

Proper 14, Year A
August 7, 2011
St. Stephen's Episcopal, Belvedere CA
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In today's lessons, both Joseph and Peter, two exemplars of faith, are at moments of great fear and terror.

(Stories retold by preacher)

Joseph: Genesis 37:1-28

Peter: Matthew 14:22-33

Faith, hope, and love: These are the 3 themes which bind us together here. Today's lessons talk of faith.

Faith

We all have times like Peter and Joseph. Peter is in a short term immediate need; is very fearful; and Joseph descended suddenly into a long term state of great difficulty.

Today's stories which encourage us to have faith, and to lean into a trust that God will redeem the situation.

1. Faith is a foundation, a practice, an attitude and a state of mind. John MacQuarrie, Anglican theologian at Oxford has written that faith is not just a belief but is an existential attitude. We exist in a "wider being" in the context of which we have our own being. If we simply look at the night sky realizing that we are looking into 14 billions years of stars back to the beginning of creation, or at the beauty and diversity of the natural world in which we live we begin to understand the wide-ness of the being in which we live.

MacQuarrie defines faith as "commitment" to this wider being, and "acceptance" of the fact that we have a small and limited place in it, We need to come to terms with, and accept, our limitations.

There is a paradox in this as well. We make a decision to this wider being; to obedience to God; but we are constantly being invited, and wooed. We make a decision but God invites us.

Also: We live in grace with the Spirit surrounding us, but we are also free to do what we want, to step away and do our own thing. We are free to act as we see fit.

2. Just as blood is the life of the body, Prayer is the lifeblood of faith. Peter in this story is using the most basic form of prayer:

"Help! Help!"

Lucky for him, Jesus is right there but we believe that God is right there for us hearing our prayers. Prayer is the filling station for a life of faith; like a car with fuel, we need to get filled up in order to live a life of faith.

In their book, Prayer, Carol and John Zaleski describe prayer as "action that communicates between human and divine realms." This reminded me of a broadband connection from goes from God to us. We talk to God and God talks to us.

3. I have talked about Peter in the boat in literal terms but this story today is actually symbolic. The boat is the church. This room we are in is called the "nave" of the church. Nave comes from the Latin "navis" meaning boat. Most, or many, churches, if you look up at the ceiling, look like an upside down boat. We are all together in this. Faith is not something that we do alone: Boat is symbol of the church, and the disciples are us. Since the sea is a biblical symbol of anxiety and fear, when it is proclaimed in these accounts that Jesus can walk safely and easily over the surface of the sea, they are proclaiming that Jesus can overcome all of the anxiety and fear in us. We need to have Jesus in the boat with us in order for us to do well. Peter is chided for not having faith because he is the leader: the leaders are expected to be exemplars of faith.

4. Lastly: Faith is the expectation that everything will turn out OK; that everything will be fine. Julian of Norwich, 14th century mystic has a saying that she is famous for: "All shall be well, all manner of things shall be well." This doesn't mean that the outcome will be what we expected; it won't necessarily be butterflies and birds singing, but it will leave us feeling peaceful, and that all is right with God.

As individuals we are often like Peter needing help in the moment, or like Joseph, needing help over a difficult long haul; As a society we are like the boat on troubled seas. Like Peter, Christians call on Jesus in time of need, trusting that as we call out we will be met.