

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
August 13, 2023 – The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:16-22; Matthew 14:22-33  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

In the Old Testament reading for this morning, we have another episode in a series of stories about Israel's patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and we have now reached the point in the story where we are learning about the next generation, Jacob's offspring. These are Jacob's twelve sons. Jacob was renamed Israel by the angel with whom he wrestled at the side of the Jabbok River. Jacob's twelve sons, therefore, are the sons of Israel, the ancestors of the Israelite people.

In order to avoid making today's reading too long, the lectionary left out a section in the middle in which Joseph recounts two dreams that he had. In the first one, he and his brothers were binding sheaves of wheat in the field, when suddenly the brothers' sheaves stood and bowed to Joseph's sheaf. In the second, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him – the heavenly bodies standing in for his father, his mother, and his brothers.

In addition, because Joseph was his father's favorite – possibly because he was the firstborn of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel – his father had given Joseph a special garment: a long-sleeved coat. This used to be known as the "coat of many colors"; it is an obscure word, maybe meaning "ornamented," and the translation is uncertain. Whether the coat was brightly colored or long-sleeved, however, the meaning is clear enough: it prevents Joseph from joining in any heavy labor. It is one more annoyance for the other brothers: it is as if everyone else in the family got overalls for their birthdays, but the youngest got a tuxedo. We therefore see *why* Joseph was the object of such envy and resentment. We have a way of understanding why the brothers stripped Joseph of his special garment and threw him into a pit.

Of course, the story doesn't end here. The nomads took Joseph to Egypt, where, as today's Psalm says, he became "a ruler" – a high official in the Egyptian court, where he was able to stockpile extra grain to prepare for a coming famine. This famine, and the Egyptian food supply, brought his brothers and his father to Egypt, and led ultimately to the Israelite populace in Egypt growing and flourishing, until the Egyptians decided to force them into slavery. And that brought about the Exodus.

What might we learn from this saga? God will work with what is available, even if those characters are as envious, resentful, conniving, and shady as Joseph's brothers. Even with such imperfect raw material, God can bring forth what is good.

I think this story also invites us to consider something else. When we think about the behavior of the brothers in this story, we might say to ourselves, "It was very bad to think of killing Joseph or sending him off as the captive of a band of nomads. But we can understand why the brothers were envious – it's only natural." Do we truly think that envy and revenge are "natural"? When we think of being human, how do we see "human nature"? Do we believe that human beings are made in the image of God? If so, can we hold onto that vision no matter how common and pervasive that which is contrary to the will and nature of God is, within us and around us?

I think our view of "human nature" is important. If we see human beings as beings made in the image of God, we can maintain hope rather than sink into despair because we are able to focus on goodness and love and mercy despite their opposites. Can we face evil and have faith in goodness? This may be the essential question of our faith as Christians – do we have faith in resurrection after crucifixion? And if we think of others as made in God's image, it makes sense to "respect the dignity of every human being," as we say when we renew our baptismal vows. Finally, when we examine the ways we think and speak and act and when we make choices, our God-given nature can be our guide.

Now let's turn to a story about faith - this morning's reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Keep in mind that the Israelites regarded the sea as an uncontrollable and chaotic place. The immediate context of this morning's lesson is this: Jesus had recently learned that John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod, the Roman ruler of Galilee. John was Jesus' relative, a great prophet, and the man who baptized Jesus. We can imagine how Jesus felt when he received the news of John's murder. He went by boat to a deserted place to be alone. But crowds of people followed him on shore, and in compassion, he joined the people and cured their sick. Evening came, the people were hungry, and Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish, blessed them, and fed more than five thousand people.

Once everyone had eaten, Jesus made the disciples go to the other side of the sea, while he dismissed the crowds. Then he went up the mountain by himself to pray. This strikes me as a very human moment. Jesus had needed to be alone in his grief over John. But the needs of sick and hungry people had priority for him. Once the sick were cured and the hungry were fed, Jesus absolutely needed to be alone to pray. Apparently, Jesus prayed all night, for it was early morning when he walked across the sea and joined the disciples in their boat.

The disciples were afraid when they saw Jesus because they thought he was an apparition of some sort. Jesus knew they were afraid, and he calmed their fears by saying "Take heart, it is I." The Greek for "it is I" in this passage is similar to the Greek translation of the Old Testament passage when God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush and tells Moses God's name: "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). In other words, Matthew is here conveying the idea that in Jesus' presence God is present: God who has power over the sea, God who saves.

What a very human story of faith and doubt Peter's story is! Jesus is Peter's Lord. So, when Peter sees this man walking on the water, he says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." To go to his Lord Peter is willing to put aside his fears and risk his life. Jesus calls Peter: "Come." That call is enough for Peter. He got out of the boat and walked toward Jesus on the water. But when Peter noticed the strong wind, his fears returned. He began to sink into the dark and terrifying sea. "Lord, save me!" And Jesus did. He reached out his hand and caught Peter. And the storm was over.

We are gathered here this morning because each of us has acknowledged Jesus to be our Lord. Each of us has heard the voice of Jesus say "come." Each of us has said "yes" to that call. Each of us has put our faith and trust in the power of God to subdue the forces of darkness and evil. And I am sure that each of us has had moments - perhaps many moments - when the storms of life have filled us with fear and doubt, when we have cried out, "Lord, save me!" We may be in the midst of such a moment now.

When Jesus reached out his hand to save Peter, he said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" We might hear these words as a rebuke of Peter's fears and doubt. But as I read the Gospel story, it seems to me that Jesus expects his followers to be afraid. There is, after all, so much to be afraid of in life! Jesus acknowledges our fear and offers us an alternative to fear. That alternative is God.

To the terrified disciples in the boat Jesus said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." It is I. I am who I am. God is God. Because God is God, we can have assurance that God will save us. We cannot save ourselves, others cannot save us, but God will save us. That may be the grace to be found in the worst storms of our lives, when with all our hearts we cry, "Lord, save me!" We know then that without God we are sunk. But we are not without God. God is with us. We may feel the saving hand of Jesus reaching out to us during our darkest moments. But often it is only long after the terrifying storm has passed that we know the Lord has reached out his hand to save us. God has acted in our lives with saving power. God is acting in our lives now. God will save us. Because God is God.

Jesus said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Amen.