

“A Journey Unknown”
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

Please join me in exploring our continued biblical story-telling about the lives of Jacob and Jesus and our own national narrative in this uncertain time. Sometimes we can identify with characters in these important narratives, and sometimes we can just identify God being with us along the journey. Let us seek God’s Word anew for us today.

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Genesis 37:1-8, 12-28

Matthew 14:22-33

“Who’s streets? Our Streets!” Was being chanted by a group protesting the “unite the right” event where the Alt-right, the KKK and the Nazi party descended on Charlottesville Virginia yesterday.

“Who’s streets? Our streets!” was the claim being made by people of all racial and gender backgrounds who had gathered to demonstrate an alternative message from the violent racist hate speech they encountered on this disturbing day.

“Who’s streets? Our streets!” Was the rallying cry of nonviolent organizers who had hope in their democratic institutions to carry out the wishes of their democratically elected leaders to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee that was seen as an idol of their confederate past and a normalizing force in the narrative of racial oppression. The push to remove images like Lee’s statue may never have began if not for another incident of white terrorism in 2015 where a young white man massacred nine black members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. An act of terror that led many elected officials to finally act on resident’s concerns that glorifying our white supremacist history was dangerous for all people.

Six months ago, a Washington Post article describing the discernment process in Charlottesville said, “Vice Mayor, Wes Bellamy, the council’s only African American member and the man who led the push for change, pleaded with residents to try to better understand each other.”

He said, “You, my friends — regardless of your skin color, regardless of your position on this issue — are not my enemy,” he said. “However, I will be very clear, we will not be bullied. We will not be pushed away. And we — we, for the last time — are not going anywhere.”

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“Who’s streets? Our streets!” was a declaration of shared ownership in our nation’s path that is no longer directed by the all white male voices of our history books. The streets, the land, the voice of the people is shared by all in our democratic society - a shared space that multitudes of people have risked their lives in order to join and make space for others.

“Who’s streets? Our streets!” was the chant of the people who were violently attacked by a man in a silver sports car that plowed through the crowd at high speed, causing chaos, injuring dozens and killing three people yesterday.

What would provoke a white man, with all the privileges born to him in this country, to turn his car into a murder weapon in support of a statue? Like many terrorists in our country’s history, this white man used violence to promote fear and perhaps to exact some cheap revenge for his own feelings of loss that could be caused by any number of local or global issues.

While the issues of a shrinking middle class and a diversifying nation might have daily impacts on white supremacist organizers, this day of action in Charlottesville was not a crime of passion. This was a meticulously planned event with thousands of attendees from across the country. This was an event planned to evoke fears in local residents to undermine the long term work of the democratic process that had led to the planned removal of the Lee statue. All actions to bring weapons, provoke violence and use violence on those in their way were planned out before they arrived.

These crimes are not unlike the crime that Joseph’s brothers commit against Isaiah’s most beloved son in our Genesis text this morning. When Joseph was still a long way off in the distance - searching for his brothers as his father had requested - his brothers conspired to kill him. This was not an act of passion provoked after being forced to listen to another of Joseph’s dreams of coming to rule over them or after receiving punishment for a complaint made by their beloved brother. The brother’s had judged Joseph to not be worthy of his own breath while he was still a long way off because of their hatred for him.

This may have been misplaced hate - captured for a generation by mothers and sons that their father, Jacob, had never wanted, forced into marriages for financial gain and to produce children, while the woman that Jacob loved remained isolated from him. Of his thirteen children, only two were born to his beloved Rachel - Joseph and his brother Benjamin whose labor led to Rachel’s death. Joseph was the only child with whom Jacob had memories of bringing joy to his beloved Rachel. None of the other children seemed to mean so much to him.

These men - born to enslaved mothers - inherited the trauma of their family and needed to release their rage. Instead of finding ways to talk about it or learn more about themselves, they

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zero in on Joseph as the target of their rage. These grown men, caring for thousands of goats out in the wilderness, meticulously plan out how they would capture and potentially murder their brother in cold blood. They say, “let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.”

