

**GENESIS 37:1-4, 12-28 (p. 31)**

**AUGUST 9, 2020**

**MATTHEW 14:22-33 (p. 796)**

**BLAINE**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Feed us Lord, for we are Hungry, and you are the Bread of Life. Teach us Lord, and enlighten us with your Word. Calm the Storms that rage around us, and enable us to step out and Walk on the Water in your Name! But mostly Lord, open our eyes to who you are, so that we will turn and Worship you! In Jesus' Name we ask this, Amen.

**“STEPPING OUT IN FAITH”**

The Reverend Doctor Clark Williamson, one of my Seminary Professors, often used to say, “any text without a context, is just a pretext”! So, let me set the stage. Mom was baking bread, and the rich aroma wafted from the kitchen and permeated the entire house! And before long, it began to stimulate the hunger pangs in her two young sons. Both wanted the first piece of course, from that hot, steaming loaf! Both could almost taste the melted butter running down the sides, over the golden-brown crust! And both, naturally, started to argue over who would get it! Mom immediately recognized this as a teaching moment. So, she said, “If Jesus were here right now, what would He say?” To which Ryan, the oldest, answered, “He would say ‘let my brother have the first piece.’” “You are right,” said mom. “So, what do you think we should do”? And without missing a beat, Ryan turned to his brother and said, “Kevin, why don't you be Jesus today?”

There's just nothing that pricks your senses like the smell of fresh-baked bread, is there! You can almost taste it, three rooms away! Or maybe even now! And when you're hungry, really hungry, there is nothing like fresh bread to satisfy your belly as well!

So, imagine being out in the middle of nowhere, in an extremely desolate place, tired and hungry, miles from the nearest market, and having Jesus provide fresh bread! That's where we are today. We talked about it extensively last week! Jesus has just fed tens-of-thousands of people with a couple of fish and few loaves of bread! So, I can see why the crowds followed Him after that, can't you, even all the way around on the other side of the lake in fact! I mean, fresh bread! Miraculous bread! Only I wonder what kind of "bread" they were looking for?

Was the Wonder Bread, do you think, the miracle itself? Is that what makes folks step out in faith? Were they really impressed, in awe, or simply curious? Could it have been the bread itself? I mean the people were hungry, right, and it was late in the day. Were they hoping to be fed again? And again, and again, and again! Why do people reach out to Jesus? Do you think it was His Charismatic Preaching that drew them in? Or the message of the Good News? Was it the Teaching that day? Jesus does have a novel approach to "fleshing-out" the Law, doesn't He, using Parables and such. Or do you think it was the Healing, the driving out of demons, the making people whole? Why do people follow Jesus? Why do you? It's a good question, isn't it?

What I am asking is, is it the Baker that motivates you to step out in faith, the one who provides sustenance? Or the Showman, the one who impresses, and maybe entertains? Or is it the Miracle Worker that folks follow, or the Great Physician, with the power to heal? Is it the Teacher, or the Preacher, or simply the crowds that cause you to believe? What, exactly, gets you up off of your "shoreline", and stepping out in faith? It is a good question! And you know how I like questions!

“Immediately” after the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus has His Disciples “get into a boat, and go on ahead, to the other side”. There were only two fish, remember? And just five loaves of bread. I sort of doubt if it was covered with melted butter, or even if it was hot. I doubt if those way in the back of the crowd that day could smell it, or if anyone argued over the first piece. I know it fed “multitudes” though! Forty or fifty thousand people were satisfied! And “immediately afterwards”—after they were fed—Jesus sends the Disciples out into a storm! What does that say?

You know, I decided to call this sermon, “Stepping Out in Faith”, for obvious reasons. But after wrestling with it for several weeks, I think a better title might be, “Stepping Out in Faith in the Midst of a Storm”! Because that’s actually what I see. And that’s an important distinction, isn’t it? Stepping out in faith involves a certain level of commitment. But stepping out in faith, in the middle of a storm, requires yet another! And I see “storms” brewing all over the place in both of our readings today!

