

HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of August 13, 2023

Collect for Proper 14

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** BCP 232

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 NRSVue, 2021

In our Hebrew Bible story, Israel, once called Jacob, has settled in the land of Canaan. He sends his youngest and favorite son Joseph to assist his older brothers shepherding the flock in Dothan. Joseph's older brothers despise him out of jealousy and at first conspire to murder him, though in the end they sell Joseph to Midianite traders who carry him off in slavery to Egypt. Joseph will one day see God's providential hand in these actions, and ways in which evil may be turned to good.

Genesis 37:1–4, 12-28 (NRSVue)

¹ Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ² These are the descendants 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 made him an ornamented robe. 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 to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸ They saw him from 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 ornamented robe 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

2

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.

Exploring Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

By Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, Rector, All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

With this reading we continue the story of patriarchal history and the origins of Israel in the “land of Canaan,” with the early years of Joseph’s life. While the text shows signs of at least two collections of material and so some logical inconsistencies, the purpose of the story as prehistory is clear, setting up the story of those who are favored wandering in the wilderness and finding that their destination is not an easy place to be.

The overriding theological themes of this lection are the reality and consequences of envy and the multigenerational reality of sin. The roots of the envy of Joseph’s brothers are twofold. In this lection we learn that their hatred comes from the fact that their father loved Joseph more than all of them (v. 4). Though Joseph was only seventeen years old, he was old enough to work and was shepherding flocks. Yet his father has given him a “long robe with sleeves” (v. 3). This robe, the kind of coat that princes and others who did not have to work might enjoy, is a visible sign of Joseph’s favored status. The second reason given for the brothers’ envy is found in the verses omitted from our reading. Joseph told of two dreams he had in which his brothers were bowing down to the ground before him ([vv. 5–11](#)).

Envy (also invidiousness or covetousness) is classically one of the seven deadly sins and the source of much misery. Cain murdered his brother Abel because “the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard” ([Gen. 4:4–5](#)). The consequence for murdering Abel is that Cain is to be a “fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” ([4:14](#)). Envy is prohibited in the Ten Commandments ([Exod. 20:17](#)), for like most sins, it will eventually lead to violence. Envy is the name given to either that desire we have for some possession or quality or talent that belongs to someone else, or the desire that the other not enjoy some possession, quality, or talent. Joseph’s brothers had plenty to dislike about Joseph, not least his favored position and his belief that in the end he would lord it over them.

Envy can stem from the belief that there is not enough favor to go around, from a sense that life is fundamentally unfair, or possibly from simple greed. Any of these causes for envy are in direct opposition to the revealed purposes of God for the world, and so envy gives rise to rebellion against the Lord of the universe. In God’s economy, there is no limit on love and well-being, regardless of material circumstance. In God’s economy, material circumstance is the source neither of happiness nor of salvation.

Israel sends Joseph to check on his envious and hateful brothers, sending him alone for a journey of some days from the Valley of Shechem to Hebron and then on to Dothan. Joseph is “wandering in the fields” and receives the assistance of an unnamed man (v. 15), reminiscent of the “man” that had wrestled with his father at Peniel ([32:24](#)). This man asks an existential question, “What are you seeking?” similar to the question Jesus poses

to Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” ([Mark 10:51](#)). From Bartimaeus, Jesus receives an answer that is both practical and obvious, “Let me see again,” while at the same time it implies a fuller answer. Joseph seeks his brothers’ location, but also, perhaps, something more, a restored relationship.

When he finds his brothers, they conspire to kill him. At least two stories seem to have been put together here. In one version, Joseph’s brothers sell him to Ishmaelites ([37:27–28](#)), and in the other, to Midianites ([37:28, 36](#)). The oldest brother, Reuben, pleads for Joseph’s life and plans to secretly come back and rescue him and restore him to his father. But when Reuben discovers that Joseph is missing, his concern seems to be a calculation born of his fear of bloodguilt, rather than any genuine compassion for Joseph or for Israel their father.

