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"God's Steps"

Genesis 37:1-4;12-28 Matthew 14:22-33 Romans 10:5-15

INTROUCTION TO GENESIS 37:1-4;12-28

Jacob, now also known as Israel finally has a son by his beloved Rachel. That son is named Joseph. Sibling rivalry evolves into attempted fratricide only to be curtailed by an opportunity to make a financial profit. Hear the story of the favorite son being sold into slavery to children of Ishmael; Abraham's other son by his wife's handmaid Hagar.

INTRODUCTION TO GOSPEL LESSON

After the crowds were filled, and leftovers from the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 were collected and counted Jesus sent his disciples away and then he sent the crowds away and he went to do that he came to that region to do in the first place—to go up on the mountain to pray. Hear the word of God from Matthew 14:22-33

Let us pray. Lord, thank you for this your word. Thank you for the encouragement it holds for us as we hear you calling us to step out on faith. As we meditate on this portion of your word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

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Walking on water—Jesus, and Peter—for a few feet— are the only two to have ever done it. For them, walking on water was a reality, but for us it has become a metaphor, a metaphor for faith—for stepping out into the unknown, for believing in what you can't see, for believing you can do what has never been done...yet.

I once saw a billboard for a furniture store that said, "Seeing is Believing." That may be true for furniture, but it's not for faith. In the realm of faith "Not seeing is Believing." Hebrews 11:1 says, "To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see." 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, "We walk by FAITH not by sight." Seeing is verifying. Not seeing is believing.

The disciple Thomas had missed the meeting on the day that Jesus' rose from the dead. For a week his fellow disciples tried to convince him that Jesus really had raised from the dead. But Thomas was like that Furniture Billboard. In essence he said, "Seeing is believing."

A week later, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room again and this time Thomas was there. Thomas fell at Jesus' feet and said, "My Lord and my God!" To him Jesus said, "You believe because you see? Blessed are those

who have NOT seen and yet believe. Seeing is verifying. Not seeing is believing.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Hebrews the writer lists people of faith who believed in what they could not see. Verse 1 shares the writer's definition of faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Abraham had faith that he would be the father of many nations even though he only lived to see Ishmael and Isaac born. Isaac had faith that even though he was tricked by Jacob to give his blessing to the second born son, once given it could not be taken away. Jacob had faith that God's promise to him would come true even though he thought Joseph to be dead. Joseph had faith even when taken from the pit to the palace to the prison that God had a role for him to play.

I was not alive to see Jesus' feeding 5,000. I was not alive to see Jesus walking on water or see him resurrected. I have to believe the testimony of those who did and reported it. I have to accept it by faith.

I can't imagine what it would have felt like to have been in a small fishing boat in a storm in the dark of 5 in the morning, much less to look through the mist and the pounding waves and see a man walking ON them towards me. I don't know whether I would have cried "OH MY GOD!" (in which case it would have at least been accurate). The disciples shouted "It's a Ghost!" But Jesus said, "Fear Not! It's me."

Peter saw Jesus walking on the water and he believed he could do it too. He took off and for a while, step by step, he did it! But when he started seeing the waves around him he couldn't believe what was happening and he started to sink.

Friends, I don't believe that I will ever walk on water. At times, the best I have been able to do is to walk on land with a cane. ...but I know I can walk on faith, walk by faith, step out on faith and be led by Jesus, step by step following God's steps.

Faith calls for more than intellectual agreement with a formula. James 2:17 says, "Faith without works is dead." James 2:19 says that the demons have faith. They believe in God and shudder!

Genuine faith is a response that shows itself in what we do. Now, that's not to say that dramatic actions such as Peter's are the only acceptable evidence of faith. For the vast majority of us, it's in the ordinary tasks of our daily routine that faith will make itself evident. It takes faith to go to the doctor. It also takes faith to do what the doctor says. It really takes faith to go to the pharmacy and believe that the pharmacist can read the doctor's handwriting!