In our first lesson, for instance, the storms sweep-in when Joseph suddenly finds himself in a very awkward situation. He is “down a hole, without a ladder”! And in our Gospel lesson, the storm is a physical one, one that threatens the Disciples with their very lives! They are in a boat, in the wee hours of the morning, at the North end of the Sea of Galilee, when suddenly, a tempest begins to rage around them! Imagine being in either one of those scenarios. Now ask yourself; “Would I, in that moment, step out in faith?” “Would I do it, in the midst of the storm?”

Joseph is only seventeen, remember, and comes from a pretty big family. In addition to his mother and stepmother, there are two maidservants in the household, who also bore sons to his father. So, Joseph has one brother, and ten half-brothers to contend with. And in all honesty, he appears to be a little spoiled!

He is not the oldest son, something cherished in a Hebrew family. And he is not the youngest either, who quite naturally might get spoiled. Joseph shouldn't hold any special status in the tribe what-so-ever! Other than the fact that his dad likes his mom the best, I don't see any reason for Joseph to have special favor in his father's eyes! Only he does! Verse three says, "Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons". In fact, he loved him so much, that he made him "a richly ornamented robe." I am sure you remember the Technicolor Dream Coat.

But picture that brewing storm. If you were one of his brothers, how would that make you feel? "Who does he think he is? Here I am wearing this old, dingy white, wool tunic. A hand me down, no less! The only thing holding it together is this beat-up leather belt! But this 'Daddy's Boy' gets a brand-new robe!" How would you feel? And then Joseph adds insult to injury. He runs to his father and tattles on the other boys. He makes them look bad! "While they were tending the flocks," were told, "Joseph brought back a bad report". Is it any wonder that they, "hated him, and could not speak a kind word to him"? How many of you have brothers and sisters? How many of you can feel what Joseph's brothers must have felt? How many of you had a fleeting thought, or maybe several, of throwing your sibling down into a hole and leaving them there? How about selling them off, to a traveling band of merchants maybe, headed down to Egypt? Is it really a surprise that Joseph finds himself in the middle of storm?

Only Sibling Rivalry is not the only storm forming on the horizon. There are more dark-clouds in the sky, more thunderclaps echoing in the distance, more flashes of lightning even! And this bigger storm encompasses the whole People of God!

Up to this point in Scripture, remember, God's Chosen People have been living with God's Blessing, living under the Covenant Promise. God declared that He would make the descendants of Abraham into a great nation, remember? And that He would give them a land flowing with milk and honey. But now they have broken the Covenant, and things are not looking so good.

The fact that Joseph's brothers have to constantly move the herds farther and farther away, in order to find good grazing, hints at the times of drought that we will read about in the next few chapters of Genesis. And the fact that Joseph is thrown down into an "empty" Cistern, tells us that the dry spell has already begun.

Cisterns, in the Middle East, are great big cave-like structures that the ancient people dug to collect and store water. Most of them are huge, holding millions and millions of gallons of water. So much water, in fact, that an entire settlement could live off of the Cistern's reserves for over a year! There would be enough water to drink and wash clothes in, enough water to bath in, every day. There would even be enough water to be heated, so that the steam could be piped into the buildings, to warm them up in the winter. For Joseph to be thrown down into a Cistern that was totally dry speaks volumes about the drought conditions of that day!

And at the same time another storm front has taking shape as well! It's centered in the extended Family of God. Not only do we have the obvious problem of Joseph's brothers attacking him and selling him into slavery, but we also have the bigger storms of the family-at-large. The merchants who bought Joseph, were Midianites. These are the family members of Moses' father-in-law. They are actually relatives of Joseph. And the Ishmaelites who took him down into Egypt, were from the clans of Joseph's own grandfather's, half-brother, Ishmael. So, when you couple all of this, with the conflict between Joseph's dad and his uncle Esau, it appears that the family is really starting to break up!

Joseph lives in one of the original dysfunctional families, doesn't he? His father is showing favoritism, and causing the children to fight! His stepbrothers, all from different marriages by-the-way, want to see him dead! The family's livelihood has been taken away by the draught! Soon there will be no source of income, no visible means of support at all! And the extended family is at each other's throats! Aunts and Uncles and Cousins are all speaking some very angry words to one another! The sky is dark in young Joseph's life! The storms are really sweeping in! And yet, if you read on in Genesis, you will see Joseph clearly stepping out in faith!

