

“Storm Windows”
Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28 and Matthew 14:22-33
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
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August 13, 2017

It’s an odd thing to write a sermon

before going to an event that you know
will shape what you may need to say.

On Friday morning Rob and I went to Charlottesville to stand against
a gathering of the white supremacists planned for Saturday.

An interfaith faith group in Charlottesville had put out a call
for a 1000 clergy, and especially white clergy,
to come to help them represent God’s love and grace
in opposition to white nationalist hatred.ⁱ

I thought, given our proximity to Charlottesville, that I ought to go
and I wanted to get a full sermon done before I left,
because who knew what time we might be get back.

We know now that the rally itself led to brawls and fist fights,
with cuts and bruises, none of which were life-threatening.

Then came the news that an intentional act I will not name here
led to more injuries and one death,
and still more news of the crash of a state police helicopter
assigned to monitor the rally; two officers were killed.ⁱⁱ

As of last night there were 19 injuries, five of which are critical,
and three lives lost.

Even before the event there was tremendous tension.

Groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center and
The Anti-Defamation League were predicting that the rally
would attract the largest public gathering
of extremist white nationalists in decades.ⁱⁱⁱ

The organizers certainly did all they could
to hype the drama, with one scheduled speaker
insisting the rally in Charlottesville would be
the “largest ethno-nationalist rally of the 21st century”
and a “turning point for white identity.”^{iv}

Trying to be prepared, I read part of a website
by the organizers, who call themselves Unite the Right.

Comments on the Unite the Right site
made it clear that the organizers were attracting
a chunk of the American public who see life in the US
as filled with terrible privation for them,
privation that stems from being called upon to accept
people of color as deserving of equal dignity and respect.

Their rage at the idea of equity with people of color
and with immigrants leaps off the screen.

Rage is not a rational emotion.

I need to confess now that I doubtless don't understand
anything the Unite the Right crowd feels to be true.

But I don't think I'm wrong in thinking

that many of them operate from the viewpoint

that the needful things in life are limited,

the vital things in life are like a pie:

that can only be divided so many ways

before someone is getting more than they deserve.

For them, if life is a pie and someone gets a piece,

then someone *else* has to lose out,

because there is only so much pie to go around.

Whether they really believe that, or simply using that to pull in the vulnerable
and the ignorant, I don't know.

But they confirmed this view on Friday night

by marching onto the campus of the University of Virginia

with lighted torches and shouting

"You will not replace us!"

Then they would alternate with the word

"you" with the word "Jew."

That same scarcity dynamic is present in the Joseph story.

The story tells us flat out that Jacob, whom God has now named Israel,

Israel loves Joseph more than his other sons,

and it was galling and it was hurtful to his brothers,

as if their father's love was a limited commodity

and therefore Joseph was receiving an unfair share.

In the family context, we get it, we know what sibling rivalry is,

at any rate, is real and can be a source of deep and abiding pain.

As a Christian I grew up being told that love is *not* a limited commodity.

That life is not a pie, life is a bakery,

a bakery filled by God with good and wondrous things

that come continually, and they *increase* by being shared.

A bumper sticker I bought this summer says:

"Everybody does better when everybody does better."

Everybody does better when everybody does better.

That is bound to be an idea that the Unite the Right folks

Who are targeting Charlottesville find ludicrous.

For them they do worse if anybody else does better.

Encountering ideas that are the exact opposite of Christianity

on my way to the protest was upsetting and unnerving,

but it was probably good preparation.

It was like looking into an alien culture,
where goodness and kindness, compassion and respect,
democracy and dignity, unity without the need for uniformity,
and grace undeserved simply don't exist.

Given that Rob and I had absolutely no idea what the weekend would bring,
I sat down last week and I wrote this sermon,
even though I knew that our experience
in Charlottesville would likely change it.

So imagine that it's Tuesday of last week,
and you've just heard these scriptures.

Both of them have a storm at the center.

One is a family storm, in which jealousy leads brothers
to commit violence against brother.

The other is not even called a storm, but high wind,
and it allows us to hear what Jesus says to the disciples when
things happen in the context of the storm.

Together these two stories, I thought, could be windows
into where God is and how to hear God's voice
when storms come our way, as they always do.

