

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to August 10

Proper 14

Year A

RCL



Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Psalms 105, 1-6, 16-22, 45b

Matthew 14:22-33

The Collect

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Call to Worship

Psalm 105, 1-6, 16-22, 45b

Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name; make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to him, sing praises to him, and speak of all his marvelous works.

Glory in his holy Name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

Search for the LORD and his strength; continually seek his face.

Remember the marvels he has done, his wonders and the judgments of his mouth,

O offspring of Abraham his servant, O children of Jacob his chosen.

Then he called for a famine in the land and destroyed the supply of bread.

He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

They bruised his feet in fetters; his neck they put in an iron collar.

Until his prediction came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him.

The king sent and released him; the ruler of the peoples set him free.

He set him as a master over his household, as a ruler over all his possessions,

To instruct his princes according to his will and to teach his elders wisdom.

Hallelujah!

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock

near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “Here I am.” So he said to him, “Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, “What are you seeking?” “I am seeking my brothers,” he said; “tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.” The man said, “They have gone away, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, 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.” But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him” -- that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his

blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Pe-

ter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

SERMON

It's been a long time since we've checked in with our friends at the Chapel of St. Arbuck, but we have just finished an extensive brush-up. The interior got new carpet, the exterior got new paint, wood that had been suffering from the ravages of the weather was replaced and stained to match and I have to say, it turned out well. The Chapel just gleams. I also have to confess that I never thought it would happen. The Archbishop put the Sexton in charge of the renovation, instructing him to hire the workers, and you would not believe who he came back with. That was the least inspiring collection of humanity I ever saw in one place, short of a jail cell.

One was immensely obese and could hardly move.

One was missing an arm. Another looked as if he'd been sleeping rough for months. He actually still had a

vine caught in his beard when he showed up the first day. Another was full of attitude. Another seemed to be a little, well...drunk.

As you can imagine, the Archbishop was beside himself to see this rag-tag bunch show up to renovate his church. He had imagined a crew in uniforms arriving in a shiny truck, someone who looked the part of people chosen to renovate God's house. I happened to be passing by His Excellency's office as he was telling the Sexton off.

“Why do you doubt?” the Sexton asked. “I have chosen these workers as being best suited to the job. If they need help, if they fall short, I will be there to assist.”

There followed more, pointed, expressions of the Archbishop's opinion of the Sexton's judgment, but, as we all know, the Archbishop is a silly man, and no one

pays much attention to him, least of all the Sexton. It wasn't long before the Archbishop was reminded that he had promised to help distribute Mrs. Winter-sheimer's bumper stickers, and before that job was finished, he'd forgotten all about the Sexton's unsatisfactory work crew.

You don't have to ride around the sun very many times before you begin to notice that the world contains an awful lot of unlikely-looking people; people who don't seem to share your idea of what it takes to make it in the world. This one is addicted, that one is a drunk, this one is just dumb, that one so full of hate that it is painful to speak with him. What are these unlikely-looking people doing in my nice, tidy world?

And even those people you thought were doing things right, we find out, very often, weren't. Everybody now

knows that President Kennedy was a womanizer and President Roosevelt had a girlfriend. We need not dwell on the revelations that come forward regularly about members of congress with zipper trouble, or, saints preserve us, cell phone cameras. They are sufficiently frequent as to be tiresome. A lot of people you meet, it seems, look an awful lot like the crew the Sexton brought in, or, even a lot like Joseph's brothers in the text today.

Joseph's family was a big one, so we need to remind ourselves who goes with who. Remember that Jacob, their father, fell in love with Rachel. He worked seven years for her father to win permission to marry her, but on the wedding night, her father substituted her sister Leah for Rachel and when Jacob awoke he was married to the wrong sister. He had to promise another seven

years' labor for Rachel.

Jacob loved Rachel but didn't care at all for Leah, and she was heart-broken.

When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."

If that doesn't break your heart, I don't know what will.

There are two other women in the story, Bilhah, Rachel's maid, and Zilpah, Leah's maid. Genesis tells us:

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!"

Jacob became angry with her and said, “Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?”

Then she said, “Here is Bilhah, my servant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and I too can build a family through her.”

Bilhah had two sons, Dan and Naphtali.

