

Overcoming

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

Last week, poor Jesus, couldn't get any rest. After withdrawing for some time alone, he is interrupted by those seeking healing and blessing. He ministers to them before feeding the more than 5,000 with a miracle of turning little into much. This week, we pick up right from there.

Jesus puts the disciples in a boat and tells them he will meet them on the other side. Then, he dismisses the crowd and goes up a mountain alone to pray. Jesus is still trying to get some rest and renewal: some much needed self-care. He doesn't return to the disciples until the wee hours of the morning. Through the night the disciples have been rowing trying to cross the sea. There is an unrelenting head wind. The Greek says the wind "vexed" and "tormented" the disciples. They were working hard to reach the shore; they just could not make it there. They were dreaming of dry land and solid footing. They must have felt desperate.

Jesus senses the disciples' distress and comes to their aid. Our translation says he came in the early morning. The Greek also offers a metaphoric meaning. There I found it also means a "time for deeds of sin and shame" or a "time of moral stupidity and darkness". Jesus comes to the disciples when they are at their wits end, when all seems lost. Jesus comes out of nowhere to bring relief to their suffering at time where they would have surely begun to slip. Whether he literally walked on water or not, his healing presence would have been a miracle.

And, isn't that how God's presence usually feels? The peace, the calm, the resolution to a situation we thought had no solution just when we couldn't take much more. Just when life seems so insurmountable, we gather the fortitude to continue, we relax enough to enjoy what is, or we harness the energy to dream of a better tomorrow.

Often, our world is uncomfortable with dreamers. Sometimes we think of them as lazy, non-doers. But, sometimes, we recognize that genius and fortitude can be tied to dreams. What sets the two apart is the presence of God. When the dream mirrors God's calling in our lives, it is not really our dream. It is truly God's dream. This is at the heart of Joseph's story.

Joseph's family is dysfunctional to say the least. There is favoritism, sibling rivalry, hatred and threats of violence. Joseph has a strange dream that only makes things with his brothers worse. It's interesting the lectionary leaves this part out.

The quick version goes like this ... Joseph has a dream of he and his brothers binding sheaves of grain. Suddenly, Joseph's sheaf stands straight up. The brothers' sheaves gather around and bowed down to his sheaf. When he tells this dream to his brothers, they hate him even more than before.

Joseph's brothers read his dream as being an attempt to laud their father's favoritism over them. To Joseph and his father, the dream doesn't seem to make logical sense. The family, however, does have a history of God coming to someone in a dream. The last few weeks, we heard about how God visited Joseph's father, Jacob, in his dreams. While Jacob was certain God was the source of his dreams, he isn't too sure about Joseph's. He isn't sure he believes Joseph will come to be an authority in the family; Jacob simply makes a mental note of the dream.

Joseph's brothers, on the other hand, are incensed. When they see Joseph approaching them as they graze their flock, they make snide comments to one another. "Here comes this dreamer." "Let's kill him ... and see what becomes of his dream." (Genesis 37: 19-20)

There is a human propensity to shut down the dreams of others with violence. This happens both verbally and physically. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream intolerable to the man who shot him. The Black Lives Matter Movement has a dream they are hated and tear-gassed for. Those who feel threatened by such dreams are marred by their own feelings of inadequacy or by the stain of broken hurtful relationships in their own communities. Joseph's brothers feel inadequate in the face of Jacob's favoritism towards Joseph. The unequal love and admiration leave them insecure and fearful of their future. As a result, they perpetuate hurt and pain in the world.

This is an all too common occurrence. Today some in our society are so afraid that we will be brought into one human family by this pandemic that they cry out "masks are for sheep." "Be an alpha. Be free. Forget the mask." What they do not realize is that they simply are behaving as a beta following the pack leader, the alpha who first proclaimed the idea. It is the kind of plan that gets hatched by a Judah. It is the kind of plan that gets hatched by someone who is moving from a place of fear (fear of having to think of others, fear of being seen as part of a larger human family which includes people they despise), rather than a place of love. This is someone who is moving with human intentions rather than answering God's call. They refuse to see Jesus' dream that there be only one beloved community.

Dreams which come from God, however, cannot be dashed. They cannot be shutdown. All things are possible when we put aside fear, and focus on God. We may even walk on water.

The dream of life after the pandemic is alive and well right now. We yearn for a world where we can embrace one another and greet strangers again. We yearn for community like we once knew it. Yet, so much of how we experience the world today is about division, about isolation. To keep ourselves, our loved ones and society safe, we keep physical, tangible, painful distance from others. We have been doing this now for almost five months.

The need to keep it up (while incredibly draining and taxing) is not over. Cases are on the rise again here in Massachusetts. They are exploding all over the West and South. While we must remain vigilant in our social distancing and personal hygiene, the ache to be with others in meaningful ways only grows. We surely are in an in-between time.

We are in a time when we are no longer living the lives we thought we would have, and we are not yet in the life we will come to have. We are in a liminal space – what we colloquially call "limbo." It is disconcerting, and it is offensive to our understanding of what it means to be human, to be a part of a community or part of an extended family. While nothing like the horrors of slavery and nothing like the battle for civil rights, it is nevertheless a visceral reminder of other people's experience of liminal space, of perilous limbo.

Perhaps, it is like the time Joseph spent in the pit or what it might have been like for him to travel to an auction block and be sold into slavery. The life he knew before is gone. There was no getting it back. The future was a complete uncertainty. Yet, through it all, God was with him.

The power of liminal space is its ability to make space for healing. Joseph comes out of a liminal space not of his choosing to rise to a position of authority in the Pharaoh's court. Jesus

comes out of his chosen liminal space of prayer and self-care recharged and ready for his ministry.

This pandemic time could be our time to focus on what matters. It could be a time in which we focus on loving and life-giving things. It could be a time where we offer ourselves the care we need, the care we might have been putting off for far too long, in order to reinvigorate our love and care for our neighbor. We can, and *should*, recharge so that we can go out better equipped to serve the ways of Jesus. Once we are powered up again, Jesus' example reminds us it is time to get back to sharing the love with others. He walks on water to reach his disciples. He readily calms the seas. He is, once again, so full of love he is able to heal people by their simple touch of his clothing (Matt 14: 34-36). This miracle is something he has not done since the early days of his ministry. (Matt 9:20-21) But, refreshed and renewed, he does it once more.

So, refresh and renew yourself. Do not be afraid to embrace this limbo time. Remain vigilant in your self-care and your care for others. Through such acts of love, we will reinvigorate our lives and our mission, and be lifted up into new heights of beloved community. God *is* calling us forward to a new life.