

The Power of Presence

Big Idea: You will never go where God is not.

Purpose: To challenge people to practice the presence of God.

Passage: Genesis 27:25-36, 39:1-6

Verse: Genesis 39:2a

Opening

The Power of Presence

-We have now effectively been on lockdown or some sort of stay at home order for 3 months. How are you doing? Or maybe I should ask – *How are being?*

At first, as an introvert, I thought it was great. I don't feel that way any longer. I miss being with people. I am grateful for Zoom, but it is a poor substitute for being in the presence of another person. I am grateful for the technology that allows us to offer online gatherings. I have heard some people say that will be the future of church. If online gatherings are the future of church, then I will have to find a new career. Online gatherings are valuable when they are our only option, but they are a poor substitute for being with one another.

-With that said, I have been fully supportive of the stay at home order. Our quarantine has saved lives. New Hope is committed to reopening and beginning to gather in person, when it is safe to do so. We want to be a good neighbor and make temporary sacrifices to protect those in our community who are most vulnerable. But we cannot wait until we can safely be together again.

-It is somewhat ironic that one of the last series we did before the pandemic was called ***Together***. In that series, we argued that **we are made for relationships. We are not meant to be alone. We are better together. And yet we live in a world that is increasingly alone.** It is likely that loneliness is the leading cause of death in America. Persistent loneliness shortens our lives on average by 15 years. The word ***quarantine*** means a ***state of isolation***. The quarantine has absolutely heightened that experience.

-**Some of the greatest heartaches of this pandemic have been the stories of people dying alone from COVID.** I have friends who were unable to be with those they loved as they died. It is devastating. Everything in us tells us that is not the way it is meant to be. We were meant to be together, especially when things get hard. Love means we are committed to being present with one another. I encountered a touching story that illustrated that point.



John Kline is a Professor of Leadership at Troy University. He had a routine of stopping by the John Knox Manor Nursing Home every afternoon to spend a few hours with his beloved wife, Ann. Ann is in the midst of a 17-year battle with Alzheimer's Disease. When COVID hit, he was no longer allowed to visit Ann. So he came up with a new plan. Each afternoon, John stands outside the window of Ann's room and sings Amazing Grace to her. Views of [John singing to Ann](#) blew up on YouTube. Upon reflection, John said it had to do with "our deep yearning to be present with one another."

-We were made to be with one another. We are not meant to be alone.

There is a power in presence. There is power in knowing that someone else is with us and that we are not alone. It is interesting to note that the word ***presence*** is a noun and not a verb. It is a state of being and not of

doing. Presence is being *with* someone. There is a power in presence. Today, we will explore the power of presence in the life of Joseph.

Review

-Last week, we began a new 7-week series called *You'll Get Through This: Lessons from Joseph*. The series is a deep dive into the life of the Old Testament figure Joseph. The Bible covers the life of Joseph in Genesis 37-50. That is 13 chapters of Scripture devoted to one dude. We are meant to pay attention the story of Joseph. Joseph's story is our story.

-Our **Big Read** for this series is also called *You'll Get Through This* by pastor and author **Max Lucado**. We want you to get the book and read along with us. I also want to encourage you to join the Facebook group and engage in the book club discussions. This will undoubtedly deepen your experience in the series.

-Let's review. Joseph was the great-grandson of Abraham and Sarah, who God called to birth a *family* that would birth a *nation* that would birth the *Messiah* or Savior. Joseph is the 11th of 12 sons born to Jacob. Remember that Jacob got tricked into marrying Leah and then ended up working 14 years to marry Leah's sister Rachel, whom he loved. Joseph is the oldest of two sons from Rachel. Even though he was the 11th son, Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. He made him a special coat. Joseph was a spoiled brat and the rest of his brothers hated him.

-One day Jacob asked Joseph to travel about 50 miles away to check on his older brothers who were tending the flocks. When Joseph approached his brothers, he expected a group hug. Instead they stripped him and threw him in a hole that was about 20 feet deep. They planned to leave him to die. Last week we left Joseph in the bottom of a pit.

-As we journey through this series, we must keep in mind where the story will end. Several decades later, Joseph will be the 2nd most powerful person in the world and will play a key role in saving his family and saving the world. When he encounters his brothers 22 years later he will declare – ***You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*** (Genesis 50:20) This is the key verse for our series.