In our ordinary everyday lives we need to be conscious of the call to act and speak as people who trust in God rather than in our own ingenuity. It's not by our ingenuity that we are saved. In Ephesians 2:8, Paul reminds us, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

I'll bet every one of us this morning can think of some remarkable folks who have like Peter, followed in God's steps. We all have watched simple, straight-forward, hard-working men and women, little toddlers and tormented teens, the shut-in elders and the shut-out homeless, perform acts in their lives that defy the limitations of the world in which they live. There's the chemotherapy patient who gets out of bed, puts on clean clothes, picks up the house, before going for treatment . . . taking steps of faith, following God's steps.

There's the single parent, overworked, overwhelmed, over-extended in time, money, and energy, but makes it to soccer games and school plays and checks to see that homework is done . . .taking steps of faith, ...following God's steps.

There's the octogenarian who lives alone, whose family has forgotten him, who counts the postal carrier and the water-meter reader as "company," but still is up and dressed by 8am and sits at the table for all his meals . . . taking steps of faith, following God's steps.

There are times in our lives when we need a sign from God. There are times when we need to get out of the boat and step out in faith. There are times when we do and even make it for a few steps....and there are times when we take our eyes off Jesus and "start to sink. 2)"

I don't know what stepping out of the boat, stepping out on faith might be for you. Maybe it's sending your baby off to college for the first time. Maybe it's going back to school for that degree you never finished or another one you really need or asking for that promotion or a raise. Maybe it's being called to serve on a search committee. Maybe it's inviting someone to come to church with you. Maybe it's speaking out and standing up to the evil of racism.

Yesterday in Charlottesville there was a White Supremacist Alt-right rally and at 2 in the afternoon 20 year old James Fields drove his car into a crowd of counter protesters that were peacefully standing against the rally and one person was killed and dozens injured. Later that day a helicopter that had been covering the event went down and both men were killed.

Joshua Dubois wrote, "A wave of hatred is threatening to crash on this country. It is a seismic crash of historic proportions. And some of the most prominent Christian voices in the nation are standing by, watching their own people drown in the growing flood. ... in Charlottesville, Virginia White nationalists—many of whom claim to be Christians—sought to define America. They spoke with one

voice, with AR-15 rifles slung over their shoulders and Confederate Flags, Trump signs, and skull insignias on full display. They said that America is not a place for Jews and Blacks. They said Muslims and immigrants are not welcomed here. If anyone was unsure before, after Charlottesville we should all now know exactly what "take our country back" means. It means back to a place where whites have continued superiority in every part of American life. Back to a place where Blacks, Jews, Latinos, Asians, and immigrants, Muslims, women, gays and more live in relative subjugation. The haters have spoken and they are clear. What is not clear is the position of many Christian leaders, especially in the white (and even some in the Latino) Evangelical church.

Terry McCauliffe, the governor of Virginia said to the White Supremacists and Nazis in Charlottesville after the violence, "Go home. You are not wanted in this great commonwealth. Shame on you. You pretend that you're patriots, but you are anything but a patriot."

Senator Orrin Hatch, President pro tempore of the United States Senate, Chairman of the Finance Committee, longest serving Republican in the Senate from the state of Utah Board of Directors for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum tweeted, "We should call evil by its name," making sure to note that the tweet was composed by him and not his staff. "My brother didn't give his life fighting Hitler for Nazi ideas to go unchallenged here at home."

Brian McClaren, one of the pastors who participated in the counter protests shared his update from Charlottesville.

"The mainline clergy were, in his word, "amazing." They were everywhere on the streets, praying, witnessing, preaching, taking care of people. The Black Lives Matter people and the local Charlottesville African-American community were committed, brave, and non-violent. He said they "took a beating" and yet stood their ground. UVA students were "some of the most courageous people" he'd ever seen -- especially those who came to the Lawn on last night. They stood up for tolerance, diversity, compassion, and against the white supremacists and Nazis "without fear.". About "70%" of the alt-right were millennial white men. The others seemed to be paramilitary and other right-wing "professionals."

