

Pentecost 9, Proper 14, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

The last few months  
we've been exploring the lectionary readings for the psalms.  
Today we have the first of what we'll find increasingly common - a repetition.  
Two weeks ago, we read the first part of psalm 105. This week we get the first six verses, and  
then a section from the middle of the psalm. In three weeks' time we will get another section,  
and another one a few weeks after that.

And you might wonder, why do they keep choosing the same psalm? After all, if we're on a  
three year cycle, we only have 156 weeks to fill, and with 150 psalms, some of which are so long  
that they have to be divided across a number of weeks,  
we should never have to repeat them.

But here's the thing.  
The psalms are usually chosen  
for some sort of connection  
with one of the other readings. Sometimes that connection is obvious;  
other times,  
not so much.  
But today is one of those times  
when the psalm matches up  
with the Old Testament reading.

And one of the great advantages of preaching on this psalm  
is that it allows us to go back to that Old Testament story that I preached on six years ago  
with a slightly different perspective.  
To read it,  
and perhaps see new things,  
or perhaps  
it simply remind us  
of what we heard then.

On this Sunday six years ago  
the big question of the sermon was  
how do we get through  
the dark times of faith?

It's a question  
that seems very appropriate now.

As people keep saying to me,  
the world seems to be in chaos.  
We have the war in Israel and Gaza.  
The increased evidence of the killing of Christians in Iraq,  
and our own military dropping both food and bombs.  
The Ebola outbreak in Africa.  
The storms hitting Hawaii.  
This list goes on...every time we turn on the news  
we hear of more horror.

And here in our own parish, we've had our own struggles.  
Caring for family members with health issues.  
Financial struggles.  
The joy of new life growing and the fear that something will go wrong.  
Feeling overwhelmed with juggling life and work and family and all the other demands placed  
on us.

And it seems as though maybe  
the big question of the sermon from six years ago  
is just as alive as it ever was,  
"how do we get through  
the dark times of faith?"

But this time  
we read the story  
from a slightly different  
perspective.

Our psalm begins  
with a call to give God thanks,  
a call to give thanks  
for the wonderful things  
that God has done.

But that call  
is not just a general,  
generic  
call for thanks,  
that call is tied  
to specific events  
in the history  
of the people  
of God.

And those specific events  
in today's portion of the psalm  
are the first part  
of the story  
of Joseph.

Joseph  
was the son of Jacob,  
the son of Isaac,  
the son of Abraham.

But Joseph  
was not the first born,  
not the one expected to count  
in the story of the descendants  
of Abraham.  
He was the eleventh.

The eleventh son, but the first one born  
to Jacob's beloved wife Rachel.  
and so it's perhaps not surprising  
that he was the favorite one.  
The favorite one, and spoiled and indulged: given a special robe  
that was clearly not designed  
for joining his older brothers in the fields.

Every time his brothers looked at him  
they were reminded  
not just that Joseph was the favorite,  
but that being the favorite, somehow he never had to work quite as hard  
as the rest of them.

And even when he worked, out in the fields with the sheep,  
he always came back with stories.  
stories of dreams he'd had  
where he was in charge  
and his brothers  
his servants.  
It wasn't the way  
to get popular.

And then came the day

when Jacob wanted to know how the flocks were doing,  
and the easiest way  
was to send Joseph out into the fields where his brothers were.  
And so Joseph went,  
and as he got close enough  
that they could see him coming,  
they began to plot  
how to get rid of him.  
The first idea was to kill him,  
next they planned to throw him in a pit in the ground and wait for the wild animals to deal with  
him;  
but then some traders came by, and they solved the problem  
by simply selling him as a slave  
No pesky little brother, and some silver - win/win.

That's where today's Old Testament reading ends,  
but the psalm goes on to tell more of the story.

Joseph was taken away into Egypt,  
and after a series of ups and downs in his life there,  
time as a servant,  
time in prison,  
more dreams,  
he eventually became one of the highest and most trusted officials  
of the Pharaoh.

There's much more to the story. More that tells  
not just of this apparently happy ending,  
but of trouble in Joseph's homeland,  
his brothers in need, and the decisions  
that he has  
to make.

But that's for another time.  
This time, all we have  
is part of the story,  
part of the story  
and the assurance  
from the perspective of the psalm  
that God was in deed  
at work in all this,  
at work in the enslavement of Joseph,  
at work in his servitude

at work in his imprisonment,  
at work in his final vindication  
and elevation to Pharaoh's right hand.

These, says the psalm  
are the deeds of the Lord;  
these are the wonders  
that God has done.  
So give thanks.

But I have a suspicion.  
I have a suspicion  
that Joseph didn't always see it that way.  
He had no idea  
how it would all turn out.  
All he had  
was his trust in God  
to hang on.

And that's exactly where  
we live so much of our lives.  
Trusting in God  
on the one hand,  
but struggling with the reality of life,  
the pain, the struggle,  
on the other.

Isn't that the very same experience  
that Peter had  
in our gospel today?  
The crowds were overwhelming;  
so Jesus sent the disciples ahead by boat,  
planning to send the people away  
and presumably  
walk along the lakeshore  
to meet up with his disciples  
later.

But then the wind came up,  
and the boat was in danger of being swamped  
and the disciples were afraid that they would die out there  
that night on the lake  
and suddenly they looked up

and saw Jesus  
walking across the water towards them.  
And they were even more afraid  
Was this a ghost? Were they hallucinating?

And Peter blurted out,  
“If it’s you, Jesus, if its really you, Lord,  
let me walk to you!”  
And he leaped out of the boat  
and began to walk towards Jesus.  
And then he began to notice the wind and the waves and the water underneath him.  
Jesus was right there in front of him  
but he was so overwhelmed by what was around him  
that he couldn’t quite see him, couldn’t quite trust him,  
and he began  
to sink.

And Jesus reached out to him,  
and held him firm  
and calmed the waves.  
And the disciples worshipped him.

It’s the same story  
time and time again,  
the same story in Joseph’s life, and in Peter’s  
and in ours.  
Suspended between fear  
and faith.

And what scripture reminds us is that when we are in that place,  
that place  
between faith and fear,  
God  
is not absent.  
Even there,  
God is with us.  
God with us,  
Emmanuel,  
Jesus Christ  
who became like us  
and hanging on the cross,  
in that same place between faith and fear  
cried out, “My God, My God!”

And we too, can call out,  
can, in the opening words of the psalm  
“Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name”  
and trust that God will  
reach out a hand,  
trust that God will  
speak a promise,  
trust that God will once again  
do wonders  
among us.