-We laid out a few main ideas last week that will run throughout the series. First, **evil exists.** That is fully on display in our opening two scenes. There is evil in the world. Evil is the opposite of good. God is good and God is continually seeking to overcome evil with good. There are two types of evil. One is **moral evil**. That is the evil that comes out of our hearts. **That is the evil that caused Joseph's brothers to want to kill him.** That is the evil we have seen all other our screens over these last two weeks. **Racism of any kind is pure evil.**

There is also **natural evil**. Natural evil is due to the presence of evil in the world; the reality that creation is subjected to frustration until it is redeemed. Pandemics are an example of natural evil. Evil breeds suffering. **God hates evil and suffering, and God is committed to overcoming evil with good.**

-That brings us to the big idea of our series. Max says it this way – ***In God's hands, intended evil becomes eventual good.*** (Max Lucado) This comes from the pronouncement Joseph made to his brothers – ***you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.***

To use our primary image from last week, God is the master "junk artist". God takes the evil and suffering in our lives, the things we want to discard, looks at them and says – What could this become? God makes beauty out of junk. Joseph believed this. It was why he survived and flourished. It was how he got through the messes of his life.

-Maybe you are at the bottom of a pit today. If not, you will be at some point. We all end up at the bottom of a pit at some point in our lives. When we are sitting in the bottom of a pit, **will we throw in the towel and give up? Or we will join Joseph and believe that God will transform evil and suffering into eventual good?** When we encounter evil and suffering, a great question to ponder is: **Will this break me or form me to become more beautiful?**

-Let's return to our story. We left Joseph in the bottom of the pit. He doesn't stay there. Today, Portia Manjengwa from our worship team will be reading scene three from Genesis 37:25-36.

²⁵As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. ²⁶Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

²⁸So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels^a of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.²⁹When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. ³⁰He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?"

³¹Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. ³²They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."³³He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."³⁴Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him.

³⁶Meanwhile, the Midianites^b sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Color Commentary

Down to Egypt

-We are told the brothers strip Joseph and throw him into a pit and then they sit down to eat. It is a head snapping shift in the narrative. Evil is again on display as we observe the callousness of the brother's hearts. They are likely eating food that Joseph has brought them from home while they listen to his weeping and pleading from the bottom of the pit.

-The brothers look up from their meal when they hear an approaching trade caravan coming from Gilead to the east of them. Dothan, where they ate, was situated along a major trade route. Judah hatches a new plan. Judah is the 4th son of Jacob. Whenever we meet him in the text, he is successfully convincing others to do something. He is a conniver. In this case, he convinces his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. Instead of leaving Joseph to an uncertain fate, they could make a little money out of the deal.

-Picture Joseph in the bottom of the pit. He can hear his brothers eating and laughing. They are ignoring his pleas. Then he hears the wheels of the approaching caravan. He starts to shout for help. Finally, one of his brothers is lowered into the pit by a rope. He convinces Joseph they have had a change of heart. Joseph weeps tears of joy and he holds onto his brother for dear life as they are raised from the pit. All is well.

Then he emerges to see the waiting caravan. He quickly reads the faces of his brothers and senses all is *not* well. He tries to make a run for it, but stumbles and falls. He is bruised and broken and has little fight in him. Two of his brothers drag him, kicking and screaming, towards the traders. There are other slaves shackled, awaiting sale in Egypt. The traders poke at Joseph. They ask the brothers to turn Joseph around for full inspection. They ask if Joseph is a good worker. The brothers have to hold back their smirks. He appears to be a young man in good health.

The traders offer 10 shekels for Joseph. The brothers protest loudly and counter with 30 shekels. They meet in the middle at 20 shekels. A shekel was an Ancient Near East coin. 20 shekels was the going price for a male slave between the ages of 5 and 20. The traders toss Judah the bag of coins. The brothers toss Joseph to the traders. The shackles immediately go on his hands and feet and he is thrown in a rolling cage with the other slaves. Did Joseph protest? Did he go quietly? We don't know. What we do know is that Joseph went from the bottom of a pit to a life in chains.

