

**What Are You Seeking?**

Part 4B – August 13, 2023

**Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28**

<sup>1</sup> Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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...

<sup>12</sup> Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> 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, <sup>15</sup> and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup> "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. <sup>19</sup> They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>21</sup> But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> 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

<sup>22</sup> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup> but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup> And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup> But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

<sup>28</sup> Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” <sup>29</sup> He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

<sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” <sup>32</sup> When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup> And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

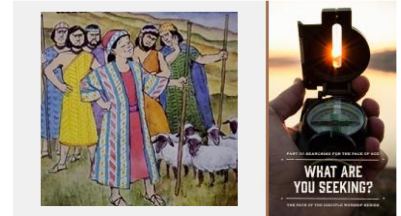


Last week we asked what drives us from within, what is it that we hunger for? This week we ask, what is the vision that we move towards? We ask: what the world would be like if the world were fully aware of God’s presence? To that end we have to also ask this question: What would we look like and what would our community of faith look like if we really believed and lived out what we say about Jesus and grace and salvation?

So, today, when we ask, “What Are You Seeking?” we are talking about kingdom living. We are talking about being a sign of God at work in the world. We must admit that at times we fall short of that ideal – of being Jesus in the world each day. We that admission we ask God to open our eyes to our shortcomings and to our blind spots. Today we look at Joseph and Peter as an attempt to answer the question of what we are looking for. As we begin, let us pray...

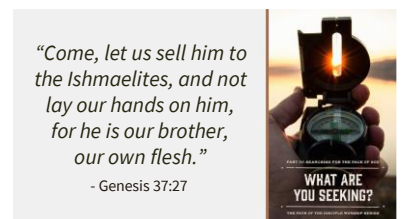
When you think about your growing up years, did you get along with your siblings? I had one brother and overall we got along pretty well. Sure, we had our spats – what siblings don’t? But overall I think we got along pretty well. Now, David or my mom or dad might tell you differently, but... For a look at a brother who did not get along at all with his siblings, let’s turn to Genesis 37. As our story begins, we sense some family conflict right away. As we talked about last week, there were 12 brothers from one father and four different mothers. That alone says “dysfunction.”

As our passage begins, we see that Joseph is a tattletale. Joseph goes to his father Israel and gives a bad report about his brothers. This is after Joseph has shared his dreams with them – about his eleven brothers and even his mother and father bowing down to him. That did not earn him any brownie points either. And then we read about the fancy coat that Israel had made for his son who he loved more than any of his other children. Joseph was born later in life, the first child from Israel's beloved Rachel, so he was daddy's favorite. Add all this up and it is not surprising to read in verse 4, *"they hated him."*



In verse 12 we see that Israel sends Joseph off to check in on his brothers. As we ponder this idea, we must see it as something that might not end well. Joseph eventually tracks down his brothers' whereabouts. As the brothers see him approaching, but *"before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him."* They say, *"Here comes the dreamer,"* referring to his dreams in which they bowed down to him, and they decide to kill him and throw his body into a pit, ending with the thought, *"we shall see what will become of his dreams."* If they have their way, those dreams will end right there. But the oldest intercedes, saying, *"Let us not take his life. Shed no blood."* Reuben suggests throwing him into a pit – so that he might return later to rescue his little brother.

Following the elder's advice, they rough up Joseph a little, take his coat of many colors, and toss him into a pit. As they sit down to lunch, they see a caravan passing by. Judah, the fourth born, comes up with an idea. Partially agreeing with Reuben, he says, *"Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh."* And just like that, Joseph is sold and heads off towards Egypt.



As one considers the dysfunction and the hatred and the thoughts of killing Joseph but ultimately selling him into slavery, one has to wonder where God is in all of this. I'd sure bet that Joseph was asking the question: Where is God? Sitting in the bottom of a well, wondering what in the world might happen next as his brothers argued about killing him or not. Maybe you, like me, have found yourself in a "pit" of sorts and have wondered where God was. And like Joseph, if someone asked, "What are you seeking?" I'd sure say I was seeking a heaping dose of God's presence. I'd be seeking for God to show up in a big way to rescue me from whatever struggle I was in the midst of. But for Joseph, it does not really appear that God is wanting to be sought out or found.

All we have here is a group of brothers totally turning on one of their own, getting rid of him for a mere 20 pieces of silver. Yet as Joseph's story unfolds through the next 5 chapters of Genesis, we can see that God's fingerprints are all over his story. When Joseph's brothers end up in Egypt, desperate for some grain, they discover that Joseph is alive and well and large and in charge, and they fear for their lives. But Joseph says to them, *"What you intended for harm, God intended for good."* In and through all things, God can and will work for the good of those who love God. Even in the storms, God is present and at work, even when we might not see it at first.

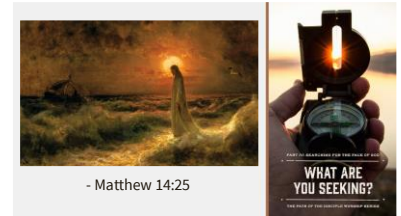


That is Peter's experience in our New Testament passage.

Peter desperately needs Jesus to reach out to him, to save him as he sank into the stormy water. Turn with me to

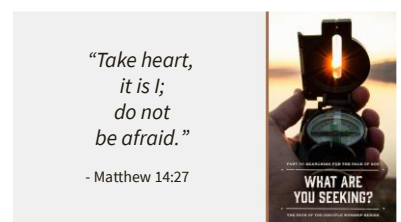
Matthew 14 as we look at a familiar story. As the passage begins in verse 22, we see that Jesus sends the disciples away. The feeding of the 5,000 has just wrapped up and Jesus still wants some alone time. He sends the disciples off in a boat and dismisses the crowd and heads up the mountain to pray.