Edwin Friedman, building on the work of Murray Bowen, recognized the multigenerational nature of emotional or family systems.[1] The theory is that patterns of relationship get played out and repeated from generation to generation, unless or until someone seeks to change those patterns, largely through self-differentiation and a willingness to resist succumbing to anxiety while the family system resists this change and seeks to return to its status quo. We are seeing something of that sort shown in this lection. Just as Jacob stole his brother’s birthright and deceived his father, so now he is deceived by his own children, who have sought to destroy his favorite child. Our reading began with the announcement that “this is the story of the family of Jacob” (v. 2), with the word for “family” having the force of “succession of generations” or “family history,” suggesting that what is really intended here is not so much a story about individuals, but the continuing story of the origins of the people Israel.

Just as envy led to murder in the ancient stories of the first family, so it was also critical in the origins of the tribe who were eventually to be led out of slavery in Egypt and formed into a people while they wandered in the wilderness. They were to seek the land of promise where they could enjoy right relationship with God and each other, along with a sufficiency (of milk and honey) that obliterated or obviated any possibility of envy.

[1] Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

“Theological Perspective (Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28),” in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays, vol. 8, Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b NRSVue, 2021

A hymn of praise celebrating God’s forming of a people through the generations.

- 1 O give thanks to the LORD; call on his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples.
- 2 Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works.
- 3 Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
- 4 Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually.
- 5 Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles and the judgments he has uttered,
- 6 O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

Hear what the Spirit is saying

Pentecost +11 (14) Week of August 13, 2023

4

16 When he summoned famine against the land and cut off every supply of bread,
17 he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who had been sold as a slave.
18 His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron;
19 until what he had said came to pass, the word of the LORD kept testing him.
20 The king sent and released him; the ruler of the peoples set him free.
21 He made him lord of his house and ruler of all his possessions,
22 to instruct his officials at his pleasure and to teach his elders wisdom.
45b [Hallelujah!] Praise the LORD!

Exploring Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

By James C. Howell, Pastor, Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

Psalm 105 is a long poem that was used in a great worship festivity in ancient Jerusalem, celebrating the installation of the ark of the covenant in the temple ([1 Chr. 16:8–22](#)). The psalm itself is a lengthy recitation of historical events. How could a history lesson that was a history lesson so long ago in history be encouraging or healing to people today?

The very length of this psalm may be instructive. The nineteenth-century pulpit giant Charles Haddon Spurgeon advised that the varying lengths of the psalms are an indication that we should not have expectations of “brevity or prolixity in either prayer or praise.” Spurgeon grants that short prayers and verses are often best; however, “There are seasons when a whole night of wrestling or an entire day of psalm singing will be none too long.... The wind bloweth as it listeth, and at one time rushes in short and rapid sweep, while at another it continues to refresh the earth hour after hour with its reviving breath.”[1] That Israel’s prayers were both long and short, that the investment in seeking God can be instantaneous or extended over a lifetime, may open us up to patiently waiting on God.

History is always what got us where we are today. We have personal histories, and our personal histories are lived out on the stage of world history. To understand what has transpired, and to ruminate over history in the presence of God, is our only hope for the reformation of the soul. Clint McCann suggests that the twin psalms, [105](#) and [106](#), were addressed to Israel during their darkest, most desperate days of Babylonian exile, in essence answering questions like “How did we get into the mess we are in?” and “Can we ever trust God again?” We can trust God, because God has a résumé longer than this long psalm. God has acted, repeatedly, generously, graciously, doggedly intervening on Israel’s behalf.

Not that we will ever be able to nail down God so that all will be sunny tomorrow. Psalm 105:3–4 uses the verb “seek” three times, as if to underline that God is to be “sought.” The psalm does not say “find” the Lord, but “seek” the Lord. In the Beatitudes, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6)—not, “Blessed are those who are righteous.” We seek God; God is not to be possessed. We never quite grasp. We long for God, we reach out for God. If we get a question answered, we discover new questions. The pleasure is in the not quite having tied God down, as this God is as elusive as the events of history. We seek.

We seek this God, and not some other divinity, because of the past; we seek this God, instead of relying only on our own initiative and energy, because of the past. This is hope: to stand in the river of time and to be swept forward on the waters that have been flowing toward us for quite some time.

