

Sermon – Changing Winds

Sunday, August 10, 2014

Scripture Readings: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28, Matthew 14:22-33

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28. Genesis tells the stories of Israel's ancient leaders and their experiences of God's salvation. Abraham's grandson Jacob—named Israel in Genesis 32:28 is a central figure. The nation that emerges will take his name. Jacob's saga includes Joseph's story, an epic tale of God's gracious action and intervention to fulfill the covenant made with Abraham. This saga moves Jacob's family into Egypt, where they survive a devastating famine and then thrive. It prepares the ground for the coming Exodus story. (*Seasons of the Spirit, 2008*) Listen now for the Word of God.

*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 Jacob 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. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 14:22-33. Following the feeding of the five thousand which we read together last week, the focus shifts from the wilderness to the sea—from God's provision in the desert to God's deliverance through the waters. In Hebraic thought, water is a representation of all the evil powers which oppress and resist the salvation God intends. Throughout the Old Testament it is precisely this reality over which God's lordship is continuously demonstrated...in the creation of the world, in the covenant with Noah and in the mighty act of deliverance from Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. The God of Israel tramples

on the waves and walks over the recesses of the deep. (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume III*) The story of Jesus' walking on the water is found in Matthew, Mark and John. Listen now for the Word of God.

*22 Immediately Jesus 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."*

The title of the sermon: Changing Winds

*The text: ...by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. Matthew 14:24*

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, we thank you for your reassuring presence when the winds are against us and for your providential care hidden in the circumstances of our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Salvation. Amen.

The Kieffer Family has learned a new appreciation and respect for changing winds since moving to Central Illinois. Whether we are riding our bicycles along the prairie roads or watching the colors and waves move across Lake Springfield, we have discovered anew the beauty, challenge and power of the wind and its unpredictable nature.

This past week Peter and I visited Kathy and Randy Germeraad at their home on Lake Michigan. The day following a lovely walk on the beach, we discovered that the waves and wind from the night had completely changed the shape and formation of the beach we traversed the day before.

Sometimes life is like this...the foundation on which we stand, the footing which gives us our identity, the groundwork we count on to provide emotional and spiritual support... shifts and changes without warning and we find ourselves unsure, frightened, saddened or out of sorts.

For each of us, this has a different storyline but the same meaning. Let us contemplate for a moment how the winds have changed the landscape within our lives unexpectedly? What winds are blowing against us? How can these changing winds be harnessed for the good?

One can only imagine how Joseph's world changed when he was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. The foundation of his identity as the favored, youngest son of Jacob was torn from under his feet in a fleeting moment. None of the players in the cast of this colorful saga had a clue as to how God would use these cruel circumstances for good.

When the winds changed the landscape of Joseph's life, he discovered an inner strength and a faith to sustain him in the unknown and dangerous terrain he traveled. Through hardship and moments of grace, Joseph grew from a self-indulged little boy into a thoughtful and wise leader among a foreign people. Joseph never forgot who he was as a child of God, even when he was in the depths of despair imprisoned in Egypt. Listen to the lyrics from the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat:

Close every door to me,  
Hide all the world from me  
Bar all the windows and shut out the light  
Do what you want to me,  
Hate me and laugh at me,  
Take those I love from me...  
Children of Israel are never alone!  
I know I shall find my own peace of mind  
For I have been promised a land of my own.

Joseph's faith and identity as a child of God gave him the gift of *transcendent perspective*, which literally means to be able to look beyond what is in front of us. It allowed him to put present circumstances in the proper perspective... to see things not only from his point of view but to trust in God's perspective and to believe in the larger picture of God's providence! (*Giving Good Gifts, George Conway*) Joseph believed in the God of Israel who separated the waters from the land to create the world, who parted the Red Sea, who tramples the wakes and who walks over the recesses of the deep.

So when Jesus approaches the disciples in their boat on the Sea of Galilee as they battle the elements with the wind against them, the circumstances are understandably terrifying. Surely the disciples were uneasy, anxious, even frightened the night. They were alone in the dark and an unexpected storm and changing winds were moving toward them. However, Matthew makes it clear that what was more terrifying to them was the fact that they were in the presence of the divine. The disciples came face to face with the One whose mercy is wider than the sea on which he is walking, and we learn that this is a daunting experience. Wonderful, certainly; life-changing, absolutely; but none the less, terrifying.

When Jesus identifies himself, saying *It is I*, the phrase he uses is what Moses heard while standing on holy ground before the burning bush in Exodus: *I AM THAT I AM*. Matthew, through Old Testament allusions and images identifies Jesus as the God of Moses who makes a path through the sea and who walks upon the water. Jesus shares in God's dominion over the waters of chaos in this ever changing world.

And then because Jesus understood what his disciples must be feeling, he says: *Be not afraid*. These words instill courage, assuring the disciples that this vision in the midst of the changing winds at sea is intended as good news.

What follows is Peter's risk of faith in stepping onto the waters and Jesus' helping hand when he gets distracted and falters. The risk and courage of Peter empowers all the disciples...Rather than view Jesus' words to Peter "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" as belittling, let us see them as kind and playful. Little faith, in fact, is all Jesus expects of us. In Matthew 17:20 the evangelist says, "If you have the faith of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, move from here to there and it will move." And in the story that precedes this one, five thousand

people are fed out of one lunch pail, generously shared. Peter had only a little faith, but nobody else got out of that boat. A little faith may be all that is needed to transform a story that begins in terror into a story that ends in worship. (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*)

And so, as we worship together, let us not forget during the changing winds within our lives, that Jesus has promised to be near...nourishing our bodies and spirits with daily bread in the Eucharist even as he fed the five thousand along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

And when we find ourselves in the darkness and peril of the sea—overwhelmed by the chaos of change around us, may we remember that we have a God who walks upon the waters, who makes a path through the sea, who brings good out of the evil others intend for us and whose love is wider and deeper and broader than we can possibly imagine. Amen.