

Proper 14 A

Baptism

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22

Romans 10: 5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

On a quiet afternoon  
Gliding downwind  
Through hazardous but familiar waters,  
Homing towards a beloved harbor,  
We saw a boat adrift.

A lovely wooden boat,  
Drifting slowly towards the rocks.

One of us went below to radio for help,  
But then,  
As we got closer,  
We saw a man on the deck,  
And with him,  
A small child.

No immediate crisis,  
But no time to wait for help to arrive.  
We went as close as was prudent,  
And then I got in the dinghy with another  
And rowed over to the drifting boat.

The man was helpless,  
And his little girl was scared.  
After some conversation –  
All the while drifting towards the rocks –  
It became clear that there was nothing wrong  
Except that the man was completely out of his depth.  
He had been directed  
To secure a mooring line,  
Which he did not know how to do,  
And then left aboard alone with his daughter  
While the captain went ashore.  
So when the boat slipped her mooring line,  
And drifted away,  
He had no idea what to do.

There was nothing wrong with the boat,  
And the conditions were benign.  
The man had everything he needed,  
But he had no idea what to do.

We tried to help him help himself.  
But talking points were useless.

Finally, we got aboard,  
Found a key,  
Started the engine,  
And motored him back to the mooring.  
And left him,  
Securely fastened this time,  
To await the captain's return.

What do we do,  
when the captain is ashore  
and the boat drifts helpless,  
or is battered by the waves?

For many of us,  
The boat is an image of the self.  
We set off from the shore,  
Onto the sea of the unknown future,  
And we find clear skies,  
Calm seas and a prosperous voyage,  
Or we are battered by the winds,  
Swamped by a rogue wave,  
Or we drift rudderless and helpless.

What was it like,  
For the disciples?  
Sent away without their captain,  
Off onto the sea that had once been so familiar.  
Once their whole world changed,  
The sea was no longer their home.  
They had found a new center in him.  
Now he was their world,  
And the sea was strange,  
And they were lost without him.

The wind and waves were against them,  
And they were getting nowhere.

And even when he appeared,

They were confused and afraid.

Are we like the disciples,  
Lonely in the boat  
That has no captain,  
And far from shore?

Like Joseph in the pit,  
Like the disciples in a fragile boat,  
tossed on a wild and stormy sea,  
we see danger and disaster all around us.  
Joseph is trapped in a hole  
With no water,  
He can't move,  
And there nothing to see but the empty sky.  
The disciples are adrift in a storm,  
Nothing to see but water,  
Nothing to hold them fast.

Trapped or adrift,  
Like them,  
We've lost our moorings  
And we can't see a way out,  
Or around, or through.

This is the moment  
For Jesus to come to us across the water,  
Reaching out his hands in love.

If only it were so simple.

Sometimes,  
Every once in a great while,  
Jesus does come,  
At the moment of greatest need,  
And lift us up,  
Like a lost and broken lamb  
And carry us home  
To safety, hope, and healing.  
But that's a different story  
Than the one we hear today.

In this story,  
We don't know him when he comes.

We so often don't see God at work,

Don't recognize Jesus when he comes,  
Don't feel the Holy Spirit as she passes by.

In the Joseph story,  
It takes years for all the harm to unwind,  
Years of betrayal and fear and oppression,  
Years of uncertainty,  
Of hard work and vision and hope.  
It is not clear to Joseph,  
When they fish him out of the pit,  
That things are going to get better.  
It's a long story,  
And most of the way through,  
God is hidden.

God is hidden  
In the long and complicated story of Joseph,  
And hidden in the person  
Of Jesus walking on the water.  
The disciples in the boat  
Think Jesus is a ghost,  
Until they hear his voice.

And then,  
Perhaps,  
They learn to hope.  
They can hang on until he comes aboard.

Like the disciples,  
We're being tossed about on steep waves,  
With strong and shifting winds whirling against us.

There is only one thing  
That keeps us safe.

It is only Jesus,  
Who calls to us across the water,  
Only the presence of Jesus  
Returning to us over and over again  
That makes this boat ride  
An act of courage.

Without Jesus,  
It's simply rash  
To be out here on the waves.

But Jesus calls us,  
And listening to his voice,  
We can set out across the water.  
If we're going towards him,  
We're going in the right direction.

But we're human.  
That means that sometimes,  
We can't help it,  
We take our eyes off his face,  
We look around at the storm,  
And then – this is really scary –  
We look down and there's only water under our feet.

That's when anybody – anybody –  
Would start to sink.

“Why did you doubt?”  
That's what the story says Jesus said.

I'm not so sure that's what he said,  
Because doubt was not what Jesus cared about –  
Or at least, not the doubt we think about  
When we think we know what doubt means.

We can talk about the usual kinds of doubt another time –  
It has little to do with what is or is not true –  
Really the word means being of two minds about something.

But the word Jesus uses here –  
Or the word the story says Jesus used –  
Is a special word  
That really means “waver.”

“Why did you waver?”  
You were heading out across the water,  
your eyes on the prize,  
and then you wavered.  
You lost your balance.  
Until Jesus reached out his hand.

You of little faith, he says,  
Why did you waver?

Jesus did care about what he called “little faith.”  
If faith is at least in part about relationship,

Then little faith is a faith  
That can't hold the thread,  
Can't keep eye contact  
With the one who is always looking at us in love.

That's the story we need to hear.  
That's a story for us,  
Right here, right now.  
When we waver,  
And start to sink,  
There is one who will meet our eyes,  
reach across the water,  
And draw us close,  
and bring us where we need to be.

We can trust  
That this is true.

How do we know it's true?

Because this is the promise given at our baptism.  
The new life of grace.

Our baptism story is a story of water,  
A story of hands outstretched.

Our baptism story is a story of wavering,  
Of looking down  
and seeing nothing but water under our feet,  
And then,  
Again and again,  
Reaching out for the hand  
That is always reaching out for us.

Baptism is the moment  
When we grasp that strong and gentle hand  
And find ourselves back where we belong,  
Ready to begin again.

Baptism is the sign  
That though Jesus may send us on ahead,  
out into the waves and storm,  
he will never abandon us,  
but will always be coming to us across the water,  
ready to be recognized,  
ready to reach out a hand,

ready to still the storm.

Baptism is the moment  
When Jesus comes aboard the boat  
That is our frail and helpless self,  
Showing us how and where to find  
What is already there,  
Enough and more than enough  
To bring us safely home.