Psalm 105 is far from a dry history lesson. Countless moods are evoked. The people are not memorizing facts, names, and dates for a quiz. They hear the story, and they wish to “make music,” to “speak proudly,” to “rejoice”—moods that might be a tad unfamiliar to us. God’s great actions in the past are called “signs.” Signs point to something beyond themselves. The Gospel of John thinks of Jesus’ miracles as signs. They exist not for themselves, but so that we will be drawn to what is higher and more personal than a mere dazzling, inexplicable wonder. We are pointed to the very heart of God, the one who is the Lord of history, who wants an intimate relationship with the people, each one and all of them together, right now and tomorrow.

Memory is the key to healing. Memories need to be healed, but memory can also heal. There is a retreat model that involves individuals taking long stretches of time to think and reflect on a single request: “Remember what God has done in your life.” We remember not merely what God has done for me; we remember what God has done for the people, for Israel, for the body of Christ, for all of humanity. Finding my place in that larger picture is itself a healing balm, for a narrowing of focus constricts the heart and soul.

The lectionary selects portions of the longer psalm, and after the initial admonition to praise and seek the Lord, we turn to verses 16–22, which consider the stories of Joseph and his brothers that we know from Genesis 37–50. Jacob’s sons, in a fit of jealous rage, sold their father’s favored one into slavery and broke their father’s heart; Israelites always knew themselves to be the heirs of an embarrassingly dysfunctional family!

Then a famine came along. The psalm implies that the Lord caused the famine. We can think our way around the idea that God inflicts natural disasters on humanity; but for Israel, they were so hinged to God that they could not conceive of anything happening without God’s having some involvement in it. God’s involvement in this case was not to let Joseph’s unjust slavery go to waste. The psalm recalls the way Joseph dreamed, and could understand dreams, and how that supernatural ability landed him in the halls of power in Egypt. Psalm 105 glosses over the tension with the brothers, and their beautiful reconciliation reported in Genesis 45! Pastorally we will not want to miss this most hopeful highlight of the story. The psalm does seem in sync with the theology of Romans 8:28, that God causes things to work together, that God brings good out of evil.

6

The psalmist's goal in this long recital of God's great deeds is tucked away in that little half verse the lectionary oddly prescribes at the end, verse 45b. Actually, in addition to inviting the people to "praise the LORD," [verse 45](#) clarifies history's holy purpose: "so they should keep his statutes." Praise implies an imperative; history has its imperatives too, and even the simpler history of God's work in each of our lives contains an urging that we respond, that we live in a way that is fitting. God is gracious, but how we live matters. Obedience is really nothing more (or less) than gratitude.

[1] C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 5 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), 41.

"Pastoral Perspective (Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b)," in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays*, vol. 8, *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Romans 10:5-15 NRSVue, 2021

In this lesson Paul teaches that the word of faith is a gift; by it we make our saving confession that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. Without God's grace the way of righteousness would be impossibly distant. But the faith that leads to righteousness is in our hearts and the confession of salvation is on our lips. This is true for all people, no matter what their background, and so it is essential that the Good News be carried far and wide, that all may call upon the name of the Lord.

- 5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them."
- 6 But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down)
- 7 "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).
- 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim),
- 9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
- 10 For one believes with the heart, leading to righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, leading to salvation.
- 11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."
- 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.
- 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."
- 14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?
- 15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Exploring Romans 10:5-15

By Kyle D. Fedler, Vice President and Dean of Faculty, Huntingdon College, Montgomery, Alabama

Today's lectionary text is in the middle of Paul's extended theological wrestling with the fate of his fellow Jews. Paul anguishes over the fact that most Jews continue to seek righteousness through the law rather than through faith in Christ. Therefore, it is not surprising that we should find, here in the middle of Paul's explanation of the salvation of Israel, a treatment of the relationship between Christ and the law.

Romans 10:5–15 is an expansion of [Romans 10:4](#), where Paul states that Christ is the “end of the law.” Let us briefly explore what Paul means by looking at several ways in which Christ is the “end of the law” (Gk. *telos nomou*). The word *telos* can mean “termination,” but it can also mean fulfillment or purpose, as in the first article of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Question: “What is the chief end of man?” Answer: “To glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”[1]) These are the different ways in which Christ is the end of the law. First, he terminates the law as a means of salvation. Second, Christ is the culmination of the law by doing what we were incapable of doing, reconciling us to God and to one another. Moreover, the incarnation represents the very purpose of the law, namely, uniting us with God.

