

All's Well That Begins in a Well

Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" 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. 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." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 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.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 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. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 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. When some Midianite traders passed by, they 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 year is 1847. The place is the sophisticated, bustling city of Vienna, Austria. And Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis¹ has a problem. He runs two free maternity clinics in Vienna for poor women where he trains doctors and midwives. The problem, the mystery really, is that women are dying. A lot of them. They were dying from what was called “child bed fever”, or puerperal fever. The symptoms were severe internal swelling and an extremely high fever- in more than half of the cases it was fatal. And in Semmelweis’ clinics- as many as 1 in 10 women who entered wouldn’t come out alive. Can you imagine that? One in ten? Word got out about the clinics and women would so frightened they were actually having their babies in the street rather than in the clinic they were so desperate to escape the fate suffered by so many other mothers.

But Semmelweis, he was determined to get to the bottom of what was happening.



Joseph had a problem, too. Joseph, the youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons, he was supposed to head to Shechem, modern day Nablus, to find his brothers and check on how they were doing with the flocks. But when Joseph made it to Shechem, he searched high and low, but his brothers were not to be found. Finally, an old man found him wandering in the hills and asked him what he was doing out there. Telling him who he was looking for the old man surprised him telling him he had seen his brothers and their flock- it probably was unusual to see eleven shepherds for one flock. The old man said last time he saw them they were headed in the direction of Dothan.

¹ The story of Ignaz Semmelweis, intercalated in this sermon with Joseph’s story, is drawn from [Leadership and Deception published by the Arbinger Institute](#), pp18-20

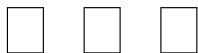
“Great,” grumbled Joseph under his breath. And so, annoyed, he headed off for Dothan- where his problem was about to get much, much worse. His brothers were in Dothan, they were sitting up on a high hill, on a flat rock overlooking the valley below them. On the horizon they saw their little brother coming- the long sleeves on his coat were unmistakable. “Here comes that dreamer,” one of them sneered scornfully. Joseph’s brothers hated his guts. They hated him with a fierceness we reserve for the ones closest to us.

“Why don’t we just kill him, and get it over with,” one of them said.

But Reuben piped up. “No, think of the blood. What a mess. What an effort. Why don’t we just dump in that well over there instead?” The idea appealed to the guys- toss that little punk into that dark well and see how he likes being on the bottom for a change- see what he does when his daddy isn’t there to come to the rescue anymore.

And so, when Joseph finally sees them up there and climbs up- he’s like: “Um, hey guys. Dad sent me to check on you. How’s it going? Um...why are you looking at me like that?”

And just like that they picked him up, as easy as picking up a lamb for slaughter, and they tossed him down into that dark pit- down into that deep well. And down there at the bottom, half terrified and half enraged, Joseph screamed up at them asking them what they were thinking? What had he done?



Well, Dr. Semmelweis’ problem was about to get worse, too- much worse. He threw himself into figuring out why so many women were dying. He became obsessed

with lowering the mortality rate. And so he began to study everything he possibly could. They controlled for linens and birthing positions. They studied whether more women died when the hospital crowded compared to when it wasn't. None of this was helpful.

The only thing that was clear was that the difference in mortality rates between the two clinics was striking- the first clinic, the one run by doctors and medical students was far worse than the second clinic, the one run by midwives and midwives in training. On average 1 in 10 women were dying at the first clinic as opposed to just 1 in 50 at the second clinic. It was a glaring difference, and one that ate at Semmelweis. It made no sense! The doctors and the medical students were so much more highly trained and skilled than the midwives. They had so much more education. Why were they doing so much worse?

After time, he began to take this very personally. What did all this have to do with his doctors- the ones he himself was training? How could this be their fault?

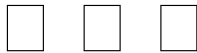


We don't know how long Joseph was down there in that well. Long enough for his brothers to hatch a plan to sell him into slavery and make a little profit off him at least. It was long enough, I imagine, for him to think long and hard about why all this was happening to him.

And seriously, why did they do this? It seems incomprehensible- for brothers to treat a brother this way; especially the youngest! Now Joseph knew they didn't like him much. They were always giving him a hard time, always going on about his coat, for instance. Oh that coat- they HATED that coat of his.

It had been a gift from his father. It was beautiful. It had threads of every color of the rainbow woven into it. And the sleeves- it had these incredible sleeves, sleeves that billowed out and flowed down. When he wore that coat, and he hardly ever took it off- he just felt like a king.

And they just hated it. They hated his coat, and they made fun of him every chance they got. But it was a gift from their dad. He never asked for it. Why should they be mad at him? How was this his fault?