In the story in Genesis, the Lectionary committee shortened the reading.
they left in the tattle tale story,

but skipped a segment in which the young Joseph
tells his brothers about a dream he had in which
all of them were binding sheaves of wheat in a field,
until his sheaf rose higher and higher
and all of their sheaves bowed to down to his.

That's exactly the kind of mouthing off
that would make your siblings have no interest
in spending time with you.

It was a stupid thing for Joseph to repeat
unless he was completely guileless and without malice.
Which at this point in the story we just don't know.

The intensity of this brothers hatred for him though,
reads with the stark speed of a folk tale:

"Once upon a time there was a dysfunctional family
where jealousy and hatred among brothers
grew thick and dark and deep until one day
it erupted into an act of evil."

There is an elder brother who was able to prevent murder,
but he joins in the deception, telling a terrible lie to his father.

At another point another brother steps in,
which probably tells us there were different versions out there of this
story and were combined when they were written down.

No one, including the boastful, clue-less Joseph,

comes out looking very good,
though he at least has our sympathy.
And that's where it ends.
We are not allowed to run ahead to the verses
that will come many chapters later because tragedy is real.
Evil is real. Terrible things do happen to people,
did happen yesterday, and many of us know what it is
to cope in circumstances where we are cut off
from hope or solace or sense or relief.
It is hard to find God in the story,
except in the act of protection by Reuben and Judah,
which ensures, at least,
that Joseph's story is going to go on.

God shows up in that one act of protection from Reuben,
and in one other place, in Joseph's dreams,
which tell him something about himself
that may help him to survive.

In the gospel, the storm, the wind that comes up suddenly
on the Sea of Galilee is an event that still happens
in the region today.
Karoline Lewis, who teaches preaching at Luther Seminary,
was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee
with a tour group a few years back
when the sky went from light to dark in an instant,
the wind bending trees, scattering lawn chairs
and kicking up whitecaps on the sea.
It happened at the end of her trip,
meaning her group had already been trooped around
to the places where Jesus "could" have fed the 5000,
where he "possibly" preached the Sermon on the Mount,
or "might have" hosted breakfast for his disciples.
But it was this wind out of nowhere
as she stood by the shore of the sea of Galilee
that touched Lewis most deeply:
"Suddenly," she writes, "there I was,
in the boat with the disciples,
[thinking] so this is what it would have been like?"^v

For the disciples the storm most likely
would not have been a frightening phenomenon.
Many of them were fishermen,
and all of them were familiar with the region's dramatic weather.
It's crucial this morning to realize that this is *not*
the story of Jesus calming the waves and the waters,

in which the storm itself was causing fear.
In our story the disciples are in the boat
going on ahead of Jesus
because it is what he asked them to do.
The storm kicks in just before
he comes walking to them over the water.
It is the sight of him out there on the waves
where no living person ought to be that frightens them,
until he calls out and tells them he is no ghost:
“Take heart,” meaning take courage, “It is I. Do not be afraid.”

Beloved it is vital for us to see
how the wind and the storm functions in this gospel story.
Some of the storms we face, like Joseph’s,
are sudden and unexpected and devastating.
Other storms are part of the scenery.
Winds of life are real and even frequent
and God does not want disciples lead lives
of stasis and sameness that contain no risks at all.^{vi}
Sometimes we have to take risks in order to be faithful.

Peter takes a risk when he asks Jesus
to command him to step out of the boat.
He begins well but falters in the unfamiliar waters until Jesus intervenes
with words that are too often assumed to be shaming and harsh.
I don’t know what it is, but it seems to me that in traditions
like ours that don’t put an intense emphasis on
on having a close personal relationship with Jesus
people often just hear Jesus as harsh and judgmental.
But there is nothing in this story to suggest that was his tone.
This week I watched part of a film version of the gospel of Matthew
in which Jesus was portrayed as someone
whose primary qualities were laughter and joy.
All the words he spoke came straight out of the text
but his tone was never harsh or shaming.
It was always full of encouragement and love.
That may be false to but, in this scene where Peter falters,
the Jesus of the film calls out to him
with a sweet chuckle in his voice,
as if the two are sharing a self-deprecating joke.
You idiot! Why worry when you can see that I’m right here!”