So how do you cope when you're in the middle of a storm? How do you respond when it starts to rain on your parade, or when all of the "fun" in the dysfunctional part of your family drains away? What do you do when those you love toss you down into a Cistern, like Joseph, and treat you as if you were dead? If your boat is really rocking, if your sail is torn, and the water is pooling around your feet, how do you take that next step of faith? What do you do when some mysterious virus upsets your daily apple cart, and those in leadership just blame each other?

I wonder if that's why Scripture gives us less-than-perfect people as examples? Or even a perfect one! It's three o'clock in the morning, the fourth watch, a few hours before dawn, and the Disciples are somewhere on the North End of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has sent them on ahead in the only boat they had, while He stayed to dismiss the crowds. That's curious, isn't it? Wouldn't someone ask Him how He was going to get across?

Jesus then goes up on a nearby hillside in search of a solitary place to pray. He is obviously still dealing with His own grief. His cousin and friend, John the Baptist, has just been killed! Jesus has His own personal storm raging. So, He goes to the Father on His knees. Which is also what He did just before He sent His Disciples out to preach, right? And on the night that He was Transfigured right before their eyes! It's what He did as He shared the Last Supper with His Disciples in the Upper Room, and later that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's what He did from the Cross, asking for forgiveness for those who nailed Him there! In the middle of the storms, Jesus stops and prays! Is there a take-home in that for us? He also, by the way, prayed over the bread on the shore, just before He broke it and fed the multitudes!

So, we find Jesus praying in the middle of an emotional storm. And we find the Disciples, out in the middle of the lake, facing a storm of their own. In fact, it's a tempest, and it's raging all around them! And they are cowering down in the bottom of the boat, shaking with fear! What would you do? How about if you have no idea how you are going to find your next loaf of bread, if your body is betraying you and you don't know how to get healed, if you are all alone, straggling way-back from the others in the crowd, what in the world do you do at a time like that?

How do you survive, at a time like that, let alone thrive? When the wind is howling and the waves are crashing at the side of your little boat, how in the world do you step out in faith?

The boat, in Scripture, is often used as a metaphor for the Church. And I can see that. The believers are all together, cowering in fear, but together, as the angry storms pound away. So, what happens when the clouds start rolling in, and your calm sunny sail, as the Church, isn't all that smooth anymore? What do you do when you are drowning in "unknowns", and opinions seem to vary? What do you do when the followers of Jesus are huddled down in the bottom of the boat? What do you do when resources are in short supply, and you can't even find five loaves of bread, or two fish? A lot of Churches around the world are dealing with that right now!

What do you do when one of your Christian brothers or sisters throws you down a hole, metaphorically, if not physically? Or as you huddle down in the bottom of the boat, you notice that someone doesn't smell so good, that they are, indeed, less-than-perfect? What if the waves are crashing over the sides and it appears that you are the only one paddling? Or worse, if you think the Crew are paddling in the wrong direction! Is that when you jump over the side? Leave the boat? Or is that when you look up and notice Jesus coming towards you with outstretched arms, beckoning you to step out in faith?

Peter said, "Lord, if that's you, tell me to come out on the water with you." I like that! He didn't say, "Come to me, Lord, where I'm cowering in fear." He didn't say, "Save me, save me, while I just sit here on my butt." He said, tell me to step out of my comfort zone, meager as it is, and come to where you are, out in the middle of the storm!



Command me to leave the relative safety of whatever I'm clinging to, and Walk on the Water!  
Tell me to leap away from the familiar, jump off my comfy seat cushion, even in the middle of  
what appears to be a hurricane, to dive head-first into waters that are way over my head! Beckon  
me Lord, to trust in you!

I find it interesting that only Peter initially recognized Jesus as Lord! The others thought they  
were seeing a ghost! But Peter's first word is a proclamation of faith! Lord! I'm convinced that's  
what enabled him to step out in faith, and the real point of this passage! The boat is really  
rocking! The whitecaps are crashing over the sides! The wind is twisting the little vessel back  
and forth, and all of his friends are hunkered down, afraid to move. But Peter, even in the midst  
of all this, sees Jesus for who He truly is! And it's enough, isn't it! In fact, it's enough for him to  
Walk on Water himself, hand-in-hand with his Lord!

