

Sermon – “He Became Frightened”

Sunday, August 13, 2017

Scripture Readings: Genesis 37:1-4, Matthew 14:22-33

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Today’s first reading tells of Joseph facing dangerous storms in his relationship with his brothers, in a moment where faith in God’s provision is all that he has left. Hear these words Genesis 37, verses 1 through 4 and continuing with verse 12-28.

¹ Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ 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...

¹² Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, “What are you seeking?” ¹⁶ “I am seeking my brothers,” he said; “tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.” ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰ 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.” ²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” ²² 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. ²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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.

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel according to Matthew. Listen for God's word to you in these words from Matthew chapter 14, verses 22 through 33.

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

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Not long ago, I sat reading to my 3-year-old son a story from a series of books I remember from my own childhood, about two characters named Frog and Toad. You can probably guess from their names what sort of creatures they are. The two are best friends in a whole series of stories, and take part in all kinds of often-amusing journeys and activities.

In this particular story, the two of them have just read some kind of adventure story together, featuring brave people who fight dragons and giants. One of them takes note of this bravery, and then offers up the question: "Are *we* brave?" They don't really know, and they set out to discover the answer.

Upon hearing this story, my son Scott then asked the obvious question, of course: "What is 'brave'?" Obvious question, but not necessarily immediately easy to answer. I started haltingly describing the characteristic of being able to carry on with determination in the face of fear, explaining the virtue of perseverance in the name of something worthy in spite of risk to self, but found myself unsure exactly how to translate this into 3-year-old language.

One thing I did remember in that moment was how much Scott loves superheroes. I don't know what *exactly* he thinks a superhero is, since his fascination with Superman, Batman, and Spider-man somehow has grown to huge proportions even though he hasn't yet had much exposure at all to the movies or comic books in which their stories are told. Basically, he's gathered that they can do super things, like fly, and they help people. Also, they tend to wear capes.

So, fumbling around for an example of bravery he might connect with, after trying to abstractly describe the concept, I declared, "Superheroes are brave."

But then...I immediately stopped and questioned myself. Because it occurred to me: are they? Are superheroes brave? I mean, aside from the obvious fact that they don't exist in the first place, I realized there is a bit of real philosophical uncertainty here. How would we know whether superheroes are brave or not?

The whole point of the concept of superheroes is that they have super powers. And what that means is that when they do things that *look* really brave to regular people...well, think about it. If you stepped out into traffic to shove a wayward baby stroller that had rolled into the street out of the way of a truck bearing down fast on it, or if you put yourself in between a would-be mugger and his victim, you'd be undeniably displaying bravery.

But if *Superman* steps out into the path of the truck to save the baby, he's not in the slightest bit of danger. And some old everyday street mugger has no shot at defeating Spider-man. I'm not sure it takes any bravery at all. Someone with superpowers is risking little, or nothing, even when facing things that would pose serious danger to us. Except when encountering a supervillain, a superhero doesn't have to fear much of anything.

So are superheroes brave? I think the answer is that we don't know. For all we know, Superman could be a complete coward! Maybe *he* doesn't even know whether he is brave, because he's rarely had to make the attempt at summoning true courage. He has no practice or experience at it. Like Frog and Toad, maybe he has yet to find out whether he is brave or not.

One of the reasons I love the apostle Peter is that we can see so much of the human struggle in him. He is the sort who is full of inspired energy to serve Christ when called upon; you can just feel the earnest, genuine desire to jump forth and apply himself, commit himself, to be an unwavering disciple.

He is the one who hears Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" and boldly declares, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."¹

Peter is the one who wants to jump into action on the mountaintop during the transfiguration and play a part, but doesn't know what exactly to do, and offers his awkward suggestion of building booths for Elijah, Moses, and Jesus.²

Peter, at the last supper, proudly declares he'll never allow Jesus to do the dirty work of washing his feet, and then when Jesus explains that he can have no part with Jesus unless Jesus serves him in this way, Peter jumps to the other extreme, saying "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!"³

And the very same night, Peter is the one who insistently commits himself to Jesus, saying, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you!"...only to fail only a few hours later.⁴

¹ See Matthew 16:13-20 and Mark 8:27-30.

² This episode is described in Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-9, and Luke 9:28-36.

³ See John 13:1-11.

⁴ See the portion of the Last Supper evening story related in Matthew 26:31-35 and Mark 14:26-31, and Peter's denial of Jesus following his arrest in Matthew 26:69-75 and Mark 14:66-72.

