



Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday of Pentecost, Aug 13, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b Romans 10:5-15 Matthew 14:22-33

Oh, God of all things, your Word is very near to us. May it be on our lips and in our hearts, showing and knowing your ever-present care. Amen.

Good morning, God's beloved.

Today we have some meaty, challenging stories from scripture. And we have some difficult, heart-wrenching stories from the world. We are facing stories of when everything goes terribly wrong, when chaos tumbles in upon us.

Thrown into a pit. Sinking in the stormy sea. Jumping into the ocean to escape the wildfire.

Where is God? Where is Christ Jesus? When we are in the thick of it, but especially afterwards, after we have stepped back from fight, flight, or survival mode, we wonder. We are troubled. We want to make sense of this nagging wondering about where God is in all of this.

Some of you may recall a sort of poem that was popular for a while, sold on plaques and posters, titled "Footprints." It imagined a person's life review with Jesus. Looking back on life, it appeared as a journey across sands. Often, going up and down paths, there were two sets of footprints – one that was the person's, and one that has Jesus'. But at times, there was just one set of footprints, and the person wondered what happened there, and where was Jesus at those times. Jesus responded, "Those are the times I carried you."

I have to tell you, I'm not always very fond of this poem. I know, for some folks, it is a beautiful expression of God's care. But, personally, there are times when I actually can't stand it, and it is the last thing I want to hear. It can sound like false promises. Depending on where I am in my life, or what I am seeing in others' lives, it just doesn't ring true. There are times we may in this life have felt desperately alone. Abandoned. Forgotten. In the thick of it, with what seems like no way out.

We feel the sorrow, the grief, the anguish of others who face suffering, trauma, cruelty, despair. We feel from afar the waves of grief and anguish of our people in Maui. As we continue to feel from afar the trauma of war for those in Ukraine, the hunger in Ethiopia. Because we are empathic creatures, and we can sense something of what it might be like if such tragedy fell upon us. We feel because we care. We care because we know suffering and sorrow. And we care because we are wired – created with embedded hardwiring of our imaginations – to sense and sympathetically experience something of what others experience.

**

Joseph, the favored and most beloved son of Jacob, the firstborn of his beloved Rachel, went blithely to do his father's bidding, to check up on his brothers and see what they were up to. Joseph had not yet touched the sorrows and pains and betrayals and dark experiences of the world. He had had dreams of a future in which he was the center of attention and lord of the entire family and all its heritage. He had shared these dreams with his brothers – perhaps innocently, perhaps with a bit of arrogance and sense of his “specialness”, either unaware of how he was “poking the bear” or very aware and nonetheless reveling in the sense of protection as their father's favored one. And here he goes – arriving across the hot fields dressed in the long robe that was the special gift of his father.

Joseph's brothers were caught in the nets and mazes of their own growing anger and hatred of their brother, and they could no longer see him as a person but only could see him as a problem – THE problem. He became the symbol of everything wrong in their lives, including the wrongs they themselves had done, the way that Jacob had treated them with less love, the heavy work they were doing. And now, here he comes – if only they could get rid of their problem!

They took hold of him, and, only at the urging of the eldest brother, Rueben, did not kill him. But they stripped him, and, given the rage expressed by them with each other as he approached, likely beat him, certainly handled him very roughly, and threw him in a pit where there was no water. And, they sat down to eat.

Imagine. Imagine Joseph's experience, stunned and horrified. Imagine the brothers, coming at him with unsheathed rage and hatred. Imagine the fall through the air into the pit, banging onto rocks and old roots and castaway debris at the bottom. Imagine the dark, or (if the pit was straight down and exposed) the sun beating down in a place with no water, in pain and bruised all over, bleeding in places, and hearing faintly just a bit over the ridge of the pit the noise of the brothers eating.

And then, he is hoisted roughly from the pit only to be presented to traveling merchants as a thing to be sold for cash or traded for trinkets. He becomes like an animal, being marched off to market to be sold, far across the desert lands to the foreign empire of Egypt.

- ¹ Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck.*
- ² I am sinking in deep mire, and there is no firm ground for my feet.*
- ³ I have come into deep waters, and the torrent washes over me.*
- ⁴ I have grown weary with my crying; my throat is inflamed; *
my eyes have failed from looking for my God.*
- ⁵ Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head;
my lying foes who would destroy me are mighty.
Must I then give back what I never stole?*

These verses from Psalm 69 are some of the most sorrowful, desperate prayers recorded in all of the Bible. They are the cries of someone in the pit of loss, the terror of storm, the trap of relentless downward pull. This could be the heart-cry of Joseph from the Pit and then afterwards on the long desert journey in captivity to Egypt. The Psalm rings out sorrow and a cry of need, from the midst of any deep sorrow, tragedy, trauma, crisis, or long suffering. I imagine Joseph had such words constantly in his heart and mind – front and center for a long while, and fading then coming back forcefully during

his time in Egypt. As Joseph is torn from his father who adores him and from all that he has known, as an unimaginable future of slavery opens in front of him, he cannot help but be crying out, "Save me, God! Oh God, the God of my father, where are you?"

**

And then, we have Peter. Among the disciples, one of who was among the closest to Jesus. Peter, the skilled fisherman, among other skilled fishermen and boatmen, out on the great Lake of Galilee, in the middle of the night. Facing into stormy, turbulent waters and winds that were against them. Struggling, striving, and uncertain if they would be successful. Boats had been sunk, lives had been lost, on the Galilean lake.

