

Sermon: Faith in a Teachable Moment

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33**

When I was a little kid, I watched a baseball roll through Bill Buckner's legs, and I have never been the same.

Now, why would I bring that up? That was years ago; as I said, I was just a little kid. Maybe, with all that's going on in the world right now, today's Genesis reading just bubbled some stuff up to the top, because it turns out that trauma has a lasting effect on us as individuals and as a society.

A clergy colleague was living in New Orleans when Katrina landed, and it was a terrifying experience for him. He wasn't hurt but the whole thing was a mess. He was working as a chaplain then and he saw and heard enough to last him a lifetime.

So, he and his wife decided that they had had enough with hurricanes and, decided that New England would make a nice change, so they moved to a nice little town on Cape Cod.

The first winter they were here, the weather forecasts warned of an impending nor'easter, so he thought they should get ready for it. My friend went to Lowe's and started filling up a shopping cart with the things he thought they would need. He had no idea what a nor'easter was or what they were like and he wasn't taking any chances.

But then he noticed what was in the cart. He thought, why do I need five flashlights? Do I need *all that duct tape*? There was no rhyme or reason to the things he had put in the cart. He started shaking. And then he realized that Katrina still had a hold on him. It was years before he could unwind the trauma experienced in that one event.

In the same way, Holocaust survivors often suffer from what we now call post-traumatic stress syndrome, or PTSD. That's no big surprise, given what they lived through. What is surprising is that their children sometimes struggle with anxiety and stress. A recent study discovered that catastrophic events could alter our body chemistry, and we can transmit these changes to the next generation.¹

In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 75 years later, to the day, some survivors find healing in telling their stories to a younger generation, but most can't talk about it at all.

Masao Nakazawa, a Japanese psychiatrist who has been treating atomic bomb survivors since the 1970s, calls the psychological scars they carry “the worst PTSD in human history.”²

Máire Dugan is a conflict resolution theorist and educator. She wrote that, “The longer a society or group has been plagued by violence, trauma, or conflict, the longer it will take to resolve” the issues that created the conflict.³ In other words, you have to resolve the issue and come to a reconciliation or the problem will never go away.

We're seeing this play out across the country here and there in the form of riots and violence that have no apparent root cause or source other than to express anger.

The work of reconciling the trauma of black slavery was never done in this country as it was done in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. Maybe what we're seeing is an ancient trauma bubbling back up to the surface again and again.

This is where the Bible can come in handy.

Selling Joseph into slavery is the beginning of a journey that will eventually come to a happy ending. Some Christian scholars see in Joseph a Christ-like figure: an innocent man whose suffering brought reconciliation to his brothers (and to the world too, if we heed the lessons of the story).

The cycle begins with another example of sibling rivalry, which is what most of the Book of Genesis is about. It doesn't end until chapter 50. It's an ongoing tale that we could say began with Cain and Abel and runs right on through to today. It's a story about human nature, and the lesson it teaches is a combination of what to do and what not to do.

Today's reading tells us that Joseph, the younger brother, is a source of tension for his brothers. In the reading, we learn that he is a tattletale; his brothers envied his beautiful robe; he could interpret dreams; *and* he had his father's love, more so than they. And Jacob, their dad, was oblivious to the tension.

So, the brothers conspired to murder Joseph. But the oldest brother, Reuben, put an end to that because he wanted to rescue Joseph himself so he could gain favor with Jacob. You can see how things were all twisted up in this family.

The kicker is that they sell him to the Ishmaelites, who happen to be their ancestral cousins – Ishmael was their grandfather Isaac’s brother, their great uncle! As Hamlet put it, they were “A little more than kin, and less than kind.”⁴

If you stopped reading right here, you might feel pity for Joseph, but as I said, there is a happy ending – for now. It even shows up in Psalm 105.

But for now, it’s an awful story. Where is God in this? Did God intend for all of this to happen? Or is God playing a long game? If Joseph had not been taken to Egypt, he would not have been able to save his family during the famine, which was on no one’s horizon – except for God’s. Psalm 105 confirms it: God’s foresight and divine planning sent Joseph ahead of them, and the whole thing foresees a time when a future pharaoh would free Joseph’s descendants from slavery to become a new nation.

So, an evil act resulted in Joseph saving his family from starvation. But he didn’t hold a grudge. At the very end of the book, he reconciled with his brothers, saying, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.” Now, we call that spinning the story.

Which brings us to today’s Gospel reading. Jesus and the disciples have just finished feeding a crowd of 5,000 and Jesus needs some downtime. He went up the mountain to pray but came down the next morning and went for a walk. There was nothing urgent about this; he was simply walking on the sea, minding his own business.

This is an epiphany story, meaning it’s about an appearance of a divine being – in this case, Jesus, revealed here as the Lord of the Sea and of Creation *and* of Chaos, and ‘those in the boat’ who realized that Jesus truly is the Son of God.

It’s also a faith story, a story about putting our faith in the right place. Eugene Boring says the phrase ‘little faith’ means a ‘mixture of courage and anxiety.’⁵ Peter has enough courage to get out of the boat but he is easily distracted by his fear of the strong wind. But in his fear and anxiety as he begins to sink, he calls out to Jesus to save him from something he cannot conquer on his own, and so Jesus does.

The question raised and answered by this story is, how can Matthew’s – and by extension, any – faith community survive without Jesus’ presence?

Biblically speaking, the boat has long been a symbol for the church. The Old Ship Church down the street is so-called in part because of the way it is built,

but an old ship can also be a symbol of salvation, as can any house of worship, ours included.

We are here because God has called us to be here; regardless of the steps we took to get here, here we are. New North's history from the very beginning is that of a faith community unafraid to rock the boat, so to speak. We were for abolition before that was a thing. We stepped out of the boat completely and built ourselves a new one, right here.

We are often called to get out of the boat, to take a chance, but sometimes we forget how to get back into it when we find ourselves in difficult times.

Christians live with faith mixed with doubt. It's part of the deal. We get caught up in life's storms, as we are today between the stresses of Covid-19 and civil unrest, not to mention the violent upheavals in other parts of the world, most recently in Beirut. There will always be a storm brewing somewhere.

But when we give Jesus his rightful place, which is here among us, when we meet him at the Table, then our faith is right, as Peter learned when he began to sink and called out for salvation.

When we focus on God in all that we do, we are lifted up. The seas will calm, and the wind will cease. Do not be afraid; God is with us both in and out of the boat.

Amen.

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¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/study-finds-ptsd-effects-may-linger-body-chemistry-next-generation>, accessed 7 August 2020.

² <https://www.thequint.com/news/world/hiroshima-nagasaki-caused-the-worst-ptsd-in-human-history>, accessed 7 August 2020.

³ Máire A. Dugan, "A Nested Theory of Conflict," *A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership – Sharing the Vision*, 1 (July 1996): 9-20.

⁴ Act 1, Scene 2.

⁵ M. Eugene Boring, Matthew in New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 328.