

FAITH AND WATER
 (or, "Will Jesus Save Me?")
 Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
 Matthew 14:22-33
 August 10, 2008 – Ordinary 19
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA
 James T. Richardson

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 (NRSV)

- 1 *Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.*
- 2 *This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.*
- 3 *Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.*
- 4 *But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him...*
- 12 *Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.*
- 13 *And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am."*
- 14 *So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem,*
- 15 *and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?"*
- 16 *"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock."*
- 17 *The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go down to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and he found them at Dothan.*
- 18 *They saw him for a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him.*
- 19 *They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer.*
- 20 *Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."*
- 21 *But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life."*
- 22 *Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"---that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.*
- 23 *So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore;*

- 24 *and they took him and threw him into a pit. **The pit was empty; there was no water in it.***
- 25 *Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.*
- 26 *Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?*
- 27 *Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed.*
- 28 *When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.*

Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

- 22 *Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.*
- 23 *And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,*
- 24 *but about this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.*
- 25 *And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.*
- 26 *But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear.*
- 27 *But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “**Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.**”*
- 28 *Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”*
- 29 *He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.*
- 30 *But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”*
- 31 *Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”*
- 32 *When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.*
- 33 *And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly, you are the Son of God.”*

Each of the two Bible stories in the Common Lectionary for today, the Genesis story and the Matthew story, can change your life. Are you open to hearing them?

One of my favorite theologians, Charles M. Schulz, the creator of the PEANUTS cartoons, has another book of cartoons entitled **What Was Buggin’ Ol’ Pharaoh.** It is a book of cartoons which deal with teenagers and the church. There is one cartoon showing a scene in a men’s clothing store where a teenager is trying on a sport coat and trying to talk his dad into buying it for him. The caption under the cartoon has the father saying to his son:

***“Sure, I know all about that beautiful coat
that Jacob gave his son Joseph,
but I’ll bet you that Joseph didn’t
already have seven sport coats at home in the closet!”***

If I were to ask the average member of Oakland Avenue Church what is remembered about Joseph in the Old Testament, I would guess that the answer might involve ***“the coat of many colors.”*** Perhaps the more up-to-date member might answer by saying that it was ***“a coat with sleeves,”*** for you see, modern Bible scholarship says that the Hebrew word means ***“sleeves”*** rather than ***“colors.”***

At any rate, most of us know that Jacob gave his son Joseph a special coat.

I encourage you to go home today and read the Joseph story in Genesis, beginning with today’s passage. Let me alert you, however, that the Joseph story is the longest narrative in the book of Genesis! That, in itself, is interesting!

If you ***have*** read the Joseph story lately, you will recall that the narrative is summarized in chapter 50 in Joseph’s own words to his brothers:

***“Even though you intended to do harm to me,
God intended it for good, in order to preserve
a numerous people, as He is doing today.”***
(Genesis 50:20; NRSV)

Years later a Jewish poet was to put in words this story of Joseph; it appears in one of the Psalms of Thanksgiving, Psalm 105:

***When God summoned famine against the land,
and broke every staff of bread,
God had sent a man ahead of them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.
His feet were hurt with fetters,
his neck was put in a collar of iron;
until what he had said came to pass,
the word of the Lord kept testing him.
The king sent and released him;
the ruler of the peoples set him free.
He made him lord of his house
and ruler of all his possessions,
to instruct his officials at his pleasure,
and to teach his elders wisdom.
Then Israel came to Egypt...***
(Psalm 105:16-23a; NRSV)

Our Genesis story for today tells the story of the early days of Joseph when he was a young man, probably a teenager. And the story does not paint a very good picture of Joseph: he was the favorite son; he was a “tattle-tale;” he was a dreamer and his dreams centered in himself; he had a special coat that his dad had given only to him.

It is easy to understand how Joseph’s brothers could dislike him. But, from the story, it is evident that they not only disliked him, they hated him! And the story is pretty clear as to how they showed their hatred: **they sold him into slavery.**

I have had this story on my mind all week, and because of my own experiences during this summer, the one verse that has stood out to me concerns the brothers’ throwing Joseph into the pit in the ground. The verse is this:

“The pit was empty; there was no water in it.
(Genesis 37:24; NRSV)

During the past few weeks, my wife, Sally, has spent a good deal of time being with her sister, Betty, as she has undergone serious back surgery. Most of you know the hospital routine...the waiting...the anxiety...the waiting...the fear...the waiting. It is like:

“The pit was empty; there was no water in it.
(Genesis 37:24; NRSV)

At one moment there is life and health and strength and a smile. At the next moment there is a seemingly-lifeless body unable even to open eyelids. And there is nothing you can do about it. You are afraid; you are anxious; you are helpless. Oh, how much you would like to be Joseph’s brother REUBEN in the Genesis story and reach down into the pit and lift Joseph out of the pit. But you cannot. And so, you sit and wait.

