

A Lectionary 19 8.13.23

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

Focus Statement: God makes a way

We're trucking right along through the summer. It's time to meet the fourth generation of the family of Abraham. Fourth and, for our purposes, final, because after this point they really get too big to keep track of as individual members of a generation. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and the author of Genesis made clear God's blessing of Ishmael's line before setting that branch of the family aside. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau, and the author of Genesis made clear God's blessing of Esau's line before setting that branch of the family aside. Jacob, or Israel as we learned last week he is sometimes called, had twelve sons. And while Joseph is the central character in this story, all twelve remain connected to the on-going promise. These twelve will become the twelve tribes of Israel, the various branches of the nation that forms from God's promise to Abraham and Jacob. Which means, they're/we're stuck with each other. Before we get too far into this, that right there is one of the big and important pieces of what this story tells us, family conflict does not win out. These brothers fight and scrap and sell each other into slavery, and still God's promise is for all of them, still they end up reconciled at the end. But reconciliation is next week's reading. This week, the brothers are far from reconciled.

We've got a lot of characters here, so let's do a bit of a family recap. Jacob, also called Israel, married sisters Leah and Rachel, and with them, their two maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah. Set aside if you will the weirdness of that family makeup, it was a different time. With his four wives, Jacob had twelve sons. Six with Leah, and two each with Bilhah, Zilpah, and Rachel. Also remember the story from two weeks ago about how Jacob wanted to marry

Rachel but was tricked by his father-in-law into marrying Leah first. This story shows us the long-term ramifications of that deception. Laban could trick Jacob into marrying Leah, but he couldn't trick him into loving Leah. There's no sign Jacob was a bad husband to Leah, or that he treated the two maidservants poorly, but Rachel was his favorite wife, her children his favorite children, and everybody knew it.

It's not hard to see where the sibling rivalry comes from. A priceless coat for the nosey little brother who's supposed to be helping with chores but instead acts as a spy for dad. Plus the verses we skipped over, that was Joseph recounting a series of dreams in which eleven stalks of wheat, representing his brothers, and then the sun, the moon, and the stars, his parents and his brothers, all turning in their orbit and bowing down to him. No offence but, read the room buddy. Maybe don't tell your older brothers about your dream of the day they all bow to you while wearing the coat dad gave you for tattling on them. This is not exactly the best way to build family togetherness. The skipped verses tell us that even Jacob found the dream a bit over the top.

But, let me be clear, while the brothers have the right to be annoyed with Joseph, nothing justifies the behavior that followed. First plotting murder, then kidnapping him and selling him into slavery, "let's see what happens to your dreams now," there is no excuse for that kind of action.

What the brothers do is sin. Straight up. No question in my mind. And, I think it's also important to point out, there is no mention of God in this Genesis story. God was always

showing up to Abraham or Rebekah or Jacob, wrestling or challenging or affirming, pointing out the chosen and the blessed, but God isn't in the story of the brothers who sell their brother to be a slave in Egypt. God will be in this story; Joseph will break down where God was next week. But there's no God here this week.

And that, that there is a next week, and a week after, and the entire rest of the Bible, coupled with God's absence here, is what makes this story such incredible good news for us. Because God is not in this story. We've seen God make some confusing choices throughout Genesis this summer, I didn't even try to explain Hagar, but God doesn't seem to have chosen this. God didn't command Joseph's kidnapping and being sold into slavery and yet, the role of the Joseph story in Genesis is to explain how the chosen people of God got from Canaan to Egypt. This is looking ahead a bit, but here's where we're going. We have one more week in Genesis, then on the 27<sup>th</sup> we move to Exodus. We'll be in Exodus through October. And Exodus is important because the Exodus, God leading God's people from slavery to freedom, for no reason other than setting people free is who God is, is the central narrative of the Old Testament, and it sets the framework for what Jesus came to do, in setting God's people free to love God and each other, which, if you've been following along in Romans, is what Paul's been talking about in his confusing Paul way. Exodus is to the Old Testament what the death and resurrection of Jesus is to the New. Everything is read through the lens of that story. A story that doesn't happen unless the Israelites end up in Egypt, which they do because of what Jacob's sons did to their brother.