After bearing four sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, Leah stopped having children.

When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, “What good fortune!” So she named him Gad.

Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son.

Then Leah said, “How happy I am! The women will call me happy.” So she named him Asher.

Leah then gets back in the game and bears Jacob two

more sons, Issachar and Zebulun along with a daughter, Dinah. Finally, we're told:

Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace."

Rachel's son was Joseph. Joseph the best-loved.

Joseph of the coat of many colors, or long sleeves, take your pick. When we pick up the story, Joseph, who had spoken of a dream in which all his brothers were bowing down to him, is working as a helper to his half-brothers, who are the children of the two maids.

You believe that "helper" part, don't you? Jacob the best-loved, jumped up in a fancy coat, is being sent to spy on his half-brothers, and they know it.

Most of us here have had to supervise workers of one sort or another, and we know that one of the challenges

is to match the right worker to the right job. I watched the Sexton with his workers very closely. I was particularly struck by the way he matched the jobs he assigned to the limitations and skills of the worker. The Sexton placed each worker carefully, and the busiest of all was the Sexton himself. He was everywhere, all the time, lending a hand here, making a suggestion there. He wasn't so much supervising as he was bringing out the best in each workman.

Such was not the case with Jacob. He must have suspected that the flocks were not being cared for properly by his sons because he sent his spy, Joseph, to see "if all was well with them." That's where the trouble started. Nobody likes to be spied upon. Nobody likes a tattle-tale, particularly a tattle-tale who has already brought a bad account of them to their father.

I don't really know what kind of provocation it takes to contemplate the murder of your brother. It's all well and good to say that these were ancient people in an ancient time, but the ties of blood are the strongest we know. How did these boys, for boys they were, come to a place where they would really plan to kill their own brother?

“Here comes this dreamer. Come now, 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.”

Not only kill their brother, but cover it up by lying to their father. Think of his pain! How do you come to such a place?

Let's not forget that these boys are all Jacob's sons, and Jacob has been given a new name: Israel. These are

the children of Israel, the forefathers of the twelve tribes, God's chosen people. This bunch God has chosen don't look to me much better, and in many ways they look much worse, than the work crew the Sexton came up with. They are an unlikely-looking bunch, and that's being charitable.

Leah's oldest child, Reuben, has the coolest head. Perhaps because he and Joseph are both children of the actual wives, instead of sons of the maids, he feels a loyalty to him. Maybe he just isn't as resentful. The one thing he isn't aware of is that when he intervenes and spares Joseph's life, he acted for the good of God's chosen people, because we know what he doesn't know — that from Egypt, Joseph will save the whole family from starvation.

In a nutshell, that's a lesson for the whole passage.

God's will, God's plans, will be accomplished, even if he has to work with a bunch of pretty unlikely-looking people. God's will will work itself out even through hatred, and murderous urges, and divided loyalties, and self-righteous indignation. Reuben's cooler head prevailed. His full brother, Judah, turned from thoughts of murder as well and suggested selling Joseph to the Midianite traders who were passing by. And so, Joseph was sent off to Egypt to fulfill God's plan for him there.

How many times have we all seen mug shots or street people or alcoholics or addicted people and thought that they couldn't possibly be in God's plan? They must be children of the devil. Certainly they have nothing to do with my tidy world. To think that way is to think with the Archbishop, and we've already decided that he is a silly man.

The Sexton is not a silly man. He recognizes that the job must be done with the workers available, and he was all over the job site. To one he said, “You must use a kicker to stretch the carpet before you nail it down”, and showed him how to use the carpet kicker. To another, who had thinned the paint too much so that it didn’t cover well, he advised, “Repaint, and thin no more.”

(Sorry! I just always wanted to do that)

In the end, as I said, the Chapel sparkled. The carpet was firmly stretched, the paint gleamed, the woodwork flawlessly polished. There was even a new sense of pride and accomplishment in the eyes of the unlikely-looking workers who, by trusting in the Sexton’s competence and assurance that even if they failed, he would sustain them, now felt that they could walk on water.

The opposite of faith isn't doubt, church. We are all ravaged by doubt. The opposite of faith is fear. It takes fearless faith to walk on water.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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