Well, Semmelweis kept digging. He looked at the problem from every angle. But nothing made any sense- how could the problem be the doctors? So, at one point he left the clinics to go and study the problem at another hospital hoping some perspective would help. He was gone for over a month. And when he returned he was greeted with news that seemed good at first- but rocked him to his core when he began to think about it more. The news was that soon after he left the mortality rate at the first clinic, the one he supervised, fell off sharply. And at first this sounded great, right? Maybe something he had tried was working. But then, when they were trying to figure out what had helped- the numbers soared again back to their previous level.

After Semmelweis left the numbers were great. After he came back- they were terrible again. And it hit him- not only were the doctors the problem...but he seemed to be directly related to the problem. Semmelweis himself!



Well Joseph kept thinking, too. He thought about his situation from every angle- why on earth had they turned on him like that? It couldn't just be the coat. So what was it? And just like that he remembered- he remembered telling them one time about a dream he had had. It was so vivid. Joseph was in the fields with them harvesting the wheat- tying it into bundles, or sheaves. The golden sunlight was pouring over them, a slight breeze blowing a stirring of dust into the air. And the weirdest thing happened- his brothers' sheaves all turned towards his sheaf. And then they all began to bend down in front of his, like it was some kind of king. And Joseph remembered after he told them about it, how they knocked him down and nearly killed him right then and there telling him who did he think he was trying to be lord over them?

And that was the only time. He had another dream in which the whole night sky was displayed before him- the milky way spilling out in front of him. And eleven stars were shining more brightly than any of the others, and somehow those stars, and then even the moon and the sun- somehow they began to migrate in the sky towards him, towards Joseph. And somehow it seemed to him that they also began to bow before him. And he actually told them about this dream- he told the whole family. And this time not only his brothers were furious, but his father was, as well.

As Joseph sat there in the darkness of that well, a light was beginning to shine in his heart and mind- it was becoming more and more clear to Joseph how he had wound up in that pit. And it seemed to him that his brothers weren't quite as guilty as he wished- nor was he as innocent as he would like.

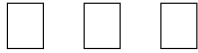


When Semmelweis realized the infections were related to him- he spent every waking minute figuring out what was unique about him. And finally it hit him. In those days people didn't know about germs. It was entirely common for doctors to move from patient to patient without washing their hands. And worse, it was entirely common for doctors to train on cadavers and to go directly from a cadaver to seeing patients. And if there was one thing Semmelweis knew about himself- he spent more time training on cadavers than any other doctor in the hospital. And he began to speculate if somehow particles from the cadavers were somehow being transferred by the doctors, by himself, to the patients.

His belief was sadly confirmed when one of his best friends, Jakob Kolletschka, was training on a cadaver when he accidentally cut himself with a scalpel. He developed symptoms similar to the women and died, and when this happened Semmelweis ordered a sweeping change throughout his clinic.² After working with cadavers every doctor had to wash their hands in this powerful chlorinated lime, basically a bleach solution, before seeing patients. The mortality rate? Nearly overnight it dropped from 1 in 10 to 1 in 100.

But while this was good news for all of the women who could enter the clinics in the future- it was heart breaking for Semmelweis who had to live with the fact that without even being aware of it he had been one of the main causes of the problem he was trying to solve. Semmelweis lost his mind not long after his great discover- it's far from clear why that happened, I can only imagine the faces of all those mothers who never made it out of his clinic were never far from his mind. He once said: "Only God know how many patients went prematurely to their grave because of me."

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ignaz_Semmelweis#Discovery_of_cadaverous_poisoning



When we are faced with challenges- people that drive us nuts at work, family members that aren't loving us and respecting us the way we think they should; why is it we are so quick to locate the blame with them instead of with ourselves? Why do we just assume when we are angry and hurt and in pain- that someone else is at fault?

I mean the challenges you and I experience, the negative patterns we fall into with relationships- I suppose it really could always be THEM. I suppose it could. But this is what Semmelweis and Joseph believed at the beginning of their stories- that everything was someone else's fault. But of course they both discovered that the changes that were most needful- those changes had to begin with them.

And you know, I think this is why Jacob wound up being so successful in Egypt, this is why- years later when Joseph was reunited with his brothers it was so easy for him to forgive them. It's because he knew before they ever said they were sorry and asked for forgiveness- he knew he was just as in need of forgiveness as they were.

Beloved, is someone frustrating you right now- is someone on your last nerve? Well, I know we don't like to hear this- but instead of immediately jumping to list all of their faults (of which there are many, I am sure), this may be giving us the PERFECT opportunity to ask some harder questions about ourselves and change the only person we really have any control over- ourselves. **Amen.**