First, with the coming of Christ, the function of the law as the means of reconciliation with God has come to an end. In its place is Jesus Christ. In today’s lectionary passage, Paul demonstrates this by weaving Christ into Old Testament passages about the law. In verse 5, Paul quotes [Leviticus 18:5](#), which places the burden of salvation on human fulfillment of the law. Then in verses 6–8 Paul quotes [Deuteronomy 30:11–12](#), which says: “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ ”

In Paul’s creative use of these passages, where the law/commandment once stood, Christ now stands. The Deuteronomic passage above ends with the declaration that “the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” ([Deut. 30:14](#)). When Moses talks about “the word” he is referring to the commandments—the law. In place of the law, Paul inserts Christ. We do not need to go to heaven to know God, God has come to us in the form of Christ who is near—as close as our hearts and mouths. Christ has replaced the law as the way to salvation.

With the coming of Christ, the law no longer serves the function of reconciling humans with God. In fact, the law has become an obstacle to salvation. “The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me” ([Rom. 7:10](#)). Martin Luther knew this as well. He too tried to achieve salvation, not by strict adherence to torah, but by strict adherence to the medieval pillars of sacraments and cooperating grace. Like Paul, Luther found that what had once promised life brought only more doubt, despair, and death. So both men understood that, in one sense, the coming of Jesus represents the termination of the law as the primary means of reconciliation and righteousness.

Jesus is the end of the law in that he has fulfilled the very function of the law; he has reconciled humans to their Lord. As John Calvin says, Christ is the “meaning, the authority, the fulfiller, and the way to the fulfillment of the Law. He is Himself the righteousness before God, the divine justification that everyone is to receive and can receive through faith.”[2]

So how does the law function after Christ? Lutheran theologians see a twofold function of the law. The law serves to condemn us of our sinfulness (theological use) and the law functions to restrain evildoers (civil function). Where Luther saw a dichotomy between grace and law, Calvin saw greater continuity. Calvin and most Reformed theologians have emphasized greater continuity between law and gospel and therefore have posited a third use—pedagogical. It not only restrains evildoers and reveals human sinfulness; it “serves as the best instrument for

enabling them [believers] daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow.”[3]

In other words, the law is still good, as Paul says in Romans 7:12: “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.” Because we have a God who is faithful and constant, those moral laws that pleased God in the time of the Israelites continue to guide us in God’s will, even with the coming of Christ. In this sense, the law does not terminate with Christ; it still has a role in Christian life.

In fact, Christ himself was the only human being who was capable of upholding and obeying the deeper meaning of the law. With a few exceptions, all torah commands had to do with one of these two primary relationships: human-human, God-human. Christ showed us what the law was intended to do and be. He was in harmony with God the Father, and he showed pure *agapē* love to his fellow human beings. He lived the life the torah was designed to create.

Finally, Christ is the very purpose of the law. The law was given in order to join humans and God. With the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the purpose of the law has been achieved; God and humanity have been united.

Because Christ is the termination of the function of the law, fulfillment of the function of the law, and the perfect adherent to the law, human beings need only believe in our hearts and confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, in order to be united eternally with the triune community.

[1] *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 175.

[2] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, II/2* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 245.

[3] *Ibid.*, 2.7.12.

“Theological Perspective on Romans 10:5-15,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Matthew 14:22-33 NRSVue, 2021

The gospel is the story of Jesus’ walking on the water and his rescue of Peter after his faith fails him. The narrative has several levels of meaning. In legendary terms Jesus is like the Creator God who strides over the watery chaos monster. Matthew’s gospel stresses this revelation of Jesus’ close relationship with God, as God’s Son, and the importance of faith on the part of the disciples. A church beset by its own problems and lack of faith would be glad to perceive in this story the saving presence of its risen Lord.

- 22 Immediately he made the disciples get into a 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 by 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.”

Exploring Matthew 14:22-33

By Clifton Kirkpatrick, Visiting Professor of Ecumenical Studies and Global Ministries, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Matthew 14:22–33 is a text filled with vivid imagery. The picture of the disciples sent on their own across troubled seas and of Jesus walking on water to save them and to calm the waters is a picture that has given comfort, encouragement, and challenge to Christians over the generations. This text and its parallel texts in [Mark 6:45–52](#) and [John 6:16–21](#) have been used over the centuries to remind us that Jesus often calls us to go into uncharted waters, but when we go in faithfulness, he never abandons us.

