

Sermon August 13, 2023 Fr. Nick Smith
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 Psalm 105, 1-6, 16-22, 45b Romans 10:5-15 Matthew
14:22-33

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

Did you ever get that sinking feeling? And just when you thought all was fine; just when you were filled with enthusiasm and ready to step out with a chuckle of joy, before the laws of physics reminded you that it wasn't such a good idea after all? What was Peter thinking?? Literally, what was he thinking when he began to sink into the cold lake waters? What sudden questions crossed his startled mind? Wait...aren't I doing what Jesus asked? Isn't my faith strong enough? Am I being punished? Aren't all things possible for God? Why is this happening to me? Didn't I offer the church enough of my time, talent, and treasure? What do I do now?! Will God save me? Friends, I think that this little passage contains many of the famous Biblical questions, the ones the scriptures all promote over and over again. And if you are one who frequently "thinks theologically", I expect that you're familiar with many of these questions. The characterization of one who thinks theologically, BTW, is a complicated scholarly explanation, but just think of it as one who feels that Jesus is standing at his shoulder all the time, close enough so that you could just turn to him and ask him "what do you think about that?" If you often pass the time asking questions about creation, sin, judgment, and redemption, then you might be thinking theologically. If you're one who wonders why God, in his wisdom, invented the laws of physics and made his beloved creatures subject to them, then you're probably asking one of the representative biblical questions. And if your first reaction to that sinking feeling is something like "Lord save me now!", then you're in good New Testament company.

In our reading from the Old Testament, Joseph is having a bad week. Okay, his father, Jacob, loves him very much, and trusts him, even gives him a special multi-colored cloak to wear. But when he sends Joseph out to check-in with his brothers, who, BTW are destined to become the 12 tribes of Israel, he is sending him into an unintended catastrophe. Joseph is happy to go, of course, but first he doesn't find them where they are supposed to be, and when he does, they jealously gang up on him and threaten to kill him. Only the by the consciences of Rueben and Judah does he survive, and even then he is thrown in an empty cistern and then sold as a slave to a passing caravan. He seems naïve and gullible. Notice that he doesn't scream or say anything when his brothers attack him. He doesn't even beg for mercy from down there in the pit while his brothers are sitting at the rim having dinner. Does he think they are playing a joke on him? Does he think that he is part of a Keep-Away game with his famous coat? Does he have that sinking feeling as he is lowered into the cistern? Some years and 10 Genesis chapters later, after Joseph oddly becomes a big-wig in Egypt, his sinful brothers will have that same sinking feeling when they must face the judgmental music as they cross paths with him; but more about that next week.

O Shrove Tuesday, the evening of our pancake dinner, I was feeling pretty good. I had ritual work to do burning dried palm leaves, Gale was in town, Slaunwhites were in the kitchen, God was apparently in his heaven, and all seemed right with the world. Filled with enthusiasm and a chuckle of joy, carrying two armloads of equipment and not holding onto the railing, I somehow in my haste missed the first step and had that familiar sinking feeling as the laws of physics kicked in. They weren't suspended, though I was in midair. As everything proceeded in slow-motion, I turned to Jesus at my shoulder and asked 'so, what do you think?' But before he could answer, I landed on the ground, my leg caught and twisted in the railing and my skull bouncing off the new driveway. Noticing that Jesus hadn't yet definitively answered my question, I looked up and thought I saw him there in the

darkness, leaning down to ask me if I was all right. Turns out, It was actually Mark and Leslie, but that was good, too. God may have invented the laws of physics, not to mention physiology and other worldly systems, to make life more predictable and dependable for his beloved creatures, but more importantly perhaps, God invented grace. Even when we do something foolish, even when we are victims to the foolishness of others, even when we are subject to illness or death, the grace of God persists. When Peter calls out “Lord, save me!”, the grace of God is there. And Jesus has his own question, “Why did you doubt?”

Paul, who had his own sinking feeling when he hears the voice of Jesus questioning him like thunder on the road to Damascus, writes to the Christianized Romans about God’s grace. In today’s reading he proclaims that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But saved how? And from what? From making foolish mistakes? From sickness and death? From inaccurate thinking? From disappointment? From guilt? From accidents? From unintended consequences? Keep asking those questions, for they are not irrelevant. God’s salvation seems to come in the form of grace. Grace is unconditional love. It does not depend on wisdom, or accuracy, and it is, our faith teaches, always forgiving. Live the questions and let them shape your thoughts. Let them open your mind to fragrant possibilities. Let them open the scriptures to you. Let them inspire in you an inquiring mind. If you need healing, it may well be the questions which will lead you through your formation, not some quick answers. Call out to the Lord with questions, and be patient for a reply, knowing that the reply might also be a question in return. When I send out prayer requests to your email accounts, I try to select my words carefully. When I give you a suggestion of how to pray and what to pray for, I often begin with the word “may”...may God embrace a hurting person, for example, or may Jesus be known to them. When I begin a thought like that, with the word ‘may’, my computer program always wants to add a question mark to the punctuation, which I then must delete. But, truthfully, that question mark makes some sense, for how and what God is being asked to do is indeed mysterious. Peter might better have called out “Lord, may I still be saved?” His formation as a disciple and church leader might have benefitted more from that question.

But the most important question is the one which offers us a path to follow, and it is as important after our salvation as before it. That question, I think, is “What is the faithful thing to do now?” When Jesus has pulled Peter up out of the lake, when Joseph has become influential in Egypt, when I survived the clumsy exit from the parish hall, when by grace you are saved from your own predicament, the appropriate and useful question is “What’s the faithful thing to do now?” After being brought up short on the Damascus road, Paul changes from a persecutor to a champion of Christians; he has found a way to do a faithful thing. When Peter is rescued, he chooses a faithful thing and becomes the rock upon which Christ builds the church. After my fall, I asked myself that question and in the asking was led to ponder whether caring for my injuries or going ahead with Ash Wednesday services would be the more faithful thing to do. And I learned a few things, and still am living that question as part of my personal formation. Would I make the same choice again? Was what I chose the more faithful thing? What’s the faithful thing to do this time? I can’t promise you that asking yourself that question, or that asking that question over your shoulder to Jesus, will prevent you from enduring that sinking feeling ever again, but after Jesus has reliably rescued and reassured you, it may become the best consequence and the best offering to God you can give. May it, with God’s help, improve your life. Amen