Jesus, their great companion and guide, the wonder-worker and great teacher who had changed their lives and opened a way to them they had never expected, was not with them. Jesus was not carrying them. They were on the waters, alone, surrounded by the unleashed wild forces of nature, of the world. "Battered by the waves," "far from the land," and "the wind was against them"... and in the dark.

Then, they see someone coming to them over the water, seeming to float on top of the water. No wonder they thought it was a ghost! But they hear Jesus' voice saying,

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

In the midst of this turmoil, they see Jesus and hear him call to them – Remember who you are. And know that I AM. Let go of your fears.

Peter's first response, oddly enough, is not about asking for Jesus to calm the seas for them all. It is about himself. He asks, "IF it is you" – Peter testing things here a bit to see if it really seemed like Jesus, a fine thing to do – "IF it is you, call me to you." Jesus obliges and calls him. Peter takes the invitation and steps out of the boat, walking at first on the water just as Jesus is doing as he came toward Jesus. But then, he notices the strong wind, becomes frightened, and begins to sink. The turmoil overtakes him.

"Lord, Save me!"

Again, like Psalm 69 – "Save me, God, for the waters have risen up to my neck!" Further into the Psalm are these verses:

¹⁵ *"In your great mercy, O God, answer me with your unfailing help.*

¹⁶ *Save me from the mire; do not let me sink;
let me be rescued from those who hate me and out of the deep waters.*

¹⁷ *Let not the torrent of waters wash over me, neither let the deep swallow me up;
do not let the Pit shut its mouth upon me.*

¹⁸ *Answer me, O LORD, for your love is kind; in your great compassion, turn to me."*

¹⁹ *"Hide not your face from your servant;
be swift and answer me, for I am in distress.*

This is the cry of people around the world in their distress.

- God, help me!
 - God, heal me!
 - God, save us!

There are pits and torrents and mire and fires that come in many forms:

- Perhaps they are environmental – as it was in Maui with the wildfires that have taken a city to the ground and left many dead.
- Perhaps they are societal – as it has been with mass shootings that have riddled our nation.
- Maybe they are physical – when an illness, ailment, or accident takes grip on our bodies in ways that utterly shake us.
- They can come in the form of mental illness – in the pits and mire of depression, the turbulent waves and driving winds of anxiety, the traps of delusions and inner voices that take us along roads that harm us or others.
- They can be familial – in things that break families apart, in divorce, in family disintegrations, abuse, or neglect.

All around the world, people cry out in their distress. And we know something of these cries ourselves.

But also, it is a cry that many around the world never make.

There are those who continue to “soldier on” and never cry out –

- Believing that they are somehow getting what they deserve...
- Thinking that they just have to prove themselves and get through it and pull themselves up by their bootstraps...
- Believing that there is no help, and if there is help then maybe they don't deserve it...
- Caught in the thought that there is no way out...

Each of us has faced pits and stormy seas and fires and droughts in our lives. Some have been more gripping and gut-wrenching and horrifying than others. But each one has shaken us, left us troubled and far less self-assured and maybe doubtful about the goodness of life, of the world, of God.

**

There are interesting moments in these stories from scripture, signaling to us something of the ways that God is indeed present.

In Peter's case, relief came immediately. The Gospel reads, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.” And then, when they returned to the boat, the winds quieted and the water calmed. At the cry, “Save me, Lord,” there is help offered without hesitation, and what follows is the stilling of turmoil. But the storm was still raging and they were still straining even in those first moments that they saw Jesus approaching.

In Joseph's case, there is a man who meets Joseph wandering in the fields. “Roaming,” as the word is more correctly translated – a word which in Genesis is associated with being on a journey one does not know is in God's hands and under God's gaze and guidance. So, this man meets Joseph roaming, and asks him what he is seeking – and then guides him toward his brothers.

Was this man in the story a mysterious messenger of God, like other unnamed visitors and strangers in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? And if so, what does that mean? Being guided into the place that brings trauma and a complete upturning of life?

In Joseph's story, the tragedy of now (what we hear today) also becomes the gateway for the possibility of what happens later. The sorrows and betrayals and cruelties of now are wrong and tragic, and deeply wounding. They also open paths that would never have otherwise opened in Joseph's life and for his family and for all of Egypt.

Be sure of this, dear beloved people of God—

God went with Joseph into the Pit, and God went with Joseph into Egypt.

God was with the disciples in the boat – even while they were in the storm and darkness and wind that fought against them, even before Jesus arrived, God-with-us walking toward them on the water.

God is with us. God is suffering with us in our suffering. In such places, when we have no words, the Holy Spirit prays in cries and groans too deep for words from within us.

We do not need to go it alone.

Can we cry out with all our heart-honest and heart-yearning, like Peter, “Lord, save me!”?
Can you see Jesus stretching out his hand to reach us, and can you clasp the hand that is being offered?
Can you allow yourself to take his embrace, as he says, “Oh, you. You my beloved.”

Because, as it says in our Epistle reading from Romans today, “How beautiful are the feet of the one who brings good news.”

We have each been touched by those messengers of God in our lives who have reached out a hand to us, who have come to us, seeming to glide through the storm that has caught us.

It isn't just Jesus. It is Christ Jesus that we meet in every person, and it is Christ Jesus that we seek to bring to every person.

It is our feet that bring good news.

All around us, the cry goes up. Can we join their cry and call to God, “Oh, Lord, save us?” And can we reach out our hands to those sinking?

This is the Gospel— This is the good news—

You are not alone. God is already with you, surrounding and journeying with you. And help can and will come. God is with you in the and stretched out to you, and your own outstretched hand.