There is a variety of rich images in this text that bring to life important dimensions of God’s call and God’s assurance to us:

- The image of Jesus taking time to pray, even in a very uncertain situation, is a reminder that things are never so turbulent or so urgent as to take us away from the necessity of prayer.
- The image of Jesus sending out the disciples on a mission just as he sends us in mission today.
- The image of choppy seas and the reality that when we set out on Christ’s mission, though we will often be in troubled waters, Jesus does not abandon us but rather comes to us, as he came to the disciples, when we need him most.
- The image that Jesus and the reign of God that he inaugurates have power even over the forces of nature and can conquer our fears and the evil that causes them.
- The image of the disciples who, because of their fear, could not recognize Jesus when he came to them in ways they never expected (walking on the water).
- The image of Jesus calming the troubled waters for the disciples and the reality that he can calm our troubled waters as well.
- The image of the disciples responding to Jesus’ saving grace through worship and through the confession “Truly you are the Son of God” (v. 33).

All of these images have rich power for interpreting the love of God, the saving grace of Jesus Christ, our calling to be in mission, and the assurance of Christ’s love and companionship when we need it most. However, what is unique to the Gospel of Matthew’s version of these events, and not found in Mark and John’s accounts, are the dialogue with Peter and Peter’s attempt to step out of the boat and walk on water to Jesus, in response to the command of his Lord. It is this encounter that may have the richest imagery to enable the word of God to speak to us through this passage.

Like the other disciples, Peter is panicked both by the turbulent waters and by this figure walking toward them on the water in the very early morning hours. Even after Jesus speaks to the disciples, they are still not sure if it is Jesus. Peter, knowing that the call to discipleship is unique to his relationship with Jesus, responds, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (v. 28). When Jesus issues the command, “Come,” Peter steps out of the boat in faith and in faithfulness. Having embarked

10

on his journey across the sea in faith, he then becomes frightened, but the strong arm of Jesus lifts him up and returns him to the boat.

What is so clear from this passage is that we are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are to be faithful to the call of Christ. Stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters or be filled with fear, but it is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, that when we need it most, he will extend his arm to lift us up and get us back in the boat.

Years ago, I attended an ecumenical gathering at which Ernest Campbell, then the pastor of Riverside Church in New York, was addressing a group of pastors on the crisis in our churches. I will always remember his assertion that “the reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it.” He was right. The key to faith and fullness of life in Christ is to follow Peter’s example and be willing to step out of the comfort and security of the boat and head into the troubled waters of the world to proclaim the love, mercy, and justice of God that we find in Jesus Christ. Being a disciple is a risky and exciting business, but that is exactly what God calls us to do and to be, and God assures us that if we “get out of the boat,” we can count on the accompaniment of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

William H. Willimon may have put it best in a sermon entitled “How Will You Know If It’s Jesus?”:

