Fear and Forgiveness - Proper 14 (A) (St. Brendan's Deer Isle, ME) August 9, 2020
Matthew 14: 22 - 33 Genesis 37 ·

"Your only task is to DEEPEN your roots in me. **I will take care of your branches**." (*Listen the Lord*, August 6)

"We like to think that good and evil are clearcut. One over here and one way over there. But the truth is, most of the time they are all mixed up together." (Preacher in the film *Get Low*)

I > Our lessons today have to do primarily with two things: fear and forgiveness. Our greatest fears always come from somewhere deep inside of us - rooted in whatever source triggers them out. We have an amazing ability to bury our fearful feelings, but something may happen, even out of nowhere, to lash out into our awareness and behavior.

There is a true story about a Russian railroad-worker who locked himself into a refrigerated car. He did everything he could to attract attention from outside. Slowly, he began to accept his fate. No one would come to that part of the train. He scribbled notes on the wall as time passed "I'm becoming colder… I fear that I'm freezing now… I'm too numb to write anymore… I'm becoming very sleepy now and these are probably my last words." When the train stopped and they opened the doors, he was dead. But the strange thing was that the temperature in the car was 56 degrees! The cooling coils had failed- There was in fact no reason that he should have died. His fear had become fatal.

Famed pastor Dr. Carlyle Marney used to say that we play hard in life to forget that we live in a haunted house. In a sense we do. Fear is always a powerful force in our lives, but particularly as we struggle to overcome what are our deepest fears. Fear is also the place where our most vivid reactions and prejudices come from. In a time when so many things and situations have become the source of unexpected danger and threats, outbreaks of terror and reaction are a "new normal." So are responses of denial and either rational or very irrational reactions. "I'm not going to wear a mask I don't care what anyone says!" There was disturbing footage this week of a health-care worker shopping, who turned and knocked down the clerk who had asked her to put on a mask, causing the clerk serious physical injury. Clearly, this was an instance of someone who had snapped from all the tension and fear as it exploded in anger.

II > Our story from Genesis today is a reading which tells half of the whole picture. The key component, for most of us, is the attitude of Joseph after he had been so severely and unjustly treated: and by his own brothers, who he trusted and loved. And equally significant: the reaction of the brothers, to Joseph's favoritist-treatment by their father. So again, they moved with an explosion of anger and resentment. Instead of just leaving him in the desert to die, they sold him to slave traders, a more cruel and prolonged death-sentence; not many survived Egyptian slavery for long.

In the final stages of the Joseph-story, over the course of the twenty years Joseph's brothers thought he was wasting away as a slave, Joseph rose to prominence in Egypt until he was second only to Pharaoh. When **years of famine** forced Joseph's brothers to go to Egypt to get food, unbeknownst to them, they found themselves in Joseph's presence, b**egging for food for their families**, bowing down before him just as Joseph had dreamed.

And after Joseph finally revealed his identity to his brothers, he did something none of them expected, **he forgave them**. At the very moment he had a golden opportunity to exact revenge, Joseph simply administered the antidote of forgiveness. Joseph forgave his brothers from his heart. "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here," Joseph assured them, "**for God sent me before you to preserve life"** (Genesis 45:5). And the second time the brothers appeared before Joseph, they were even more afraid that he might work revenge on them. This time, their fear was not hidden in some explosive place: it was right out front.

Most interestingly, Joseph responds with exactly the same words we hear from Jesus in our gospel reading today: "**Do not be afraid!"** he told them, "Even though **you intended to do harm to me**, **GOD INTENDED IT FOR GOOD"** As the writer of Genesis sums it up, "In this way (Joseph) reassured them, speaking kindly to them" **(Genesis 50:15-20)**.

III > And Peter, unlike these brothers, is not motivated by either fear or anger in the face of the violent storm. Peter; well, he is just being Peter. There's an old story, set back in the days when daring tightrope walkers stretched ropes across waterfalls and stepped out over thin air. According to this story, one such daredevil asked a spectator, "Do you believe I can push this wheelbarrow on that rope across that waterfall?"

The spectator thought for a moment and said, "Yeah, sure."

"Great," said the acrobat. **"Jump in the wheelbarrow."**

Of course, that was back when people were astounded by wonders!

So Peter, just like that guy, boldly steps up thinking he can just follow Jesus. All these veteran sailors, we can imagine, were "sore afraid" at the severity of the wind and waves. Anyone who has been on the open-sea, storm or not, is aware of how devastating that raw power of nature can be. So we can believe when we are told they were filled with fear, ESPECIALLY when they see Jesus coming across the water, walking towards them. They are in fact terrified: they think he is a ghost. Only Peter sees something more: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He does, and Peter steps out. Only then does HIS fear overtake him; if Jesus had not been there, he would no doubt have drowned. So Peter learned, as Jesus had to show him several times, what it meant to become more "DEEP-ROOTED" in God. He learned the full meaning of Jesus words that day: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter learned to walk THROUGH his fears and doubts, and to become most truly of all the disciples "full of Zeal for the Lord" and the rock of the struggling followers of the resurrected Lord.

The worst thing we can do in a storm is to **let go of our faith**. That's the most important thing with which we need to go forward. If we let go of our faith, we will surely sink. However, if we will just hold on to our faith and look for Christ's hand reaching out to us, we can make it through any storm.

If you are like me, we all too often think of God as far-off, as distant, as unreachable. And yet, out of brief moments of "sheer silence," or in the middle of the night, or in a sudden jolt of waking: We KNOW the presence of Almighty God! We feel the God who has every one of our hairs numbered! The God who tells us through Jesus and through ALL those who follow his commandments: I am your Father, your loving parent, your faithful companion in spirit who is CLOSE, who is right here. Be still, and feel it." Just as we hear over and over the words made clear by Joseph to his brothers: you are also forgiven all your shortcomings and acts of lashing out at me and my children. "Your only task is to DEEPEN your roots in me. I will take care of your branches."

Ephesians 3:20-21: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us; to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!"

Parts of this sermon originally from **Lev Aug 7, 2011**; from *"Parish Publishing,"* 2020; *"Don't Be Afraid"* by King Duncan (*esermons* 2011); *"The Antidote of Forgiveness"*(Joseph), Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta GA (Matthew 18:21-35) Dave Johnson, September 17, 2017.