

7 August 2011

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

There are some stories, some phrases that you hear once and they stick with you. Often it happens with a song or piece of music, but sometimes there are things you heard said at a particular time, and while you forget everything else that was said on that occasion, this one thing stays with you.

When I was 16 or 17, we had a “God's Word Today” week at church, a week of special events focusing on the Bible, and each evening there was a speaker looking at a different aspect of the Bible. The first evening speaker was GAF Knight, former professor of OT at Knox Theological Hall, at that time recently retired from the Pacific Theological College in Suva and living in Auckland. His topic was “The Old Testament – the Scriptures.” I know I found what he had to say very interesting, but the particular thing that stuck with me was his description of the Hebrew phrase *tohu wabohu*. It is used in Genesis 1:2 where it is translated “without form and void” - but Prof Knight explained that it is a word picture of a storm in the middle of the sea at midnight – the most God-forsaken place the Hebrews could think of.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to check with him if my memory was accurate, or whether I had made this up – but he assured me that, yes, that was correct.

A storm in the middle of the sea at midnight – that's where the disciples found themselves. They were in a boat battered by the waves, far from land, with the wind against them. And Jesus wasn't with them.

Jesus was in his own place of turmoil. He had been seeking solitude when he had traveled across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples, because he had just received news of the beheading of John the Baptist. John was his cousin, the one who had baptised him, the one who had gone ahead of him. And John had met this violent end at the hands of King Herod. As well as grief, there was the threat to Jesus' own life. Jesus responded by withdrawing by boat privately to a solitary place¹ – except that the crowds had followed him. And when he saw them Jesus had compassion on them and healed their sick, and then he had provided food for them, all 5000 men, besides women and children.² But now, now there was the need for that time alone, time to grieve, time to consider the threat to his own life, time to seek God's presence and strength. So Jesus had sent the disciples ahead of him and had dismissed the crowds, while he went up a mountain by himself to pray. He needed to find God in the midst of the storm.

Joseph was in storm too, a place of darkness and abandonment. He was at the bottom of a well in the middle of nowhere, and no one knew it except his brothers who had put him there. For the sake of brevity we missed part of the story this morning, but you probably know it – Joseph, the long-awaited son of the favourite wife, the much younger son who was given special privileges – and then there were his dreams, sheaves of wheat bowing down to his sheaf, sun moon and stars bowing down to his star. The brothers' jealousy is easily understood. But Joseph wouldn't have expected that they would plan to kill him, and throw him down a dry well – until a passing trade caravan provided opportunity to get rid of Joseph and make a profit from the whole situation. So Joseph was rescued from the pit to be packed off to Egypt, destined for the slave market.

Storms are places of chaos, of emptiness, of threat. In the midst of a storm we can feel abandoned and helpless. How do we weather the storms and come through to the other side?

In the creation chaos, when the earth was without form and void, the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters of chaos. God's breath, God's wind was blowing in and through that *tohu wabohu*, and the empty formless chaos became the place where God spoke, where God created: “Let there be... and it was so.”

There has been no mention of God so far in Joseph's story. Joseph is of course part of the family of blessing, the family of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, the family called by God and blessed by God so that all

1 Matthew 14:13

2 Matthew 14:21

the peoples on the earth will be blessed through them.

Does the promise extend to Joseph? It doesn't look very obvious as he languishes in the bottom of the well, as he is dragged out of there only to be sold to the traders headed for Egypt and the life of a slave. Once Joseph is in Egypt, a refrain appears in the story: "and the Lord was with Joseph", but it won't be very evident from the events that this is true, as Joseph is slave to Potiphar, wrongly accused by Potiphar's spurned wife, thrown into prison, forgotten even by those whom he helps. It is a long time before eventually things begin to turn around for him and for his people. It will be 8 chapters and many long years before Joseph again stands in front of his brothers and assures them "It was not you who sent me but God"³

Some storms take a lot of living through. As Jesus faced the news of John the Baptist's death, he was also facing the reality of the journey that would lead to the cross. Was he willing to keep walking this way, to continue to commit himself to the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven which would inevitably bring him into danger from the powers that opposed the kingdom, political and religious powers? In response to this storm breaking in on him, Jesus first sought solitude, withdrawing to a wilderness place. (The wilderness in Israel's history was the place where God revealed Godself, and the place where Israel learned what it meant to be God's people.) But when the crowds followed him there, his way through the storm became the response he made to the need of the people before him – he had compassion on them, healed their sick and provided food for them. And later, he came through the storm to the disciples. In the face of the storm in his life, Jesus recommitted himself to the mission God had given him, and got busy bringing in the kingdom of heaven.