“Let us see what will become of his dreams.” What a sinful line. When Joseph tells his brothers his dreams that seem to foretell of a time when he will rule over them, they immediately see Joseph as a threat to their own power and inheritance. These dreams are not seen as a blessing. They are not heard as messages from God that might inform them of things to come. They are not heard with the care or understanding of an older brother who might imagine his younger brother dreaming of someday having power of his own. They are not heard as the imaginings of a younger brother - always in the position of helper to his older siblings. The brothers reacted from a mentality of scarcity that saw blessings for Joseph as a threat for themselves. Their response to an abundance of blessing for Joseph was to get rid of him all together.

Thanks to the fast thinking of a supportive brother Reuben, Joseph is not killed, but instead his brothers sell him into slavery to make some profit in their act of methodical rage. From the bottom of a pit, Joseph would have been able to hear his brothers organizing to enslave him to a passing caravan while they dispassionately ate their lunch.

Joseph is not the only one to have a dream. I know of at least one person who had a dream that his children would one day live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I know the Standing Rock Sioux tribe that had a dream that one day they would have a voice in the care and destruction of their land. I know the city of Charlottesville had a dream to empower all people in their community by removing monuments to hate that promoted fear.

Like the children of Israel in our narrative today, those who marched on Charlottesville yesterday mistook the dreams of their neighbors as threats to their own existence. Those that marched under the Nazi and confederate flags yesterday failed to recognize the abundance of God that surpasses understanding if we just listen for God’s call.

Perhaps critiquing the Nazi’s is a bit too easy, simplistic and terrifying to be a focus in this sermon. I hope we can agree that the racist and destructive ideology of the Nazi party and the KKK should be condemned outright. This is far from the love and grace of God. We live in dangerous and uncertain times, and there is much more to be inspired by than simply avoiding being a Nazi.

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When we meet Jesus in today’s scripture, it is clear that he too is living in a dangerous and uncertain time. As you may remember from last week, John the Baptist had just been killed by the state for naming the sins of those in power. Jesus had sought solitude away from his followers to mourn and pray to God, but in that moment of chaos and fear, Jesus’ followers from every town sought him out as their refuge and received a miraculous meal. And as the miracle of feeding the five thousand came to a close, Jesus immediately hurried the disciples off onto their boat to continue their journey. Jesus immediately dismisses the crowds himself to get them home before nightfall - when he found himself alone.

Finally Jesus had the alone time he wanted to pray. He could pray for the people. He could pray for his beloved John the Baptist. And he could also pray for his own ministry that he knew was getting close to upsetting the authorities. Jesus’ ministry of healing and grace was just as vulnerable to attack as John the Baptist was.

Eating with lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes was seen as unclean to the religious elite. Jesus provided access to the divine to those who had been cut off from any form of relationship. Like our counter-protesters yesterday chanting, “Whose streets? Our streets!” Jesus’ followers could have similarly chanted, “Who’s God? Our God!” - encouraging the same access, grace and love of God to all people. This Good News was causing social and spiritual upheaval that would be the foundation of the kingdom of God.

As the disciple’s attempted to travel across the lake, the chaos and upheaval in the waters and winds tossed their boat along an uncertain path in the dark of night. When Jesus had finished his prayer, he returned to the disciples by walking on the chaotic water!

I too would likely be terrified by this sight. The disciples had just left Jesus at the beach with thousands of people. It might be easier to believe that the authorities had come to assassinate Jesus in the night - somehow leaving a ghost to haunt them on the waters.

Instead, the disciples experience a new skill of their holy teacher - to walk on water - seemingly to arrive in Gennesaret more quickly to heal their sick. Jesus was in a rush - perhaps because he knew his time was limited.

As Jesus hurries back to the boat, it is Peter who calls out to make sure it is truly Jesus approaching them. Peter has a strange request. If this was truly Jesus, then Peter believed he could call on him to walk on water as well.

Peter requested the call from Jesus and then waited to listen for Jesus’ call onto the waters. Jesus simply said, “Come,” and Peter stepped out onto the choppy water. He started walking toward

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Jesus. He was able to do it! It wasn't until he noticed the strong wind that accompanied the storm that Peter became frightened, lost focus on Jesus, and began to sink. He cried out, “Lord, save me!”

