

Lifted Up

Matthew 14:22-33 and Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

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By Janet DeWater

Today's gospel reading is one of those familiar and wonderful stories of the experience of stepping out in faith, becoming afraid, of calling out to Jesus, being lifted up and ending in renewed faith. And it all happens in about six short verses!

We hear this pattern also today in our Hebrew scriptures with the start of a long saga about Jacob and his sons, the most well known of whom is Joseph. Only this story happens over the course of ten long chapters! We have to be a little bit more patient to get to the good that has grown out of the bad, and there certainly is a lesson to be learned from that!

This pattern is, I would say, is a universal and often recurring experience. For to understand our faith is to understand that we are held in God's care always. But it is also to understand that even when we set out in faith, we can be afraid and we can slip in our confidence, and sometimes we might even fear that God is not there. And yet, over and over again, we hear the stories of God's presence with God's people. And over and over again God is present in our stories.

I've invited three of today's main characters to come and speak about their experience from their perspective. Joseph, Rueben and Jacob, would you please come forward...

Based on Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

**Joseph (first reader):** I lie in this pit, damp and filled with bugs. It's night and I'm cold and afraid. If only I could get a message to my father; would he ever let the brothers have it! Maybe it's not surprising. I've seen it in their eyes for a long time how they can't stand me. Maybe I could have kept my mouth shut a little more, but it still gives them no right. Maybe they are used to living outside like this each night, but I'm sure not. I don't know the first thing about surviving out here. I look up at the stars and I remember the story my father told me from the time I toddled at his knees. It's the story of my great-grandfather Abraham who journeyed to this strange land. God told him in a vision that he would bring about a nation whose inhabitants would number that of the stars. At times like these, that story seems so silly and from such a different time. As if God speaks so plainly. Yet I do hold on to my dreams. I am bound for greatness. I don't know how or what will happen, but I will hold on to my dreams. Wait...I think I hear voices. The brothers said something about traders along this route.

**Reuben (second reader):** I know you're probably thinking after hearing our story, "Gee, what a coward," that I didn't stand up to my brothers to do the right thing by the prima donna Joseph. Here I am elbow deep in goat's blood, splattering it on his robe so we have something to tell our father. "Joseph was killed by a wild beast, Dad." It'll be my responsibility, you know – I'm the oldest. When I went back to the pit and found that Joseph was gone, I ripped my clothes and fell to my knees. How could this have happened? I should have taken better charge of things, but it all happened in a way that was beyond my wildest imagining. Still...(sigh)... it was probably only a matter of time before something like this was going to happen to our young brother. If I told him once, I told him a dozen times, "Fine, go ahead and have your dreams. But keep them to yourself." Now Joseph is gone...he's gone.

**Jacob (third reader):** There's no question my job as the father was to give Joseph a stern talking to for telling his wildly self-centered dreams to the rest of us. But there was a part of me that knew something else. I've been raised too much in a tradition that honors dreams as messages from God to ignore what was happening. I myself have had several nighttime encounters with the holy. In fact, the rubbing in my hip is a daily reminder not to take what happens in your sleep too lightly! Some will say, "Get on with your life; you have eleven other promising sons, and daughters as well." Anyone who's lost a child knows that loss can never be filled. And besides, there was something about Joseph, not just because he was younger or born in my later years, but because I had this feeling that the future of our people might somehow be tied up with his future. Now, try as I might to have faith that God works in mysterious ways, I fear that future may be plain cut off. Blood on that beautiful robe is more than proof that Joseph is gone; it's a sign that a message from God might be lost.

It's interesting, isn't it, to imagine what our Bible characters were thinking and feeling? Joseph perhaps complaining about the bugs, hoping that Jacob will really let his brothers have it for doing such a deed, and yet still dreaming of his part in God's plan. Then there's Reuben grieving over Joseph's circumstances, worried that he has failed in his role of older brother, but still saying, "I told you so." Jacob considers his role in parenting, ponders his experiences encountering God and concludes by saying that with the blood stained coat, "proof" of Joseph's death, is perhaps a sign to him that God's message might be lost...worry, in the midst of faith.

Do you find bits and pieces of yourself in these characters? I certainly do. For me it paints a picture of ordinary life in many ways: of sibling rivalry, parental concerns, sticky situations, wondering about God, just to scratch the surface. We've begun a story today, that is long and complicated; full of twists and turns; infused with God's presence throughout; and which many chapters later comes to a successful conclusion. There are ups and downs, wrongs and rights, risks and trust, and in the end, confirmation and understanding that God's message is not at all lost. Faith can be a difficult and meandering journey, just as much as it is a joyful and unrestrained journey, but here and through it all, as in the gospel lesson, the people of God are lifted up. Amen!

## Prayer of the People – Joys and Concerns

(I will explain process...and then we will begin with singing the response)

Response: Be still and know that I am God...

Sharing of joys and concerns...

Response: Be still...

O God, we come before you seeking sanctuary from conflict, grief, sadness and worry in our lives. We come, lifting up the cares and concerns of the world around us. We come, seeking comfort and sure knowledge of your presence with us.

Response: Be still...

O God, we come before you with gladness and with thanksgiving, for myriad ways we experience your love, healing and hope. Our relationship with you brings great joy and deep love, and we desire to walk faithfully with you forever.

Response: Be still...

Be with us, O God, in our dreams, our songs, our listening and our living. We pray in Jesus name, saying together...Our Father...