I was not there. I am here. I have to speak out against the evil that is going on in the world that God so loves. God so loved and loves this world that he sent Jesus to show that love and for the effort, died at the hands of hate.

Events in the world and in even in our private lives are testing our faith. Biblical literacy is at an all-time low because people don't seem to have the desire or find the time to study the Bible, either in their homes or with other folks. Right now the seas outside our little boat are churning with a struggling educational system, a culture saturated with guns, drug addictions and glorified images of violence, and

a glorified violence in wars of all kinds and the rattling sabers between North Korea against the world. I do not agree with the pastor of First Baptist in Dallas, Robert Jeffers, that God has given anyone the authority to start a nuclear war. The passage before Roman 13:1-8 that Jeffers cites to justify his view Romans 12 14-21 says:

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.<sup>[a]</sup> Do not be conceited. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"<sup>[b]</sup> says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good

The passage that follows Romans 13:1-8 says

<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. <sup>11</sup> Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup> the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; <sup>13</sup> let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

We are in the midst of storms. There is no way I can know where you are today – whether you're in a place of complacency and just trying to stay afloat—whether you're sinking and need the hand of God to lift you up. Maybe you're like Peter and God is calling you to take a risk. Maybe you're like the other 11 and still too scared to even try. Wherever you are, just as Jesus came to the disciples, Jesus will come to you. He will give you faith and the courage to endure.

Jesus still walks on and over whatever he has to help his friends in trouble. He calls us to follow in his steps. We may have to walk over tradition. We may have to walk across the aisle. We may have to walk across cultural lines, across county lines, across red lines, across lines in the sand

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I'm so glad Jesus lifted me. I'm so glad Love lifted me. I'm so glad I follow a savior who will lift me out of the deep that I get myself into because I dared to get out of the boat. I'm so glad I follow a savior who promises to lift my spirits even if I'm too scared to risk taking steps of faith. We may not walk on water, but we can walk on faith, walk by faith not by sight.--walk not by verifying but walk by believing what we can't verify, believing to be true what we can't see with our eyes but can envision with our faith by following ... in God's steps.

My Pastoral Prayer this morning is from the Jill Duffield, the editor of Presbyterian Outlook who lives in Charlottesville, Virginia. She wrote this prayer after participating, along with other clergy, in a call for love, not hate, in her city

"Sweet Jesus, what has happened to your beloved world? What darkness is on the loose when those who hate their neighbors pray in your name and ask for your blessing?

You have told us, O Lord, what is good: to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with you, and yet there are those among us who wield machine guns to intimidate and chant vitriolic rhetoric to terrorize, and ram cars intentionally into crowds to kill.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the WORLD ....have mercy upon us.

We have no hope save in you. We have no hope to stop the violence and stem the racism and cease the destruction, save in you. Save us now.

Prince of peace, you tell us to pray for those who persecute us and love our enemies, but right now, in this moment, those prayers are not readily on our lips. for Help us. Intercede for us. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you even if, in this moment, they are colored with anger and weariness and questions about your presence during the storm.

What next, Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, when we are right in the middle of the chaos and the killing and the carnage? We know that justice will roll down like water and that crying and death will be no more someday, but we need to know what to do this very day

This very day you have made. Creator God, Living God, God of the new thing, the very good thing, show us where to be and what do to and how to be the light and the salt and the leaven and the love you call us to be Precious Lord, take our hands, lead us home to the place you prepared for us and give us rest. Put us beside still waters and overflow our cups with grace upon grace until it spills into the streets and washes away the evil in our land. Wash us and we will be clean. Made new. Clothed and in our right minds. Together".

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1. Walking on Water, by Edward F. Markquart
2. ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., Collected Sermons, by Leonard Sweet
3. Joshua Dubois "Daily Beast"
4. Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe delivers message to "white supremacists and Nazis" in Charlottesville after violence.
5. Senator Orrin Hatch. Tweet.