-Reuben was gone during this entire scene. He shows up to find the pit empty and Joseph gone. He rips his clothes when he hears what his brothers have done. This was an ancient sign of lamenting. I am guessing he had a plan to save Joseph. Now that plan is no longer possible. He essentially says – *how can I ever return home?* Reuben is the oldest. Joseph would have been his responsibility.

-The brothers plan a cover up. They stage it to look like Joseph was killed by a wild animal. When they present Joseph's bloody coat to their father, he rips his clothes, puts on sackcloth, and mourns inconsolably. The last line of scene three tells us that Joseph's story is far from over. We are told that Joseph was sold to the house of Potiphar, Pharaoh's Captain of the Guard. Joseph could have been sold to countless people in Egypt, but he ends up in the home of the man who oversees security for the most powerful person in the world. How would Joseph fare? Let's continue reading.

-Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. ²The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. ³When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, ⁴Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. ⁵From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. (Genesis 39:1-5)

God was with Joseph

-We are told he went *down to Egypt*. This is true geographically. Here is a map that shows Joseph's journey to Egypt.

But the narrator is also making a point. **Joseph is going down.** It has gone from bad to worse. From favored son living in the penthouse suite with nice threads, to slavery. **Have you ever been at a point in**



life

when it went from bad to worse?

Our family loves Chris Farley. We have been introducing him to our girls. My wife showed me this [funny clip](#) from the movie Black Sheep where Chris is progressively falling down a mountain. At various points, he stops, thinking he is o.k. – only to fall again. Someone doctored the clip to put in the names of the last few months – March – April – May – June....

We think we are done falling – only to fall again. That is what suffering often feels like - going from bad to worse. That was Joseph.

-This is what I call an *anchor point* in a story. The narrator is making intentional effort to make sure we know something about Joseph. It is a defining feature of his story, so it is highlighted in these verses. We want to give it special attention because it is a defining feature of our stories as well.

Maybe you caught it. The defining truth of Joseph's life is found in verse 2: **The LORD was with Joseph.** (Genesis 37:2a) In case we might miss it, the phrase is repeated in the very next verse from a different perspective – "**when his master saw the LORD was with Joseph...**". The name the **LORD** should be in all caps in your Bibles. This means that it is the Hebrew word **Yahweh**, the personal covenant name of God. We are meant to know that God is with Joseph. It would be reasonable if we were beginning to doubt after Joseph's downward spiral.

-**So, Joseph skyrockets up the corporate ladder.** He gets promoted from field hand to living in Potiphar's house. He then so pleases his master that Potiphar puts Joseph over everything Potiphar owns. Joseph is in charge of his whole estate. Joseph goes from shackled slave to being the lieutenant to the man who protected the most powerful person in the world. But that is secondary to what is most important.

-**We are meant to know that God is very present in Joseph's life and very present in Joseph's story.** We are told the same thing two more times in next week's scene, when Joseph heads from the penthouse to prison. God is with Joseph in the penthouse. God is with Joseph in the pit. God is with Joseph as a slave. God is with Joseph as a house manager. **God is with Joseph through thick and thin.** God will get him through. Joseph survives and thrives regardless of circumstances because he believes God is with him. *What is true of Joseph is true of those of us who follow Jesus.* How is Joseph's story also true for us?

Life Lessons

You will never go where God is not.

-I like the way Max says it in our Big Read: **You will never go where God is not.** God was with Joseph. God is with us. We know this is true and we know it is important because it is one of the most repeated themes in all of Scripture.

-**God was with Adam and Eve in the garden.** Even when Adam and Eve went their own way, God tracked them down and made them clothes. **God called forth Abraham and Sarah** and gave them his promise to make a family that would make a nation that would birth a Savior. God promised Jacob, *I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.* (Genesis 28:15) Do you think Jacob might have shared this promise with his favorite son?