And here, in today's scripture passage, we heard the story of Peter in a boat. Jesus came, in the wind and the waves, walking on the water, and the disciples "were terrified, saying 'It is a ghost! And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter was the most immediately and thoroughly emboldened, and showed it in this big declaration of faith: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And he did!

And what happened? "Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'"⁵

I love Peter because this is just like every one of us in our humanity. When we are genuinely inspired to faith, we are inspired to commit to it, and sometimes we take bold steps. And then, sometimes—sometimes right in the middle of a victory of faith over unbelief—something reminds us that we are not superheroes, that, for us, there are things to be afraid of, and we retreat, and we begin to sink. Even were we to be called to walk on water, and found ourselves succeeding, upon noticing the full storm around us, we would find ourselves overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of things which speak to us of danger, and we would have our moment of frightened sinking as it looked like we would lose everything.

Is Peter brave? For real people, like him, or like you and me, bravery is complex. It appears easily at one moment—"Lord, just give the word, and I'll jump right out of the boat and come to you!"—and it is hard to hold onto in the next.

Thankfully, we are people of faith, and we get a lesson here in this passage about the true foundation of our courage.

No matter how we start out, as one who holds back, afraid, or as one who initially launches forth gallantly, somewhere there will be a time, and probably many times, when keeping on that path becomes very difficult, where summoning courage seems beyond us, because we know what we face is beyond our own power to overcome.

That's when we either sink under our own power or we say, "Lord, save me!"

We are given this story as a reminder of who Jesus is. Not just as a demonstration of Jesus's power, although it was certainly that, particularly for the disciples in the boat who witnessed this and then "worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'" This is *also* a demonstration of Jesus's compassion in the midst of our weakness, and of his love even for the one of faltering faith, for Jesus "immediately reached out his hand and caught him."

We need this. We need to hear it, and to remember it. Because here is the real problem with superheroes. There are none. There is just you, and me, and 7.5 billion more people like us. There is no Superman. Whatever heroic will be done here in this world—and this world needs a lot of heroism—will be done not by regular people bitten by radioactive spiders and turned into superheroes, but by regular people bitten by a hunger and thirst for righteousness and turned into regular heroes.

⁵ See Matthew 14:22-33. Quotes are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

And regular heroes can't leap over tall buildings in a single bound. Regular heroes suffer pain. Regular heroes can be killed. So being one of those is much more daunting and scary.

But what are we going to do? Let it all be as it is? We live in a world where people with power choose to have a battle of egos while the hungry and the mentally ill and persons with disabilities go without funding. We live in a world where people are struck down, by addiction, by violence, by culture which tells us all to live in self-destructive ways.

We live in a world where people proudly march around flying Nazi flags.

Here is what Jesus said at the beginning of his ministry, quoting Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁶

That Jesus is the one we, like Peter, name as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, whenever we recite the creed together. It's a bold declaration, and we should remember that it is whenever we make it. But making the declaration isn't the end of the matter. We cannot just talk; we have to walk the path. And sometimes the path takes us over water, which seems impossible.

But the Son of God is the one we are following, the same one who called Peter into the water, and then reached out his hand to catch Peter in the midst of the threatening waves, when he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Now, not all of the Save-me's will save our literal, earthly lives. In fact, we're not even supposed to be primarily pursuing saving our lives as our goal. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it," Jesus said. But he didn't stop there. "[A]nd," he said, "those who lose their life for my sake will find it."⁷

One of my heroes has always been Atticus Finch, the father of the main character in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I realized at one point that my admiration for him came out of the fact that I wanted to be like that: to be someone who would stand for what is right and apply yourself with all your energy to what is right, in opposition to all the wind and the waves of the world and the people around you, *even when you knew that in the end you would lose*.

How can you keep up that kind of fight? Only by faith. Faith that in reality you are not defeated, but victorious, when you remain on the side of good to the end. Jesus knew there would be costs to us for following him. He warned of relinquishing things, of persecution. He described it as bearing a cross, following him into crucifixion.

But thank God, he is with us in it, even when it costs us everything. Our Lord is with us, and reaches out his hand, and does not leave us drowned in the depths. May God give us the courage to follow him, today and always. Amen.

⁶ Luke 4:18-19 (NRSV), where Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2.

⁷ Matthew 16:24-25 (NRSV), part of the teachings of Matthew 16:21-28. See also Mark 8:31-38 and Luke 9:21-27.