For the disciples, this storm had blown up out of nowhere. But that was the way it often was with storms on Galilee. They found themselves in a storm in the middle of the sea at midnight. And they were on their own – Jesus had sent them ahead. Some time later Jesus came to them, walking on the sea.

[Do we need to address the question, "Did this really happen?"]

I don't know.

Part of me says, I don't see why not. If in Jesus of Nazareth God took our flesh and became a human being, nothing is impossible - any other miracle after that is ... well... chicken feed.

Part of me says, Does it really matter if it happened or not? There is truth in this story, truth in what it is saying, that goes way beyond historical fact or fiction. So I will deal with the story as Matthew tells is, and treat it as a true story.]

So Jesus comes walking on the sea, through the storm, coming to be with them. God is the one who walks on the sea, God who is sovereign over the sea and creation – so says Job: "God alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea"⁴ In walking on the sea, Jesus does what God does. He manifests God's presence and demonstrates God's reign over the sea and all the opposing forces it represents.

This is not the disciples' first thought. Their reaction is one of terror – "It is a ghost!" And Jesus says to them "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Last week Florence reminded us of God's revelation of God's name as "I AM". That is what Jesus says here: *ego eimi*, the Greek words used to express the divine name. I AM is the one who acted to rescue the people from slavery in Egypt; I AM is the name that reveals God's saving presence in the midst of distress. And here comes Jesus, walking on the water, declaring I AM as he comes to be with the disciples in the midst of the storm. Remember the prophecy of Isaiah which was fulfilled in Jesus' birth: "They will call him Emmanuel – that is, God with us"⁵ When Jesus comes to them, he is present with them as the very presence of God.

Peter's response to Jesus in the midst of the storm shows both faith and lack of faith. He calls him Lord:

3 Genesis 45:8

4 Job 9:8

5 Matthew 1:24

Kyrios - the name of God, the name of the emperor. Yet he is uncertain “If it is you...” And he is ready to put his faith to the test if that is what Jesus commands him to do. He wants to do what Jesus does, to follow Jesus, because that is what a disciple does. And so when Jesus does say 'come', he gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus. But his faith becomes overwhelmed by the storm, the strong wind, the powers of chaos that are always threatening to overwhelm faith. Peter the rock begins to sink like a stone. And in faith he does the only thing he can do – and the most effective thing he can do - he cries out again: “Lord, save me”.

Faith is recognising our need and recognising who can meet that need. Faith is effective when it knows it can do nothing to save itself, and cries out to Jesus. Fear can then be the impetus for faith – it is when we recognise that we cannot save ourselves that we also recognise our need to cry out “Lord save me.”

And Jesus' response is immediate – he reached out his hand and caught Peter. With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, God saved God's people from slavery and from many other difficult situations. Jesus again acts as God acts, saving Peter from the water with his outstretched arm. And as they both got into the boat, the wind ceased and the storm was over - calming storms is also God's work.

It seems that the disciples worked this out. This one who comes to them walking on water, speaking God's name and God's words, who stretches out his hand and rescues Peter, who calms the storm – here surely is the one whom God has sent to reveal God's saving presence and God's kingdom, the one who enjoys a special relationship with God, the one who can be called Son of God and worshipped.

When have you found yourself in a storm in the middle of the sea at midnight? Or maybe you are feeling rather like this right now, that chaos has overwhelmed you.

Take heart from these ancient stories and listen to the truth they tell – chaos is the place where God's Spirit gets creative, even if sometimes it takes a lifetime to work through. And Jesus comes in the midst of the storm, declaring “I AM – don't be afraid”.

When we find our faith overwhelmed, when fear threatens to sink us, we can cry out “Lord, save me” and be sure that Jesus' outstretched arm will be there reaching out to us lifting us up.

Let us pray:

Loving God, we thank you that in the turmoil of life you are always with us – your love reaching out, your hand supporting us, your grace giving us strength.

Help us to put our trust in you, to let go of the fears and anxieties that batter us, that destroy our confidence, that cut us off from others and prevent us living life to the full.

Help us to receive the freedom you offer, which comes from knowing that you hold all things in your hands and that nothing can finally separate us from your love,

In the name of Christ we ask it, Amen