The author again uses the word “immediately” to describe Jesus' actions. He not only immediately moved the disciples into the safety of their ship, immediately dismissed the crowds, and immediately spoke to the disciples when appearing on the water. Jesus, then, immediately reached out his hand and caught him. Jesus responds without hesitation or fear. He acts out of his loving relationship with Peter. And in this act of rescue, Peter and Jesus are able to deepen their mutual trust in each other.

Perhaps the most telling comment in this narrative that distinguishes other humans from our “fully human and fully God” Jesus is Jesus' response to Peter's fall. Jesus says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Peter had been the one to trust in Jesus from the start AND to trust in Jesus to bring him out on the water for this test of faith. Why, then, did his faith falter after he began this miraculous exercise? As a fellow human being, I can relate to Peter's experience: You take time to prepare for God's call. You listen in your context for where God is leading you in your journey of faith. You take a leap into a new practice - a new job, a new ministry, a new family role, a new identity in the community - and at first it is exciting and clear - you are in the right place! As you continue to follow this particular path, however, you begin to notice the problems of your peers; you begin to anticipate the dangers around you; you begin to question your path and all the anxieties and fears it produces in you. Like Peter, you begin to sink.

Jesus definitely experiences the dangers, anxieties and fears in the people and communities around him, but he is never immobilized by them. Perhaps his internalized sense of hope and connection with God's love allows him to live outside these negative feelings that inspire so much sin and brokenness in our lives.

Peter doesn't have an answer for Jesus, and perhaps that is the most honest response he can provide. As human beings, we know we will experience events that will cause us to falter. This does not mean, however, that we don't have faith in God. We can maintain our hope in God and our connection to the call of Jesus on our lives - even in the face of failure - because when we falter, when we succumb to fear, when we allow hate and brokenness to rule our lives, Jesus is there immediately to pick us up and renew our spirits to be in right relationship with God again.

Where is Jesus in the life of this church today? How has God's Word shaped us in our context? Let us live like Peter - calling out to Jesus to invite us into our calling as faithful disciples.

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Where are we going? Where do we put our faith? What are we willing to do, to risk, to practice, in order to live out our faith - even a faith that falters in the face of our fears or anxieties?

Let's take time to discern how we will live our faith and walk out onto the raging sea. Before Peter stepped out on the water he listened for Jesus to call on him by saying, "come." Let's spend this time together listening for God's call on us.

A calling starts from your context - personal, geographical, political, racial, economical and educational. Where are we and who can we serve in ministry to God?

We live in a national context where the symptoms of white supremacy are becoming more overt every day. This latest attack on public space by those enforcing our national legacy of white supremacy is a symptom of a broken system pushing back against loving transformation. What is our role in this national context of racism that is enforced in our local community as well?

We live in a context where hope is not always available, where economic and physical violence are the norm. We may be called to nurture, to love, to empower, to inspire, to create, to protect or to protest.

What journey does Jesus call us to when we step out on these stormy seas? Perhaps we have already stepped out and started to sink.

What stormy seas have you encountered that, like Peter, cause distraction and despair that keep you from walking on water? We regularly get burnt out after investing all of ourselves into someone or something that ends up disappointing us or betraying us. The obstacles in our path might become overwhelming as we go along. We don't always have the clarity of mind to call out to Christ, "Lord save me!"

In this new uncertain age where Nazis and KKK members march openly in the streets, let us not forget that God is with us. As Carol Howard Merritt of the Christian Century reminded me yesterday, we are never alone in the chaos. Clergy and nonviolent activists in greater numbers and greater fortitude from all backgrounds were present at this White Supremacist riot - to embolden a culture of peace amidst violence and inspire a multitude of peacemakers to make space for those who remain oppressed in our society. They were there to declare, "Whose streets? Our streets?"

As we live through this moment of fear and anxiety, let us also call out to Jesus, "Lord save us!" Let us take risks for God's love that require God's help. Let us declare, "Whose God? Our God?" Let us journey together in the stormy seas, hand in hand.

Amen

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