

Turbulence

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

10th Sunday after Pentecost - August 9, 2020

Texts: Genesis 37, 39-40; Psalm 105:1-2, 6-12; Matthew 14:22-33

SCRIPTURE READING adapted from Genesis 37-41 *This is the beginning of the story of Joseph, great-grandson of Abraham, the ancestor of the Hebrew people.*

Joseph's father Jacob settled in Canaan, where Abraham had lived as an alien. Jacob had twelve sons but Joseph was his favorite. When Joseph was seventeen, Jacob gave him a beautiful robe, finer than anything his brothers owned. Quite naturally, they were jealous. They hated him and were nasty to him when Jacob wasn't looking. You might say he deserved it. He flaunted his father's favoritism. He even told them about dreams he had, where all of them were bowing down to him.

The brothers had to take their father's great flocks of sheep far from home to find pasture. Jacob sent Joseph to check on them. They saw him coming from a distance, and seized their chance to get even. They said, "Here comes this dreamer. We can kill him and throw him into a hole in the ground and tell our father a wild animal got him." But Reuben, the oldest, objected, "Let's not kill him, just throw him into this pit." (Reuben planned to rescue him secretly, later on.)

When Joseph showed up, they stripped off his fancy robe, and took him and threw him into a dry water hole. Then they sat down to eat; and along came a caravan of camels bound for Egypt. His brother Judah got the bright idea of selling him for cash and his brothers agreed. They sold him as a slave for 20 pieces of silver. They killed a goat and dipped Joseph's robe in the blood and told their father he had been killed by a wild animal. And Jacob grieved for his son Joseph.

Meanwhile, the traders took Joseph to Egypt where he was sold again, this time to the captain of Pharaoh's guard, an important official. Joseph had some ups and downs in Egypt, too. First, he became the most trusted of all the captain's slaves. Then he was a victim of racism and false accusations and was thrown into prison. But in prison he became known for his ability to interpret dreams. Eventually Pharaoh heard about him, and again put him in a position of authority, just in time. Egypt was about to get in big trouble. This story is...to be continued.

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately after Jesus had fed the multitudes by the Sea of Galilee, he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they 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 answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So 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!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Friends, the end of summer is almost in sight. I think we all deserve a little vacation, a little well-earned get-away. So, if you're willing, put away the mental to-do list, close your eyes, and come with me to the boundary waters of northern Minnesota. You are lying on a flat, sun-warmed rock in the middle of a stream; the water gurgles as it eddies around the rock. A few yards down, waves lap on the shore of the lake where you have beached your canoe. Above you, the trees murmur in the breeze, nodding this way and that, up and down. Aspen leaves show their shimmering silvery backs. In the middle of the fluttering mass is one leaf that isn't moving at all. You fix on it; you become that leaf, perfectly still, perfectly centered in this earthly paradise. All's right with the world.

Are you there with me? All of sudden, though, the wind picks up. The branches creak and groan; they toss about like wild horses. The lake erupts in whitecaps, the sun disappears. You leap off the rock and, just in time, dive into the tent, worrying, "What if? "What if a tree falls on the tent? What if the canoe gets washed away? What if the stream floods the campsite?" Fortunately, none of that occurs. But when you step out of the tent again, you see that something worse has happened: all the leaves are tick-tocking simultaneously in the same direction, like a metronome. The waves don't lap but march like robots, one-two, one-two, in-out, in-out. Something's wrong with the world. It's like a bad dream - so go ahead and open your eyes. It's not going to happen.

Irregularity is natural. Uniformity is unnatural. Total monotony doesn't occur in nature. Turbulence on a large scale, like a wind storm, is terrifying; turbulence on a small scale, like lapping waves or murmuring leaves, is just soothing. Or is it your point of view? Turbulence in a jet engine makes for efficient fuel use; turbulence in the air around the aircraft makes for a bumpy ride. Turbulence in the blood flow around your heart makes your cardiologist frown. The physics of turbulence stumped scientists for centuries; maybe it still does. The study of turbulence, though, is linked to the intriguing study of chaos theory. You know, like the Butterfly Effect? The idea that if a butterfly flaps its wings in China, a week later there's a hurricane in Jamaica?¹ Part of living in this world ensures that you never know exactly how events will play out, though you can be pretty sure that all the leaves will never be shaking in unison.^{2 3} Nature is unpredictable at best. But reliably unpredictable. Life will always be unpredictable, sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a scary way. Does that make sense?

¹ The phrase [Butterfly Effect] refers to the idea that a butterfly's wings might create tiny changes in the [atmosphere](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly_effect) that may ultimately alter the path of a [tornado](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly_effect) or delay, accelerate or even prevent the occurrence of a tornado in another location. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly_effect, August 8, 2020.

² Most of the little I know about chaos theory I learned from the incomparable James Gleick in *Chaos: Making a New Science* (1987). It changed my life - and my theology.

³ That would be like the dark planet of Camazotz in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), where a child who failed to bounce his ball in sync with every other child would have to go back to IT (presciently named?) for re-programming.

