."* Here is a young man who had it all: the favour and blessing of a wealthy, powerful father, a secure and promising future, even a fantastic, stylish wardrobe. And suddenly it's over. He's being carried off in shackles - who know where - as a slave. Sold by his own brothers. He has struck out. Big time!

What do you do when you can't go golfing?

When a pro athlete's season ends - when the Stanley Cup season finally ended, the NBA season finally ended - rumour has it players go golfing. When Joseph struck out, golfing was not an option. I don't imagine these Ishmaelites, travelling with a caravan of spices, balm and myrrh to Egypt, were about to let Joseph play the front nine at the Sinai Golf & Country Club! His would be a brutal trek across the desert with little food, zero prospects, and inhuman conditions.

Our lives are more often like Joseph's than the professional athlete's. Casey might have the option of going golfing, working on his swing, and playing again next season, but we don't usually have that choice. When life throws us a curve ball we don't have the option of a leisurely sabbatical of putting practice, casually reflecting on our misfortunes, knowing a new season (with a fat contract) is about to begin. When our lives crash, we need to do something now. There is no new season to look forward with lucrative rewards. Bills are due - now. My relationships are crumbling - now. Life hurts - now. The future is bleak - now.

We don't know much about Joseph's state of mind during his trek to Egypt. But his situation reminds me a lot of the experiences of the biblical character, Job. Job was another fellow who had a wonderful life, fine prospects, very comfortable standard of living, security ... and in an instant - POOF! - everything was gone: his wealth, security, possessions, family, health. Everything gone! Done. Finished. Kaputt.

We do know lots about Job's state of mind. He cried out to God, again and again - "Why!?!?!" Job receives no neat, tidy answer. He doesn't like that! The truth is that in a world with fallen people and fallen circumstances, bad things happen - to godly people and to evil people. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. And so do lightning bolts. Job doesn't want to hear that. Finally God does give Job an answer - sort of. Job keeps crying out "Why me?" But God will not deal with such a self-centred question. Instead He blasts Job with a vision of all of the wonders of the universe, reminding Job that He - God - is the great Creator of the heavens and earth. He is the God who creates and sustains it all. And He is the God who is ultimately in control of Job's - and Joseph's - and my - life.

In one sense, that is small comfort if you are a Job or a Joseph. Recognizing that the Almighty God who created everything and holds everything in His hands cares for you does not answer the "Why?" question. But in another sense, knowing I live in a world created and sustained by an all-powerful, all-loving God is the only answer that is good enough. The God of the exodus (the Passover and the Red Sea), the God of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho, the God of David (who slew Goliath), the God who came to earth as a person (Jesus), the God who healed the lame and the sick, the God who fed thousands with a handful of loaves and fishes, the God who rose, victorious, from the dead, the God who reigns as King of Kings - *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* asks Paul. That is a better question than the "Why me?" questions (Read Romans 8).

What do you do if your one of the fans?

So you're not Casey. You're not Joseph. You're not Job. But you've just seen Casey strike out. You see him forlorn and forgotten. Your heart goes out to him. You've seen a Joseph - a person with all the possibilities in the world - whose world has fallen apart. You know a Casey. You know a Joseph. You know a Job. You know a person with serious health problems. You know a person going through a brutal divorce. You know someone who lost their job after years of faithful service. You know folks whose children are causing them grief.

What do you do? What do you say? How can you help? Sometimes we are so overwhelmed we don't do or say anything at all, because we are afraid we might do or say something wrong ...

What does Joseph need? He does not need someone to quote him Romans 8:28: *"We know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love Him ..."* That verse is 100% true; I believe it with all my heart; I have seen it come true in my life. Joseph will discover that he can believe it and it will prove itself true in his life - eventually. But Joseph doesn't need that right now. When your life has just crashed and you're being led who-know-where in chains pious words don't really help very much.

He does not need someone to say, *"I know what you're going through"* (unless you really DO know he's going through). We often glibly say, *"I know how you feel ..."* when, honestly we don't know.

He does not need friends and family who are uncomfortable around him and avoid him.

What does Joseph need? What Joseph really needs is a friend. He needs someone who will simply be there. The person does not need to give advice (in fact, it is probably much better if he doesn't give advice). The person would not have to try to give a theological explanation for everything (in fact, it is probably much better if he doesn't - just ask Job, again!). He doesn't need someone who pretends they have been through the same experience. He simply needs presence. There is tremendous power in simply being present with someone. Just being there. Just spending some time. Just walking alongside.

What do the Josephs you know need? Not the "right words". Not advice. Not a theological treatise. Certainly not avoidance! They need you! They need a friend. Someone who will sit

with them. Who will call them. Who will send them a little note now and then. Someone who will listen. Sometime who may say absolutely nothing at all. Someone who simply, through their presence and care, provides a depth of love and concern that expresses the love of God in a powerful, powerful way.

That's how I often experience God's power in my life. It's not that He answers all my questions - in fact He directly answers almost none. It's not that He magically solves all my problems - in fact He miraculously fixes very few. It's His presence. His peace. His companionship. His love.

Yes, pray for your Josephs. But also be a presence. Be a friend.

As you look around our church this morning, you see some Josephs. They need your friendship. But don't only look at those people who are here. Look at those who are not here. Many people are just away (it's August!). But are there others who cannot be here? Or feel unwelcome here? Or are sitting at home wondering if anyone cares? Are there Josephs to whom you can reach out? Is there someone who just needs a friend this week?

As you look around the church this morning you see the empty pews that could be filled with people who may never have been part of a church community before. Who needs to be here? Who needs to know that the God of all creation loves them? Who needs to know that the Kingdom of God is here - the Spirit is here among us with His peace and presence? Pray for that person this morning. And be a friend this week to that person, too.

We are called to be a Christ-centered community who know Christ, and makes Him known. One of the best ways we can make Him known is through being His presence. His comfort. His peace. His love. God is calling us to a mission - a mission of love, a mission of mercy, a mission of hope - to the Josephs (and the Casey's) or our world.

Casey at the Bat ends,

*Oh, somewhere in this favoured land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville -mighty Casey has struck out.*

Let's rewrite it:

*Oh, Lethbridge is the favoured land, the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing in Lethbridge, and Lethbridge hearts are light,
In Lethbridge folks are laughing and Lethbridge children shout,
For there is great joy in Lethbridge - the church is reaching out.*

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