I want to tread really carefully here, because I'm walking a fine line. So let me be clear, I am not saying that God intended for Joseph to be kidnapped, almost murdered, and sold into slavery in order for God to accomplish some sort of grand overarching plan. I do not think that God creates suffering in order for us to learn some sort of divine lesson or reach some greater outcome. I cannot believe in a God who could justify such actions. What I do believe is that there is sin, there is evil, there is brokenness in our world, the brothers display just one example of it, and God finds a way to keep working in and through and around the edges to transform even the most tragic of circumstances into an opportunity for salvation. Our most base actions as humanity cannot stop God's movement for reconciliation. We can thwart it for a while, we can set it back, we can cause immeasurable pain and suffering, but we cannot stop God's working to good. This is, after all, a God who will eventually take on flesh, suffer, die, and rise again in order to bring resurrection. In the face of death itself, what chance to eleven grumpy siblings have in interrupting God's desire for relationship.

Which brings us to our Gospel reading. Last week we heard how hearing the death of John the Baptist, Jesus went to a deserted place to pray. But the crowd followed him, and having compassion on them he healed their sick and eventually fed them with five loaves and two fish. This week, he finally got that alone time, sending his disciples out ahead of him in a boat across the sea. A couple things to note here. The point of Matthew's Gospel is to teach us how to be church now that Jesus has ascended into heaven. So the boat, battered by the waves, out ahead of Jesus where he had sent them, that's a metaphor for the church, for us. Trying to do the work we have been commissioned for, to spread the good news of the

kingdom of God throughout the world, while storms of fear, and challenge, and uncertainty batter us in all directions. We were talking in Bible chat about some of the changes we're trying to make at Trinity, and how it's scary because we don't really know where we're going or what we're doing or how best to do them. Imagine the uncertainty of being on a first-century fishing boat, at night, in total darkness, in a storm so you don't even have the stars to guide you. These plans we're trying to make maybe kind of feel like that.

But as the disciples are struggling against the wind, here comes Jesus walking to them on the water. As a modern audience, it's easy for us to get caught in the physics miracle of someone walking on water, but that's not how Matthew's original audience would have heard it. Cultures all around Israel had their own stories of divine beings walking on waves, it was a common ability of gods. By having Jesus walk on water, Matthew is making a theological claim about who Jesus is. He is doing a feat reserved only for gods, he must therefore be God.

Understanding the cultural background makes Peter's request all the more brazen. If we're stuck on the physics, it's just an ask to also do a cool thing. But to Matthew's audience, what Peter's asking is much greater. Peter was asking for a share of Jesus' own divinity, a stake in his own theological position. And Jesus gave it to him. Gave Peter not just power to heal and serve food and teach, but here to perform an action of cosmic proportion, and still Peter stepped out of the boat.

Stepped out of the boat, realized the weight of his request, and immediately started to sink. We see in this story the reach of Peter's faith. Enough to ask for the ability, enough to step out of the boat onto the water, not enough to actually perform the action. And here's what I love about this story. Peter started to sink, and the text tells us that "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him." Peter asked for this and when it didn't work, Jesus didn't make him figure it out on his own, or pass some test, or struggle in vain. He chided him a little, sure, but he immediately grabbed him and brought him back to safety.

Dear people of God, sometimes stuff doesn't work. Sometimes it doesn't work because, like Peter, we panic. We don't trust our abilities, or the abilities God has placed in us. Other times, they don't work because of sin. Because we live in a broken world full of broken people and people are capable of causing real hurt. Both of these stories show us a God who does not cause suffering, but who works through it, around it, right in the middle of it, to bring peace. Sometimes it's immediate. Peter started to sink and immediately there was Jesus to grab him. Other times, God is there but we only see the results in hindsight. Next week we'll see how Joseph looked back and saw where God was working, I'd be willing to guess he didn't feel God's presence in the bottom of a pit, I don't think I would. But even in the pit, there was God, moving through Reuben and Judah and some Midianite traders to shelter Joseph's path as best as possible, so that through him the promise of blessing the world could still be accomplished. Wherever we are, whatever we face, there too, there always, is God. Making a way no matter what. Thanks be to God. Amen.