And life is sometimes chaotic and turbulent. I think we can safely say that is true today. We try, in our very small and fragile boats, to navigate all at once the uncharted waters of a pandemic, societal upheaval, and climate change. All of them are interrelated, like concentric oceans. Their currents bump up against each other in messy ways. And there's even more at play here, like people's fears. Sometimes fear makes us overreact; sometimes fear makes us hide our heads in the sand and ignore things entirely. Our fear asks, "What if...?" What if school is canceled forever, and the economy perishes? What if riots sweep our cities and martial law is declared? What if hurricanes and wildfires keep getting worse? Will we ever get back to normal? Probably not. We are clearly in crisis mode. But is this completely bad? As people like to say, the Chinese word for "crisis" is composed of two symbols; one means "danger" and the other "opportunity." Although, actually, "change point" would be a better translation than "opportunity."⁴

Both of the amazing biblical stories we read today talk about crises: times of great danger, times of opportunity. Change points. Watershed moments. One can imagine Joseph thinking, "What if I die in this pit? What if I never see my father again?" Or the disciples thinking, "What if the boat sinks and we drown? What if that shadow on the water is really an evil ghost out to get us?" Instead, Joseph goes on to do great things in Egypt, Peter walks on water, and the disciples end up worshiping Jesus as the Son of God - the only time that's happened since the Wise Men did it back in Bethlehem.⁵ It's also the only time it will happen again until after the resurrection.⁶

We can ask, too, "What if Joseph hadn't been such an arrogant little blighter and annoyed his brothers to the point of fratricidal hatred?" Or, "What if Peter hadn't been such a show-off that he had to get out of the boat?" Would the twelve brothers have done the usual chores, year-in, year-out, forever, and never made it back to Egypt, thus eliminating the basis of the rest of the Old Testament? Would the twelve disciples have gone on arguing about who was the greatest, and missing the point of the parables, grumbling and doubting and taking their buddy Jesus for granted? Would there ever have been a cross, a resurrection?

But there's an answer to all the "what ifs" fear can raise and that answer is hope - "even if"⁷: "Even if the worst happens, it will somehow turn out all right." Even if Joseph is a smug young idiot who deserves to be sent off to Egypt and languish in jail for years before his special talent for dream interpretation is discovered, God works it out. Even though Peter loses confidence in the middle of his bone-headed attempt to walk on water and starts to sink, Jesus - who after all

⁴ Sinologist Victor H. Mair of the University of Pennsylvania states the popular interpretation of *weiji* as "danger" plus "opportunity" is a "widespread public misperception" in the English-speaking world. The first character...does indeed mean "dangerous" or "precarious", but the second...does not mean "opportunity", but something more like "change point". https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_word_for_%22crisis%22 August 8, 2020

⁵ It's the same word in Greek, whether your Bible translates it "worship" or "pay homage" or "welcome."

⁶ That's in Matthew; the man born blind in John 9 is the only other pre-resurrection instance of human beings "worshiping" Jesus in the Gospels, at least in the NRSV English translation.

⁷ I owe this insight to my friend, Pastor Kara Root, who wrote about it in her blog, found on the facebook page of Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church.

did tell him to go ahead and try - will catch him by the hand. We may embark on our trip in fair weather, and still be overtaken by gale force winds and capsizing boats; but when Jesus gets there, the wind ceases, the waves settle down, and Jesus says to us, again, "Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Even if we do bone-headed things a lot of the time, it somehow comes right. The world is unpredictable; people are unpredictable. God is unpredictable, too, but reliably so. (This, by the way, does not give us license to do dumb things that may harm ourselves or others, like pitching the tent under an old dead tree that's ready to fall over, or refusing to wear masks in public places.)

Sometimes what looks like chaos, or crisis, or turbulence, is what we need to shake us out of our old comfortable patterns of seeing and being and believing that have crept over the line into hurtful, unhelpful behaviors: behaviors that make the pandemic worse than it needs to be, behaviors that mean we thoughtlessly trample on other people, or carelessly destroy the very earth we rely on to live, for food and for beauty. Sometimes we need a crisis to shake us up, to help us see others as they truly are, to bring us to a change point. Sometimes God is in the chaos, not the established order. Unpredictable, sure, but reliably there, making things come out right. There is, after all, order in chaos. And sometimes, I think, God even surprises herself with the way she manages to work around our bone-headedness.

In the next few weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at the Joseph story, which places Father Abraham and Mother Sarah's descendants back in Egypt, and sets the stage for the greatest liberation story ever told: the story of Moses, the Israelite slaves, and the Exodus. We'll look at how African slaves in colonial America somehow heard this narrative and claimed it as their own story, and how this story can become the faith and freedom story of every undervalued, marginalized, misunderstood group of people under heaven.

But in the meantime, the crisis continues. You know this, and so do I. You may find yourself asking a lot of fearful "what if?" questions. That's OK. It's only human. Just remember to follow the "what if" with the "even if." Remember that single aspen leaf in the Boundary Waters? The place of perfect stillness? Before walking on water, Jesus again took time to pray, to center down, to focus on the true and the eternal. And so Christ becomes the calm in the storm, the still point in the turning, churning world. Keep your eyes on him. And even if you sometimes blush for your own lack of faith, remember, love is reliably there for you. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

God of calm and storm, of infinite variety and beauty; God of tears and of laughter, hear our prayers as we call to you in the terrors of the night and the weariness of the day. Remind us that your view is so much longer and larger than our own; how can we help but trust?

God of work and rest, be with those who are absent from this gathering but present with you somewhere in this world; protect those who travel, grant rest and renewal to those who seek you in nature; strengthen the bonds of family and friends who journey together or apart.

God of danger and of change points, we look in horror at the suffering of your children in Beirut, devastated by the destruction wrought by carelessness and greed. May we with people everywhere come to their aid, in whatever way we can.

Wherever we see pain or suffering, perplexity or ignorance, depression, oppression, suppression of truth, lead us to re-examine our assumptions and seek purer light in you. May your wisdom guide those faced with tough decisions about school, work, and life in general.

We remember all those named already, as well as dear friends and companions. Remove our fears and increase our love. We know you are near, for you have promised that your children will never seek you in vain.

And so we pray as Jesus taught...Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever, Amen