God was with the nation of Israel every step of the way. Even in the face of their consistent idolatry, he never bailed on them. Moses continually advocated for God's people when they acted in ridiculous ways. God told Moses, *My Presence will go with you.* (Exodus 33:14a)

God gave them his promise. God kept his word. God was with them in the wilderness. God's presence was manifest in a **cloud by day** and through **fire by night**. God fed them every morning. God's actual presence was with his people in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple. That is why Moses could tell the people before they entered the Promised Land, *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.* (Deuteronomy 31:6)

-Then God was with us his people in the flesh. Jesus was called *Immanuel* which means **God with us**. In John 1, we are told that **God became flesh and made his dwelling among us**. The word *tabernacle* is the word for *dwelling*. **In Jesus, God tabernacled among us**. But now God was not just in the Holy of Holies; God was made manifest in a baby. When Jesus dies, rises again, and ascends to the Father, he sends **God the Spirit, who literally lives, moves, and breathes within all who look to Jesus for life**. God has never been more with us than He is through His Spirit living within us.

And then John gets a glimpse of what is coming one day and writes, *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.* (Revelation 21:3)

-Scripture consistently and triumphantly reminds us that God is with us. **We will never go where God is not**. And yet that is not my experience and I am guessing it is not your experience. I go through most of my days unaware of God's presence. Or worse, I believe God has removed His presence because of who I am or what I have done. I think when I struggle and fail that God pulls back. That is how most earthly relationships work. But the testimony of Scripture is that **when I struggle and fail, God leans in**.

-**C.S. Lewis said that God was the Hound of Heaven**. I love that analogy. We have a Golden Retriever named Zion. She is a retriever, so she has a great nose. Often when I walk her, our daughter, Jubilee, joins us on her bike. Jubilee takes off far in front of us and it drives Zion nuts. She wants to be with Jubilee because Jubilee is *her* person. Zion pulls and strains even when Jubilee is far out of sight. And then Zion's nose goes to work. She goes nose down and tracks Jubilee throughout our neighborhood. She doesn't rest until she has found her again. I imagine this is what C.S. Lewis was talking about. **God is always hot on our trail. No matter what we do or where we go, we can't shake Him. God is undefeated at hide and seek.**



-Here's a little something we can do to remind us of the reality of God's continual presence with us. In Psalm 139, the Psalmist declares, **Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? ⁸If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. ⁹If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.** (Psalm 139:7-10)

I want to encourage you to pray this as a prayer to remind you that God is with you. But I want you to amend it a bit to fit your life. Answer this question - **Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?** Fill in this blank – **if I go _____ You are there**. If I go **to work** you are there, if I go **for a run** you are there, if I go **for hike deep in the woods** you are there, if I **go to school** you are there, if I **don't go anywhere and stay on quarantine** you are there, if I end up in **divorce court** you are there, as I **wrestle with**

my addiction you are there, if I am **in the ICU** you are there, when **I am feeling lonely and isolated** you are there. Fill in the spaces and places where you don't sense God's presence, where you think God will bail on you and can't possibly be. This prayer, this exercise, reminds us that God is with us wherever we go. **We will never go where God is not.**

God's presence should be our passion

-Scripture also reveals that **God's presence should be our passion.** We are most fully alive, fully human, fully who God created us to be, when we are engaging with God's presence in our lives. I will even make this bold statement. **I think spiritual growth and maturity can be measured by an increasing awareness of God's presence in our lives.** At the very heart of all prayer is the awareness of and interaction with God's presence. This is why Paul could command us to **pray without ceasing.** He wants us to be continually aware of God's presence in our lives. This is why we need to make God's presence our passion.

-**This was true for Moses.** Back to Exodus 33. Right after God promised his Presence to his people, Moses says, *If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. ¹⁶How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?* (Exodus 33:15-16) Moses says **if you aren't with us we don't want to go. Your presence is the distinguishing characteristic of your people.** Moses essentially says we aren't going anywhere without you. God's presence was his passion.

-**This was true of King David.** After his adultery and murder was exposed, David prayed, *Do not cast me from your presence...*(Psalm 51:11a) David was called *a man after God's heart.* David proclaimed, **better is one day in your house than a thousand elsewhere. God's presence was his passion.**

This was true of Jesus. Jesus was in constant connection with his Father. Jesus would often just take off to get time alone so he could be fully present with his Father. **God's presence was his passion.**

-How about us? **Is God's presence our passion?** On most days I would have to answer no. On most days, checking my phone for messages, emails, and Facebook likes is my passion, not God's presence. That's why I'm probably so restless. What can we do about that? **How can we make God's presence our passion?**

-300 years ago, a man named Nicolas Herman lived in France. He was very poor and walked with a painful limp due to injuries as a soldier. Nicolas became a follower of Jesus at 18. At age 40, Nicolas entered a monastic community and changed his name to Lawrence of the Resurrection. We know him as **Brother Lawrence.** Barely anyone knew Brother Lawrence while he lived. His primary job was preparing food and cleaning pots and pans in the monastery kitchen.

