

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28, Psalm 105, Matthew 14:22-33
August 10, 2014
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When we left Jacob last Sunday, he was about to encounter his twin brother, Esau, for the first time in 20 years. Anticipating Esau's wrath, Jacob had just the night before wrestled with God, seen God's face, had his name changed to Israel and received a blessing. Certainly now he is more than ready to see his brother's face, a mere mortal, come what may. In that dramatic and highly anticipated reunion, the Bible tells us that when Esau approached with his 400 men, "...he ran to meet Jacob, embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept."(Genesis 33:4)

Time heals old wounds in this case, and they live happily ever after together, for the most part, in the land God had promised first Abraham, then Isaac and finally, Jacob, the last of the big three patriarchs of the Jewish people. While Jacob is the patriarch and the promises of God pass through his lineage, Esau, it seems, proves to be the bigger man when it comes to forgiveness, forgetting the past and honoring the family.

Today, a few chapters later, we begin the story of Jacob's 13 children – 12 sons and one daughter. Joseph is Jacob's favorite because he was the first of two children from his beloved Rachel. (Jacob's children came from two wives and two of the wives' maids.)

Joseph is despised by his brothers because Jacob, their father, favored him, he was a tattler, and he had dreams about being superior to his older brothers and even their father. When the opportunity came for the brothers to dispose of him, they took it. Reuben, the oldest, saved Joseph from being killed on the spot, and an Ishmaelite caravan saved him from a certain slow death in a pit.

Ishmael, you may remember, was Abraham's first son from Sarah's handmaid, Hagar. He was later banished from Abraham's camp by Sarah, but God promised to protect him and his offspring and make of him a great nation as well. Here are his descendants saving Joseph and taking him to Egypt where many adventures await him. This will also set up the eventual Exodus events.

Jacob should not have shown such overt favoritism. Joseph should have kept his dreams to himself. The older brothers should have been less vengeful toward Joseph. Nobody is without blame in this story, and even though God is not mentioned, divine salvation and redemption are working behind the scenes. God will make lemonade out of lemons.

In the New Testament reading, Jesus has finally gotten his much-needed time away enjoying some refreshing, prayerful solitude on the mountain. His disciples wish they could rest after a busy day feeding the 5,000. Instead they are battling a headwind in the middle of the Sea of Galilee in the wee hours before daybreak.

Much to the mariners' amazement and perhaps ours as well, who should appear off the starboard side but Jesus walking on the whitecaps. We're not told the disciples are afraid of the wind and the sea in this instance, but the sight of Jesus shivers their timbers. Are they seeing a ghost? Heavy bodied humans cannot defy gravity.

Jesus response to their cries – "...it is I" – is the familiar Greek version of "I Am" or "I Am Who I Am" from the burning bush story when Moses asks what the talking flame's name is. Only God could override the natural forces of gravity, wind and rough seas. But this leads us to ask why God doesn't intervene to prevent present day natural disasters that devastate, wound and kill all too regularly?

Nevertheless, the story has a component unique to Matthew. Peter wants to give it a try. Leap-before-you-look Peter wants to equal the faculties of his master. You've got to love his bravado, but as we've seen from Peter in the past and will see again later on, his swagger is mightier than his ability to deliver. Here he falls flat: He sinks.

This is a pale comparison, but when we do yoga, we do a few different balancing poses on one leg and then the other. Our instructor tells us to stare at a spot to help us. I do pretty well until I take my eye off the spot. Peter, likewise, lost his focus when he cast his eyes away from Jesus and began to sink.

Imagine if Peter had made it all the way to where Jesus was standing. What might have happened then? Would he have called the other disciples to follow his lead? Would he have told them to keep rowing and bailing, and he and Jesus would meet them on the other side. If Peter had successfully crossed over to Jesus, I can imagine how full of pride he would have been, perhaps feeling equal to Jesus and certainly superior to the others. Success isn't always the best thing for us.

The first day of seminary each semester, I would be in abject terror after receiving a syllabus from each of my professors. There was no way I could prepare for all the tests, read all the books and articles and write all the papers, often due on the same day. I would rush into the chapel at the end of the day, fall on my knees and pray for HELP. Somehow most the work got done each semester.

Failed marriages are painful. My family and I know, but the lessons one can learn from them are invaluable.

Peter, we're told, cried out for help as he began to sink, and he got it from the outstretched hand of Jesus. Back in the boat the wind ceased, and Peter undoubtedly led the disciples in their worship of Jesus.

Thinking back through the Bible, Moses and the people of Israel are saved from a watery grave, along with Noah, Jonah, and later St. Paul is saved by a centurion when his boat is shipwrecked. Today's briny story is about faith and doubt, which most of us vacillate between regularly. If there is one thing we can say with certainty about Jesus, it is that he was fearless. He never wavered even when it meant dying unjustly. In spite of insult and injury, he refused to return anything but love. We can't be that strong in our faith without help. "Lord, save me or help me!" is always an appropriate prayer.

Matthew's church was clearly facing persecution. Even though they were trying to be faithful, they were battling a surge of opposition from the Roman authorities as they suffered losses from arrest and martyrdom. Matthew certainly wanted to use this story to assure them that Jesus would calm their storm-tossed little fellowship and not leave them in peril forever.

The occasional stumbles and hardships we encounter aren't a bad thing at all. They help us sympathize with others who falter. They keep us humble and, most importantly, they remind us how much we need God's mercy and help every day. AMEN.