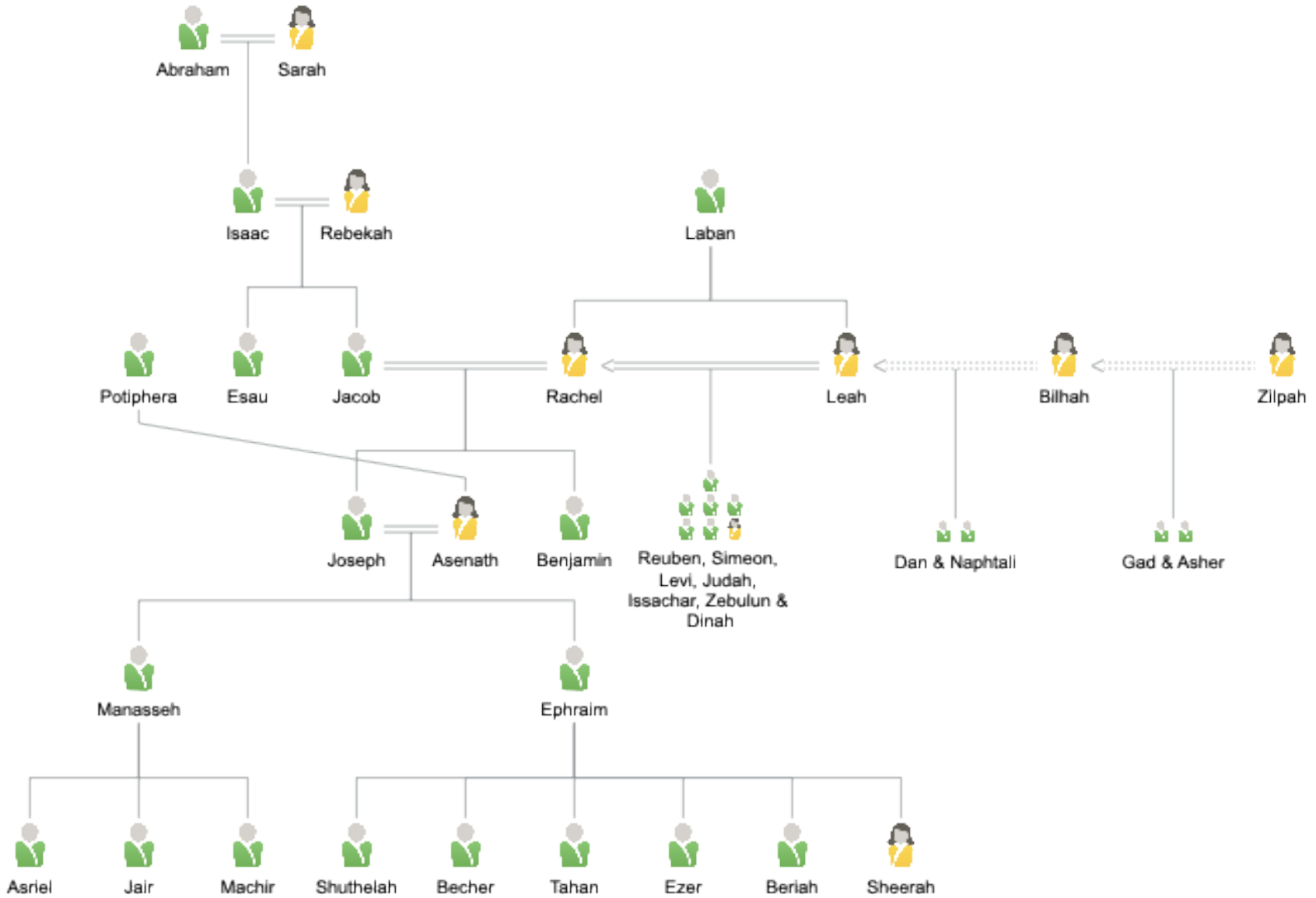
If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.[1]

Getting out of the boat with Jesus is the most risky, most exciting, and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest. Matthew 14:22–33 invites us to do just that!

[1] William H. Willimon, *How Will You Know If It’s Jesus*, August 7, 2005, http://day1.org/950-how_you_will_know_if_its_jesus.

“Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 14:22-33,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011)

Joseph's, Son of Jacob, Family Tree



Matthew 14:22–33

22 Then he made the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. **23** After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. **24** Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. **25** During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea. **26** When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. “It is a ghost,” they said, and they cried out in fear. **27** At once Jesus spoke to them, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” **28** Peter said to him in reply, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” **29** He said, “Come.” Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. **30** But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” **31** Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” **32** After they got into the boat, the wind died down. **33** Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, “Truly, you are the Son of God.”

Mark 6:45–52

45 Then he made his disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side toward Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. **46** And when he had taken leave of them, he went off to the mountain to pray. **47** When it was evening, the boat was far out on the sea and he was alone on shore. **48** Then he saw that they were tossed about while rowing, for the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them. **49** But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out. **50** They had all seen him and were terrified. But at once he spoke with them, “Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid!” **51** He got into the boat with them and the wind died down. They were completely astounded. **52** They had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the contrary, their hearts were hardened.

John 6:16–21

16 When it was evening, his disciples went down to the sea, **17** embarked in a boat, and went across the sea to Capernaum. It had already grown dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. **18** The sea was stirred up because a strong wind was blowing. **19** When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they began to be afraid. **20** But he said to them, “It is I. Do not be afraid.” **21** They wanted to take him into the boat, but the boat immediately arrived at the shore to which they were heading.