When he died, 15 of his letters were collected, along with interviews of those who knew him. They were compiled into a book called **The Practice of the Presence of God.** It has become a spiritual classic. It is likely one of the most-read books of all time. The premise of the book is incredibly simple. Brother Lawrence sought to become increasingly aware of the presence of God, especially in the midst of everyday life duties such as cleaning pots and pans.

Brother Lawrence writes, *"Oh! If we but knew the need we have of God's presence. If we could only see how greatly we need the Lord's assistance in everything. If we could really see how helpless we are without Him, we would never lose sight of Him, not even for a moment."* Brother Lawrence made God's presence his passion. But this didn't happen overnight. It took a lifetime of practice. That is why his book is called **The Practice of the Presence of God.**

-**We make God's presence our passion by practicing the presence of God.** Anytime we hear the word *practice*, our blood pressure probably rises. We feel a sense of burden over something else we need to do, and shame that we don't do it enough. That is why the way of Brother Lawrence is so liberating. He tells us to just *seek to be aware of God's presence a little more each day*. Remember, **presence is a noun and not a verb**. To be present with the God who is present with us is not an activity but a state of awareness, a state of being. If we walked into a room and discovered the presence of someone we dearly love and who dearly loves us, we would certainly acknowledge their presence.

-How can we practice the presence of a God who is present but not embodied? The long tradition of the church is to set up intentional moments throughout the day to turn our awareness to God's presence. Some call this the **Daily Office**. We can call it anything we want. **I want to challenge you to start by setting aside a moment in the morning and a moment in the evening to stop and turn your awareness to the presence of God.** You can pray, but don't have to pray. Maybe start by just saying, "Hi".

In his very last book, Dallas Willard encourages a practice he calls **playing Tag with God**. He tells us to stop and turn our attention to God throughout the day, saying, **"Tag, God, You're it"**. **It acknowledges God's presence and invites him to chase us.** I know it sounds corny, but it has been a powerful practice for me.



-We have been encouraging all of you to use the **Lectio 365 App** from the 24/7 prayer people. It is short, simple and very well done. We gather collectively every Wednesday on Facebook Live to do it together as a church. I use it daily in the morning.

I love the opening prayer. It is so refreshing for my hamster-wheel heart. ***As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still; to breathe slowly; to re-center my scattered senses upon the presence of God.*** (Lectio 365)

God's redemptive presence transforms our suffering

-What have we learned from Joseph so far? We have learned that **God's redemptive presence transforms our suffering**. Joseph got rocked by life. All of us get rocked by life at some point – often at many points. Joseph could have given up. He could have gotten grumpy and bitter and thrown in the towel. **Joseph allowed his suffering to shape him instead of breaking him.** How was Joseph able to do this? **Joseph believed in God's redemptive presence in his story. Joseph knew God was with him.**

God was with him in the penthouse and the pit. Joseph knew that in God's hand, evil and suffering become eventual good. Joseph believed that God had something beautiful in store for him. Joseph would agree with King David's cry that *even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.*

Closing Challenge

-**If you are in the pit right now, if you are headed down to Egypt, how will you respond?** It is our natural reaction to look back to what was before. I am sure Joseph had those moments. But we can't go back to what was before.

-It is comforting to consider, in our journey down, down, down, that when we hit the bottom, we discover we are not alone. We look around and discover that **Jesus is with us in the pit**. Jesus is also the one who pulls us out of the pit. Jesus suffers with us. Jesus gives us hope beyond our suffering. As Paul wrote, *we grieve, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope.*

When our world gets rocked, we grieve and lament. **Then we put everything in God's hands and ask –**
What could this become? What is now possible?

And, because God is with us, anything is possible.