And that was as far as I got before I went to Charlottesville,
What I found there was a similar kind of joyful certainty.
And it never made the news.
Yes, it was scary, incredibly so.
We were told that first night

that there was a high possibility for violence,
and given training in how to react,
right down to physical moves to make on the street
to protect ourselves and each other.
Yes, the haters were gathering right outside the door,
even as we prayed together.
And yes, we had to leave the prayer meeting Friday night
by back doors and side doors to avoid the nasty demonstration
on campus that did make the news.^{vii}
But the certainty that love would prevail in this and every storm
was as thick and pulsing as the songs we sang that night.
We listened as speakers and preachers and prayers
repeated again and again that wherever hatred tries to rule,
God is fully present and more powerful;
that love reigns; that hate will never triumph,
and together we committed
to do absolutely nothing
that could be construed as hatred
toward other people no matter what.
I invite all of you to make that commitment too.
We promised come morning, together we would stand against
contempt and cruel characterizations that have nothing to do
with reality, nothing to do with who people actually are.
It was electric, it was moving, it was inspiring.
In that Episcopal sanctuary there were some 500 people of every color
and just about every religion: Muslims and Methodists,
Episcopalians and Jews, Presbyterians and Baptists,
Unitarians and Quakers, Pentecostals,
United Church of Christ, Buddhists and Bahias.
And when the preaching and teaching and training
and praying was over everyone one of us
walked out on the water without faltering one bit.
It saddens me to my core, what made the news
was the torches and taunts of the haters
circling the stature of Jefferson on campus,
and nothing was written or said
about the power and presence of the Spirit of God across the street.
The next morning we gathered at yet another church
for a prayer service at dawn,
where the certainty of the care of God and each other
was named and claimed again.^{viii}
We were told the truth about how dangerous
the day was likely to be, and those who committed to non-violent witness
against the white nationalist, came up and had hands laid on them
and prayers prayed for their safety.

Others, Rob and I included, chose to march the safe route
to a park away from the area
where white supremacists were gathering.
Everyone could do what they were able to do.
But we all walked out of the Baptist church on top of the water
toward the storm of ugliness that lay outside.
And the ugliness was real.
And it caused injury, and it caused death.

I'm not gonna describe that storm that for you.
There's no need.
And I pray you understand what I'm about to say next:
That violent storm was real,
and it has permanent consequences
but it is *background*, like the storm in the gospel story.
It was background, it was a given.
There is ugliness in the world,
and cruelty and hatred, and it will never win
unless we focus on it as if it has power.
If we focus on hatred as if it has power
we will sink beneath the waves
as individuals and as a people.
But on the surface of the waters
there is one who is walking, walking secure.
His voice is the one that, even now, will keep us from drowning.
Over the sound of the wind,
yes, even the winds of death, he says every day,
"Take courage, Take heart, It is I. Do not be afraid." AMEN.

ⁱ Congregate Charlottesville asked clergy to come via an open letter, stating "This is a call for partnership in direct, nonviolent action on a crucial day for our city, and in a critical moment for our country...We need your help and prayerful presence - we don't have the numbers to stand up to this on our own."

ⁱⁱ Heather Heyer was the woman killed by the car; Lt. H. Jay Cullen and Trooper pilot M.M. Bates died in the helicopter crash.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Anti-Defamation League quote was found online at forward.com: "White Nationalist 'Unite the Right' Rally Could Be 'Turning Point' for movement by Sam Kestenbaum.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v workingpreacher.org, Karoline Lewis "When We Can't Walk on Water," Sunday August 3, 2014.

^{vi} My thanks to David Lose for this insight in his comments at davidlose.net, found at textweek.com, published August 4, 2014 for Pentecost 9 A: "A Whole-Hearted Faith."

^{vii} Training and worship took place at St. Paul's Memorial Church, an Episcopal church on University Avenue, across the street from UVA. Traci Blackmon of Ferguson MO gave the sermon.

^{viii} First Baptist Church, on West Main Street. Cornell West spoke. From there several hundred people marched to McGuffey Park.