The pit was empty; there was no water in it.
(Genesis 37:24; NRSV)

Of course, there are different kinds of pits. And the pit of fear and emotion and anxiety and helplessness is as real as any. The Psalmist called it

“...the valley of the shadow of death...”
(Psalm 23:4; RSV)

One of the things that I have done many times in the 43 years I have been ordained as a Presbyterian minister is to stand beside an open grave in the cemetery. I have stood there with some of you. And for much of the world, if it were watching you and me standing there, the world would think:

The pit was empty; there was no water in it.
(Genesis 37:24; NRSV)

Yet, you and I stand beside the open grave with at least two Bible verses saying:

*“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.”*
(Psalm 23:4; RSV)

and

Jesus said: *“I am the resurrection and the life;
the one who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live;
and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”*
(John 11:25; RSV)

The Genesis story tells us that Joseph was finally lifted up out of the pit into which he was cast. And if we follow the story far enough, we know that God enabled Joseph to overcome **the experience of the pit** and be of further use in God’s plan for the people of God, the Children of Israel.

DO YOU EVER WONDER IF GOD HAS A USE FOR YOU?

Having mentioned Jesus as “the resurrection and the life,” I want to ask you to jump with me your attention to the New Testament Lesson for today, the gospel-writer Matthew’s remembrance of Jesus and Peter walking on the water. **One of the interesting things about this passage for James Thomas Richardson is that in 48 years of preaching I have only once preached on this Matthew passage!**

Now the gospel-writers **Mark** and **John** also tell the story, and I have preached about the miracles of Jesus in those gospel writers, where I basically said that you and I can deal with these miracles of Jesus if they are understood in our faith that says that **God in Jesus Christ has overcome death and the grave**. Do you understand what I am saying?

If you can believe in the resurrection of Jesus, everything else is a piece of cake!

Concerning the gospel-writer Matthew’s remembrance of Jesus calming the storm and calming the fears of Peter and the disciples in the boat, my experiences with our oldest son John Richardson have been on my mind this summer. Some of you have met John. He works at Montreat raising money to support the Mountain Retreat Association, the agency which does all of the conferences; incidentally, if you want to make a financial investment in the Montreat conferences, John will be glad to talk with you. Just let me know.

I want to share two John Richardson stories with you that I have uncovered in looking at the earlier sermons I preached from the gospels of Mark and John.

In 1997 I preached at FHPC about Mark’s story of Jesus and the disciples and the storm. I told about receiving a telephone call from **Irene Patton**, a woman who had been a member of

Tims Memorial Church in Tampa where I was Pastor from 1972 through 1980. When Irene called me in 1997, Irene must have been in her late 80s or early 90s, and she was terribly shocked when I answered the telephone because someone had told her that I had died.

Irene's telephone call got me to thinking about her and reminded me of a time when our now-35 year-old-son, John was just a little tyke, maybe two or three years old. One Sunday after worship in Tampa, I went out to the children's play-yard outside the church nursery to get John and go home. Irene Patton had taught John to crawl across the top bars of the jungle gym, and of course, John was up there showing off.

I was in a hurry to get John down and go home, so I climbed up the ladder at the end to get John realizing that it would take him a long time to climb down himself. You know how it is: ***he has to turn around slowly when he gets to the end of the top piece, and then slowly negotiate his way down the ladder.*** So, I climbed up the ladder after my 3 year old, and not realizing what I was saying, really, and not realizing how John would hear it, I said: ***“Come on.....I'll catch you...”***

Before I had time to blink my eyes, John just literally threw himself down at me, confident that I would do what I said I would do: CATCH HIM!

Jesus told the disciples in the storm: ***“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!”***
(Matthew 14:27; NRSV)

The other John Richardson story I ran across in the sermon I preached in Tampa on the gospel-writer John's story of Jesus and the disciples and the storm. I preached the sermon on March 6, 1976, so John Richardson was about three years old at the time. This is the story.

“One night this past week, I was awakened in the night by the shouts of our son, John. I got out of bed and went into his room to learn that he was screaming out in the terror of a nightmare. And so I picked him up in my arms, and I broke through his sleep-shrouded brain by saying over and over again: ‘John, this is your daddy.’ ‘John, this is your daddy’ And he became quiet and calm and he was no longer afraid.”

Jesus told the disciples in the storm: ***“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!”***

Listen to this:

The pit was empty; there was no water in it.
(Genesis 37:24; NRSV)

Listen to this:

Jesus told the disciples in the storm: ***“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!”***