

Last Monday I had the opportunity to finish reading a book I had started a few weeks before. It was a novel written in 3 parts – I had really enjoyed the first two parts – so much in fact that I had been saving the 3rd section for my day off so I could savour the ending and enjoy the experience.

I set myself up with a cup of tea and the comfy chair and read – and it was bizarre! A period coming of age novel about a woman living in early 20th century London, became the story of a woman who spoke to the Devil and came to an understanding through a talking cat that she was a witch!

Now there were many layers of metaphor being expressed in this novel, and I am sure I missed most of it – but when I was done I put the book on the sofa and looked at it. I just couldn't quite work it out. While the book was well written, with some really lovely descriptions – I am not sure I have any idea – even a week on – how the book ended! It was so much not what I expected!

I had waited to read the end of this book because I wanted a reading hug – I wanted to savour the lovely writing and the fantasy of the main characters life – but in the end the fantasy went so far I couldn't understand how we got there or even where we had landed.

While this was an experience with a relatively short novel it made me think about how often this is also the case in life. We plan for things to go in a particular way – we hope for an outcome – and things take a turn we hadn't expected and we land in a peculiar place. Often the outcome of this is to lose hope, but it can also lead to other feelings as well.

Our readings today are not unlike this – they two recount events that don't go to plan for some of the characters, or result in an unexpected and confronting outcome. They are both experiences which come as a result of fearful and threatening situations, and challenge us to consider how we also deal with the unexpected, or confronting, and also how we respond to fear.

Our reading from Genesis this week moves on to the next generation in the story of Israel as we meet Joseph and his brothers. This part of Genesis is a long narrative story and we are given vignettes to savour today.

In our story Jacob¹ loved Joseph more than any other of his children ... ” (37:3a). Parental favouritism is nothing new to stories in Genesis. At Genesis 22:2, God describes Isaac to Abraham as “your son, your only son, the one you love,” despite the fact that Abraham has another son, Ishmael.

The theme of favouritism is even more pronounced in the stories of Jacob and Esau, where Rebekah conspires with her favourite son Jacob to take the blessing from Isaac's favourite son Esau. The narrative uses the term love (Hebrew 'hb) to describe

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2167

that favouritism: “Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Genesis 25:28). Especially striking in the Joseph story is the way that Jacob’s love for Joseph inspires the opposite emotion, hatred, in Joseph’s brothers (37:4²).

But Joseph, while the victim at this point is not innocent in this story either. What this narrative gives us is an insight into the dysfunction which has emerged in the way that this family relates to one another and to those around it. The dysfunction in Joseph’s family stems not from any one source, but rather from the brokenness of all parties. This story is part of the larger biblical story of promise and fulfilment and inspires us as readers to contemplate the ways that the stories of suffering and triumph are interlinked and to consider the presence of God in the midst of good and bad alike – it is also a story of our need for healing and wholeness.

God is not just with us when things are going well, God is also with us in the tumult and the suffering, and when we are afraid, as well. God knows our brokenness and longs for us to want to change and be whole. Even for those who are chosen the journey of life and promise doesn’t always go as might be expected.

If we think this is only a message of the Old Testament we can turn to our gospel reading to confirm this trend. So often when we hear and reflect on today’s gospel readings and its parallel story of Jesus calming the waves earlier in Matthew 8 – we focus on our faith in Jesus who calms the storms if only we have faith. But when we hone in on this part of the story we miss the wider image and message. In this story, as with the other, Jesus only calms the waves after he sends the disciples out into it!

The text says that Jesus made the disciples get into the boat (14:22). A better translation of this main verb would be “to force” or “to compel.” Jesus did not give the disciples a choice. He compelled them to get into the boat and to leave him alone with the crowds.

Jesus stays on the mountain to pray. While Jesus is alone conversing with God, the disciples find themselves in a life-threatening situation. The disciples have been struggling to keep afloat for a while. Jesus does not come till the early morning hours - while it is still dark.

The disciples, though, do not initially recognize Jesus in the midst of the chaos. They have been alone with the threatening waves for hours. They are probably tired from being up all night. In the midst of this crisis when their energy reserves are spent, Jesus reveals himself to them.

In Matthew’s Gospel, this story is meant to reveal who Jesus is. And that revelation is possible in the midst of the chaos. If Jesus had not forced the disciples to embark

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2167

on this uncertain journey, they would have missed the opportunity to see God revealed in their midst.

Now this doesn't mean that we need to enter tumult or fearful events to have God revealed to us – but it is true that it often when we are outside our comfort zone that we do recognise who God is and where God is

We learn about ourselves and our God through our interactions with others and world. Our life, our memories, our experiences, individually and collectively make us who we are! Like Joseph's family, there is brokenness in our world – and we will find God revealed as we address this brokenness – not just ignore it or sweep it under the carpet as if it doesn't matter.

One of the common factors in both these stories is that of fear. We all experience fear – though we don't often talk about that fear, or acknowledge that that is our motivation – even to ourselves. Joseph's brothers are fearful of the favouritism Joseph experience; and express this in their anger. Peter also is fearful!

Peter doesn't just flounder because he takes his eyes off of Jesus, but because he grows afraid. And, quite frankly, that fear is justified. It's a storm, raging powerfully enough to sink the boat, let alone drown a single person. He has perfectly good reason to be afraid.

And so do we! Whether it's a fear of the return of illness, of the stability of a fragile relationship, of loneliness after loss, of not being accepted by those we esteem, of whether we'll fare well in a new chapter in our lives, of what future our congregation has, of the direction of our country, or what is happening on the world stage and between nations.... You name it, there is a lot for us as individuals, or as a congregation, and corporate lives that can make us afraid. And that fear can be debilitating. It sneaks up on us, paralyzes us, and makes it difficult to move forward at all, let alone with confidence. Fear, in short, is one of the primary things that robs the children of God of the abundant life God intends for us, and for this reason many scholars, including David Lose encourage us to take Jesus' words to the disciples near the end of the passage (v. 31) more as lament than as rebuke³.

In response to Peter's fear, however, Jesus doesn't simply urge him to courage or instruct Peter to keep his eyes on him. Rather, when Peter begins to sink, Jesus reaches out and grabs him, saving him from drowning and restoring him to his vocation as disciple. And so also with us! Jesus will not let us go. Jesus is with us. Jesus will not give up on us. Jesus will grab hold of us when we falter and restore us to where we can be of service.

This is the promise at the heart of this story, all of Matthew's Gospel, and indeed of our faith: that God will never give up, that God is with us and for us, that God, in the end, will do what we cannot. And this promise is the one thing that helps us

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-10-a-something-more/>

cope with and transcend fear. It even in many ways transcends uncertainty and the unexpected. Fear is a part of our lives, and we should take care that being fearful is not equated with faithlessness. Courage, after all, isn't the absence of fear but the ability to take our stand and do what needs to be done even when we're afraid⁴.

God invites us in these stories to take hold, to recognise God in our midst, to allow our faith to sustain us whatever we might have to face. Or as Jesus reminded the disciples 'take heart' and grab hold!

Amen.

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-10-a-something-more/>