

Throw Me Some Rope!
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Romans 10:5-15

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Before I begin, I should be clear I have never been down in a hole. At least, not physically. I've never fallen into a sinkhole, tumbled into a well or dropped down an elevator shaft. Nor have I ever tried rescuing someone who had. That being the case, I decided to do a little research before writing this sermon, so I went online and read stories about people trapped in a hole.

One thing I learned was you should never get down in the hole with the person. Seems obvious to me, but all the articles spelled it out. Do your best to avoid getting down in the hole with the person you're trying to rescue. Instead, throw them a lifeline. Get a length of rope, tie it off, and throw the end down to the person at the bottom. Then, pull the person out.

As I say, I have never actually been in a hole and needed to be rescued. Nor have I ever needed to rescue anyone. If you have, I would be glad to hear your story.

But though I've never been in a literal hole, I've certainly been in a metaphorical hole. Many times, in fact. I suspect most of us, maybe even all of us, have as well. Across the landscape of our lives, there are any number of deep, dangerous, well camouflaged holes just waiting to swallow us up.

Sometimes there is a tragedy in our family, and we fall into a hole of sorrow, or despair. Addiction is often described as a deep, deep hole.

Through no fault of our own we lose our job. Without the job we can't make the rent, and then the car dies. Suddenly, we're in a hole of debt.

Naturally, no job means no health-insurance. We break our arm, we catch pneumonia, or maybe something as simple as a kidney stone or a hernia takes us down, but it means 2 or 3 days in the hospital. We're spiraling down a hole of medical debt.

We're betrayed by our beloved, our closest friend, someone we've known and trusted for years, decades, even. And now we're stomping through a dark hole of anger and rage.

We wanted marriage but never found the right person. We got married but our spouse was a louse. We wanted children but couldn't have any. We had children but they turned against us. We had grandchildren but they moved 4,000 miles away. The hole of our hurt has no limit.

Maybe it wasn't our fault we went down a hole. We were walking down the sidewalk when a drunk driver jumped the curb and sent us flying. Maybe it was entirely our fault we went down a hole. We took that extra drink before getting behind the wheel.

Maybe, it's a mixture of the two. Jacob has made Joseph's life complicated. Jacob clearly prefers Joseph to his other children. He's even given Joseph a long coat, with sleeves. This is a sign of high status. Jacob has bought his favorite child a new car while the others are driving old clunkers.

Joseph doesn't help matters. He can't resist showing off his coat. He's also had dreams of grandeur, of all his family bowing down to him. Which, of course, he can't resist talking about.

To be fair, Joseph is only 17. How many of us, if we were judged only by what we did before we were 20, could hold our heads very high?

And what about Joseph's brothers? Did they go overboard a little much? Yes, the kid is a brat and a braggart. But did you have to throw him down a hole? Did you have to sell him into slavery? You couldn't take him out behind the barn and 'talk' a little sense into him? Come on, please.

Sometimes it's straightforward. Sometimes it's complicated. Either way, sooner or later, we all end up in a hole. You do. I do. One way or another, sooner or later, all of us end up in a hole.

The good news, the good news, is everyone deserves some rope. Everyone deserves a lifeline. No one should be left languishing at the bottom of a hole.

This is Paul's point in our Romans lesson. Everyone deserves to hear the good news of God's love in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Jews and Gentiles alike. (That's us, remember. We are the Gentiles.) Jews and Gentiles alike deserve to know how

much God loves us. No one is beyond the reach of God's love. Everyone deserves to grab onto the lifeline.

Everyone? Yes, everyone. Even the souls in hell. Look at 1 Peter 3:18-20a.

“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey.”

After his crucifixion, but before his resurrection, Jesus descends into hell and preaches God's love to the damned. Everyone deserves to hear how much God loves us. Everyone.

But how can anyone respond if no one throws them a line? How can anyone respond to God's love if no one shares the good news with them? As Paul writes, “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?”

How are we going to grab the rope if no one throws it to us? How are we going to rescue someone if we don't throw them a line?

Friends – the fact we are here today means someone once threw us a lifeline. Someone shared good news with us. Maybe we were in a hole. Maybe we were teetering on the edge. The fact is each of us is here today because someone, somewhere, sometime, shared the Good News of how much God loves us.

And now, praise God, it's our turn. Now, it's our calling. Now you and I must be walking the highways and byways of life, the mountains and the plains, the smoothly manicured lawns and the rough, scraggly hedgerows, seeking out the fallen.

Maybe it's not their fault they're in a hole. Maybe it's entirely their fault. Maybe, like Joseph, it's complicated.

It doesn't matter. Jesus brought good news to those in hell. We bring good news to those in hell on earth.

In the name of our Triune God: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen.