

“Rescue”
The Very Rev. Tracey Lind
St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA
Sunday, August 13, 2023
Proper 14A - Gen 37.1-4,12-28 | Psalm 105 | Romans 10.5-15 | Mt 14.22-33



Tracey Lind, Cape Breton, 2007

The scripture readings appointed for this week are rich and challenging, and the common thread of universal salvation lies below the surface. So let's take a deep dive into these turbulent and muddy waters and see how they come together.

This morning's passage from Genesis is the story of Joseph, the boy with a coat of many colors. It's a tale of betrayal and abandonment, rescue and reward. It's also a story of restoration and reconciliation.

Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob, a child of his father's old age. As the youngest, he helped his older brothers in the pasture. Joseph was what as children we called a tattler and as adults we might say a whistleblower. He would bring to his father "bad reports" about his siblings. To make matters worse, Joseph was a dreamer, and he shared those dreams with his older brothers, dreams that made him better than all the rest. As you can imagine, Joseph's siblings despised him.

One day, his brothers conspired to get rid of the boy with the coat of many colors. They decided to kill him, throw him in a pit, and say that a wild animal had devoured him. However, the eldest brother Reuben wanted to rescue his little brother, and thus, suggested that they not take his life but just cast him in a pit, which they did. Before Reuben could save him, a caravan of traders

passed by on their way to Egypt. Judah, another brother, said to the group, “Let’s sell him and make some money.” And so they did, and Joseph ended up a slave to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard.

As fate would have it, Joseph landed in a pretty powerful home. Instead of letting his anger and hurt get the best of him, Joseph succeeded in his job as a steward and became a powerful and influential man in Egypt. But his good fortune didn’t last. Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph; and after he resisted, she accused him of sexual assault. Joseph was thrown in prison.

Again, instead of feeling sorry for himself, Joseph kept his integrity and “found favor” with his jailer. Through his gift of dream interpretation, Joseph also made friends with two of Pharaoh’s employees who were serving time. But, once out of prison, they forgot about him.

Then Pharaoh had a bad dream, and his employee reached out to Joseph who interpreted it in a meaningful and helpful manner. At the age of thirty, thirteen years after being sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph was released and given a leadership position in Pharaoh’s administration. His job was to prepare for the seven years of famine predicted in Pharaoh’s dream. When the famine hit, Egypt was well-stocked and thus able to assist famine refugees from other lands.

Re-enter Joseph’s brothers. Jacob and his family were starving, so the brothers were sent to Egypt to purchase grain. Joseph recognized them, but they didn’t recognize him. In spite of a somewhat devious scheme that you can read for yourself in the last ten chapters of Genesis, Joseph did not seek revenge, but rather demonstrated forgiveness, compassion, and physical aid. The family was reunited and Jacob was able to die in peace at the ripe old age of 147 years. Joseph himself lived to be 110 years old.

The story of Joseph offers a lot of life lessons that are as applicable today as they were thousands of years ago. Joseph’s biography teaches us about what it’s like to be thrown under the bus by people you trusted. Joseph is a great example of servant leadership as in Egypt he fostered trust and prioritized the greater good. Joseph teaches us the virtues of waiting, watching, listening, being patient, doing your best, and not giving up - no matter what the circumstances present. Joseph reminds us that the powers that be can take away everything (including your freedom), but not the integrity of your spirit. That is for you, and you alone, to give away or hold onto. I think that Joseph might have been a biblical role model for Jesus, himself.

Moving on to the Epistle. For me, this tenth chapter of Paul’s long letter to the early Christian community in Rome is a difficult and problematic text. As biblical scholar Amy Jill Levine points out, Paul, a Jew by birth and upbringing, and thus, a convert to Christianity, “acted as have many converts before and since” by “denigrating his previous religious commitment.”¹

While emphatically declaring that in Christ, “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek” (Romans 10.12), Paul set salvation by faith - that is, belief in Jesus as the only way to personal salvation, over and against fidelity to the law - that is, obedience to the teachings of Torah. In doing so, the apostle laid the foundation for the historic argument that Christianity is superior to Judaism and Islam. While it might feel liberating to Christ followers to believe that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, what does this say to our Jewish and Muslim neighbors who come to God and salvation by another way?

¹ Amy Jill Levine, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 253

Paul believed that Jesus, a Jew chosen by God, had ushered in the long-awaited Messianic Age, and all individuals had to do was accept this truth and join the great train of glory. The problem is that for Jews, the Messianic Age had not and still has not yet arrived. It will come with the Great Shalom, God's reign of peace and justice in all the world. And, therein lies the rub.

So what are we to say and do with Paul's words? Honestly, as one who is half Jewish and chooses to follow the way of Jesus, I struggle with Paul's words that have led to nearly two millennia of anti-Semitic attitudes and behavior. While I accept Paul's letters to the early church as part of the Christian canon, I don't want to proclaim all of his words in public worship, especially when we are trying to nurture interfaith relationships.

However, I find redeeming hope in the last sentence in this morning's passage: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news." (Romans 10.15). This quote from the prophet Isaiah reminds us to read, hear, mark and inwardly digest the good news of God's justice, love and mercy for all creation - from wherever that source of good news heralds. As Christians, I believe it is faithful to proclaim Jesus as our way to God's good news while honoring and celebrating that Moses, Muhammad and Buddha might be equally valid ways to God's good news for people of other faith traditions?

Finally, we come to this morning's gospel reading, one that is familiar and comforting to many of us. In the fourteenth chapter of Matthew, we hear how Jesus told the disciples to get into a boat and cross to the other side while he went up on a mountain to pray.

How many times in our lives have we received the invitation, command or call to cross to the other side? We cross to the other side when we start a new school year, accept a new job, or move to a new place. We cross what the I-Ching calls the "Great Water" when we begin a new relationship or get married, have a child or move in with our grown children. We cross to the other side when we move from our own home into senior living or nursing care. We make such a crossing if we're told we have cancer or some other life-threatening illness, if we've lost a job or a spouse, if we are imprisoned or held captive against our will. And the list goes on and on.

This morning's text tells us that a storm (much like storms we see here on the Outer Cape) battered the boat and frightened a group of experienced fishermen. As they struggled with the wind and waves, Jesus walked toward them on the water. They thought him to be a ghost - a deception or an hallucination.

Then, Jesus said one of his famous lines, "Take heart, it is I; Don't be afraid." Peter dared Jesus: "If it's really you, command me to come into the water." Jesus responded, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and started walking toward Jesus. But, when he noticed the wind, he got scared and started to sink. Then, he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus gave him a hand and said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

For me, this story raises lots of questions. Why did Jesus tell the disciples to cross to the other side? What was on Jesus' mind and heart when he went up the mountain to pray by himself? How did Jesus walk on the water; was it like Wellfleet Bay with deceptive shallows, and he was really walking across a mudflat covered with water? Why did the disciples think Jesus was a ghost, and why did this make them afraid? Why did Peter challenge Jesus? Why did Peter start to sink when he "noticed" the strong wind; is this what happens when we're doing something difficult or dangerous; we pause and realize the deep waters we're in? How did

Peter's cry for help become a theological doctrine? What did it mean that Jesus "gave Peter a hand" and then said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Why did the wind cease when Peter and Jesus climbed back into the boat?

The Sea of Galilee, otherwise known as Lake Kinneret or Lake Tiberias, is the largest freshwater lake in Israel. Due to its geographic location, topography and difference between air and water temperature, this inland body of water (like my beloved Lake Erie) is notorious for sudden and violent storms, which can produce waves that rival those found in the ocean. This can be extremely frightening in a small boat, even for experienced sailors and fishermen.

But according to Matthew's interpretation, it's not the storm that scared them, rather it was the appearance of Jesus walking on the water. In ancient Hebrew thought, there was something metaphysical about water - consider the stories of Creation, Noah and the Flood, Moses and the Exodus, Joshua and the River Jordan, Jonah and the whale. In the Hebrew Bible, water is a symbol of God's power, transcendence and sovereignty. So, according to Matthew, who was trying to assert Jesus' authority to a Jewish audience, when Jesus walked on the water, in a storm, he was "exercising a prerogative that belongs to God alone. When he spoke to the disciples in the boat, "his words reinforced the sense that this is a divine revelation."²

"Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." "It is I" - in Hebrew, *ego emini* - is how God identified the divine presence to Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3.14) Thus, according to Matthew, when Jesus used these same words to announce his own presence to his closest followers, he was identifying himself with God, the creator, liberator and victor over chaos. Jesus' words and presence provided comfort and courage to those frightened disciples. Whether or not we agree with the theological identity of Jesus invoked by this passage, it is a revelatory event, not dissimilar to Luke's transfiguration account that we heard last Sunday. The disciples settled down, and their missionary journey with Jesus continued.

Life sometimes leads or calls us into uncharted waters that can get pretty fierce and scary. Jesus offers us an awesome vision of calm in the midst of the storm. As Joseph learned, as the disciples experienced, and as Paul struggled to understand, God who is known by many names and found by many paths is always near and ready to save *all* of us. And that, my friends, is good news for these turbulent times.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, Kindle version location 11915



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