

“Finding a Place to Stand”
August 10, 2008

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Matthew 14:22-33

Poor ol’ Joseph – I guess it should really be “poor *young* Joseph,” but that doesn’t have the same ring to it. Poor ol’ Joseph: daddy’s favorite, wearer of the unusual garment known by so many names (“a coat of many colors,” “a long robe with sleeves,” and, in this morning’s translation by Robert Alter, an “ornamented tunic”).

Poor ol’ Joseph: tattletale, snitch, and, in the verses omitted from this morning’s reading, teller of his dreams that his eleven brothers and even the sun, moon, and stars will all bow down to him in his future greatness.

Poor ol’ Joseph: sent out to his brothers as they tend the flock and foolish enough to go to them wearing the garment that proclaims his status as his father’s favorite.

Poor ol’ Joseph: having tried to stand above his brothers by telling on them in the here and now and by foretelling his future superiority as he has learned it in his dreams, finding himself standing far below his brothers in a pit with no water and no way out, at least not without help.

Poor ol’ Joseph: Stripped of his special clothing, flung into a dry pit, and sold into slavery for twenty pieces of silver.

Poor ol’ Joseph: I confess, I have a hard time feeling much sympathy for poor ol’ Joseph. He seems desperate to find a place of superiority to stand, so it doesn’t seem like such a terrible thing that he’s been brought low ... very low. (But please don’t get me wrong. I’m not suggesting that his brothers deserve any award for playing well with others, but I think we can relate, at least a little bit, to their resentment, their anger, and their frustration.)

So we leave Joseph, brought low, standing in a pit, betrayed by his own brashness and his own brothers, and then being taken away, down to Egypt.

And then, after a lovely interlude of Scottish music, suddenly, even jarringly, we find ourselves far away from Joseph and his brothers. We find ourselves with Jesus, the disciples, a boat, and the water. We find ourselves in what is a familiar story to many: Jesus stands on the water – walks on the water – Peter asks Jesus to command him to walk on the water. Peter stands and walks on the water. But then, frightened, he begins to sink and cries out for help.

As you might guess from the title I gave this sermon early last week, I thought these readings were pointing me to the question of where we can find a place to stand, where we can stake out our ground or, in Peter’s case, stake out our water. But as the week wore on and I played and prayed with these readings in the midst of so much happening in this congregation and in the world, I moved away from Joseph and his story of trying to stand above his family but finding himself standing in a deep, dry pit, and I moved away from Peter trying to stand and walk on water.

What happened was that as I mulled and mused over Joseph and Peter and their attempts to find good, solid ground (or good, solid water) to stand on, the words of Buddhist nun Pema Chodron kept coming to mind. Chodron suggests, as do many others, that peace cannot come, compassion cannot come, fullness of life cannot come

until we realize and embrace the utter groundlessness of reality. Thanks to Chodron and, I believe, the promptings of the Spirit, as I contemplated these two Biblical stories and what they might be offering to you and to me in this moment, my focus shifted from searching for a good place to stand to letting ourselves sink into God's universe of constant change. And I started to think, not about Peter's fear the moment he begins to sink, but about his fear once he's *in* the water. I started focusing on his inability to surrender to its constant movements and his inability to let the water hold him up.

The usual interpretation of Peter's brief sojourn as a water-walker understands Jesus' rebuke, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" as a statement that if Peter had had enough faith in the presence and power of Jesus, he would have been able to cross the entire lake on foot. By extension, this interpretation suggests that if only *we* have enough faith in the presence and power of Jesus, we, too, can do things that defy all expectations and the laws of gravity.

I don't want to dismiss that interpretation; I'm not saying it's wrong. But what I want to do is set it aside for now and consider the possibility that, when Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" he was not talking about the moment when Peter becomes frightened and *begins* to sink, but was instead talking about the moment when Peter is *already* in the water, feeling its movement, the moment when he asks Jesus to save him from the water. I want us to wonder about whether Jesus' rebuke, "You of little faith," is an invitation to Peter and to us all to risk experiencing life as it is: constantly changing, constantly moving, frequently surprising, and bearing an uncanny similarity to a wind and storm-tossed body of water.

You may not need me to remind you that in human life nothing is fixed, nothing is permanent, but I'm going to remind you, anyway. Children grow and change, bodies age, death takes the young, the old, and the in-between. The earth's very climate changes, and what used to be clean and beautiful – the air, the water, and the soil – can become polluted and degraded. Marriages begin; marriages end. Friendships come and go. Our perceptions of ourselves and one another shift and, we hope, grow deeper and more compassionate.

And, of course, as we probably already know far too well, housing markets go up and down, the stock market seems to morph into a rollercoaster, and a plain ol' loaf of whole wheat sandwich bread can set you back more than \$5.00.

Churches and congregations and theologies change, too. [*Move to center.*] It may have seemed as though Judy and Gary were standing on something solid when they were received as members of this congregation a few minutes ago [*jump up and down*], but remember that this church didn't have a sanctuary – didn't even have a building – in its early years; this church wasn't on West Spain Street just 50 short years ago; and this sanctuary wasn't on the ground floor, either.

Church members join, die, move away, or simply stop coming. New ministers come along. The words of familiar hymns change. New hymns keep creeping into Sunday morning worship, and even the words of familiar prayers change over time.

New theologies point us toward a God who is and always will be still speaking. Prayer and struggle and love lead churches into new and changing territory in which tightly locked and carefully guarded closet doors are blown open and replaced by open doors, open arms, and open and affirming congregations like this one.

Whether we recognize it or not, whether we like it or not, we are with Peter in the water *after* he's begun to sink. There is a fundamental groundlessness to our lives and to all of life that resembles the shifting, wavy waters into which Peter sinks and from which Peter asks to be saved, only to hear the words, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Perhaps the question God is putting before us this morning is whether our faith is big enough to surrender to the groundlessness of life, the fluidity of everything, the ever-changing cosmos. Are we willing to trust that we are held and blessed by God's love and mercy no matter how rough the seas are or how many of the things we thought were permanent prove to be quite changeable? Can we open our hearts and our minds to the possibility that the change making us fearful and uncomfortable may simply be an expression of the ever-working, ever-blessing, and ever-loving God? Can we trust that if we surrender to the groundlessness of life, to its impermanence and constant movement, we may find that we're held by God, the One whom Paul Tillich called the ground of our being?

Joining a church requires a bit of that surrender. Joining a church, as many of us have experienced and others of us may soon be discovering, doesn't mean we've joined something fixed, permanent, solid, and predictable. It means that we've joined something that has as its very purpose being open to surprise, open to winds and waters that shift and take us into new territory. It means we've found ourselves sinking into that water with Peter, ready to be buoyed by the changing, groundless water itself, ready to discover that in and under and through and all around a constantly changing world, God is ever-present and always ready to hold us.

* * *

I don't want to end this morning with poor ol' Joseph having been thrown into a pit and then sold into slavery. His story continues in the book of Genesis. His story is a story of change and impermanence and, by the end, his story is one of discovering his identity and his life within God. Poor young Joseph grows into someone who understands that who he is and the gifts he has all come from God.

* * *

My beloved brothers and sisters, may we, too, discover that who we are and all we have to offer originate in a God who is in every changing moment and in every changing life. May we all find a way to say, "Yes!" as we feel the changing waters of life embracing us. May we all find a way to say, "Yes!" as we feel those moving waters taking us to someplace new.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
August 10, 2008