I also find it telling that when Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus, when he focuses on the wind and  
the waves instead of his Lord standing right there in front of him, that's when he begins to sink,  
and potentially drown. So, I wonder if there is some truth here for us as well?

By the time Peter and Jesus step back into the boat, the other Disciples have had an Epiphany  
themselves. Now they too recognize who Jesus is. "Truly, this is the Son of God," they proclaim!  
And then they "Worship Him", it says! They too turn to Jesus, and step out in faith! But was it  
only because He calmed the storm? Do you think they would have recognized Him if the  
Whirlwind continued? Do we? Because that may be the best question of all! Do we see Jesus for  
who He really is, reaching out for our hand, even as the storms rage around us?

When they landed, the Gospel of John tells us that the crowds had gathered once again. It also says though that Jesus admonished them saying, “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.” You’re following me with a tin cup in hand. You are here to find out what I can provide. You want something from me. That’s obvious! And I have something to give you! Truly! Only what you seek is the wrong thing. You’re following me for what you can get out me. What I want, is for you to follow me because of who I am! You see, I am the Bread of Life! And to paraphrase John Ortberg, “If you want to Walk on the Water, you need to step out of the Boat, in Faith”!

So, try to imagine a drowning world, buffeted by the wind and the waves. It shouldn’t be that hard to do these days. Imagine you, and your sisters and brothers in Christ, reaching out and pulling folks into safety, as you head together in the direction that Jesus has sent you. A drowning person needs a Lifeguard, you know. And ours, “Walks on Water”! So, the question remains to be answered. Will you step out in faith and point others to safety, or not? Will you Walk on the Water with Jesus, your Lord, or not? Will you do it, even in the midst of the storm, or not? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

Jesus, you are the Bread of Life set before a hungry people. Help us to be nourished now by your Presence. You are the Water of Life offered in a parched place. Help us to drink now from your Fountain of Grace. And you are the Light of the World in an ever-darkening time. Help us to turn towards you now in this time of prayer, and then reflect the Light we receive to all we meet.

Lord, so often we come to you for all the wrong reasons. We come for selfish reasons, or for things we want. We come to ask for Blessings, or to try and move your hand. We come to be fed, when what we really need is to feed ourselves. And yet Lord we do need these things. So, help us please, to set our priorities straight. Cause us to come before you in Worship and Praise! Make us to love you with all of our hearts, and minds, and souls, and strength. And then, only then, when we are in your Presence, humbly acknowledging you as Lord, allow us to open up our needs and desires to you. For you are the God of Mercy and Grace.

Lord, there are some things that are troubling us this morning, include those cares and concerns that we have just shared with you privately. Please gather these into your heart, and pour out upon us your love. Bless us with the gifts Lord, that will heal us and make us whole. And Bless our loved ones as well, particularly those that we lift up before you now such as.....

In confidence, Lord, we lay these burdens down. And with complete trust, and in total Faith, we lift up to you our prayers. We Worship you as our Lord and King—as our Cause and our Purpose and our Strength. And we pray to you now with very prayer that we were taught saying, Our Father...

## COMMUNION MEDITATION

Jesus is the Bread of Life, ready and willing to satisfy your hunger. The question is, what emptiness do you need to fill? He comes to the believers in the boat, and to the questioning crowds gathered on the shore, to the saints and the sinners alike. He eats with those who love Him, and with those who deny Him, and with those who betray Him. And He offers each and all Salvation. But in order to receive it, you need to recognize who He is! So, my hope is that you haven't just come here today to eat of a little piece of bread and drink from a small cup. But that you have come to Feast on the Lord!

## OFFERING MEDITATION

I'm continually reminded of how the multitudes received the bread they needed to survive! It started with sharing, and then, through Jesus, moved to blessing, abundant blessings that all could share! Our Offering, and our commitment of our time and talents to one another, is part of the first step in that process. Sharing! Our Lord "Gives"! And we are called to do the same! And through that, abundant Blessings flow!