Jesus is getting back to what he was going to do in the first place. As Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, the disciples are working their way across the lake. But soon enough, out there in the middle of the lake, a storm arises and pretty quickly the disciples find their boat “*battered by waves.*” It is in the early morning hours that Jesus comes walking towards them “*on the sea.*” At first, the disciples think Jesus is a ghost. They can’t believe that it might be Jesus who is drawing near.

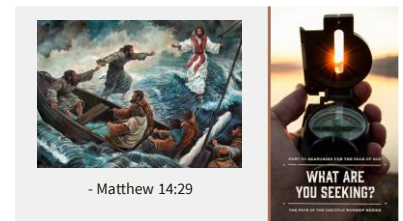


Before we press on into Peter’s part of this story, let’s consider another layer. This story can also be seen as the story of the early church. They are sent out into the world without the physical presence of Jesus there with them. This is when Matthew is writing his gospel – the time when the church was a bit adrift, struggling with persecution. It felt like storms were rising all around them. The early apostles wondered about their safety, about whether or not they’d make it through. And in their fear and doubt, they couldn’t quite make out if that was really Jesus there with them in Spirit. Was it just a dream, a vision, a hope in something that he had said about never leaving them?

In the context of Matthew’s culture, the sea represented all that opposed God. It was a place of death and pain. In the belief of the day, on the sea there was an absence of God. That is all part of what Matthew has in mind as he recounts this story. So when the disciples see Jesus from afar, as the wind and waves batter their boat, they can’t really believe that it might be Jesus. They cry out in fear. Immediately Jesus speaks to them, saying, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” Jesus assures them of his presence. Be encouraged, Jesus says, I’m right here with you. And to the church caught up in the storms of persecution, these words would also offer hope and peace.



v Like some in the early church and like me, and maybe like you, Peter wanted some more proof. Peter needed to step on the waves to conquer the fear that was right there before him. He needed to see that which was rising up against him underneath his feet. Peter needed to know that Jesus could conquer the fear within him. So Peter says to Jesus, *“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”* And Jesus simply says to Peter, *“Come.”* That’s all. Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water, coming closer to Jesus. It all sounds so powerful. But the storm was still raging, and Peter had never walked on water before. Sure, it might be Jesus there on the water. But it might be a figment of my imagination too. That’s why I love this artist’s rendition of Peter getting out of the boat.



Can you see it – one hand reaching out to Jesus with the other hand outstretched towards the boat, even though it appears to be sinking? I hate to admit it, but that can be how I reach out to Jesus too in the midst of the storm. Yes, I very much want to step out in faith, to trust that Jesus is right there, to lay aside these fears, to walk boldly forward in faith. But at times I can also want to keep a foot in the boat or at least a hand on the steering wheel. Like Jacob last week as his reunion with Esau drew near, I can be tempted to hedge my bets a bit. It is hard to fully let go of it all, entrusting it all to Jesus. How many of you know what I am talking about here?

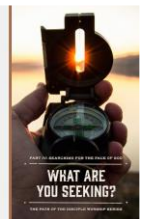
We can understand, then, when Peter again notices the wind and the waves, when he feels the fear and the doubt rising up inside of him. We can understand, then, why it is so hard for him to keep his attention solely on Jesus. We can understand, then, when he begins to sink. We can understand how hard it is to keep one’s eyes on Jesus.

We can understand because we have all been there too. We want to believe in Jesus with all that we have. We want to be “all in” with Jesus. We want to 100% trust that he is always present to us and will carry us through whatever storm life can throw at us. We want to take hold of Jesus with that left hand that Peter is reaching out with. We want to grab it and never let go. But if we’re honest, that right hand seems to always be there too, not wanting to get too far from the boat. Can I get an “amen”?

And yet, in our world today, it feels like the ‘boat’ is less and less trustworthy. “Truth” has become blurred and shifting. Integrity and honesty can be hard to find. When we dare to believe something we hear – whether on the news or on Facebook... - we are often disappointed and feel let down once again. All of this is why it is even more important to place our trust in God. In the chapter “Life in Christ” Rueben Job explains why we can trust in God: “In a world where institutions and

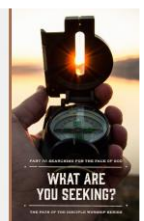
individuals seem to be unworthy of trust, the believer finds in God one who is completely trustworthy. Thus it is possible to offer one’s life, without reservation, and as totally as we are able, to this trustworthy God. Because God can be trusted, we can give ourselves to God without fear or anxiety that we will be deceived or disappointed. This kind of trust leads more and more to the living out of our faith” (page 37, A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader.)

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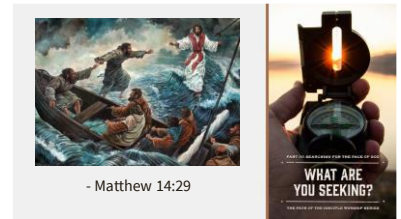
- page 37, A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader



As we learn to hold less onto the ‘boat’, trusting less in the world and more in God, we do grow in our ability to trust God with all that we are. From a place of increasing trust in God, I do believe that we are willing and able to live out our faith more and more. But this takes time and experience. When we trust God in small things, we find that God is faithful. From there we learn to trust God in bigger things.



It takes time to get to the point of even mostly trusting in God. We can want to cling to the boat, to the security that we think we have in the things of the world. So we have to empathize with Peter as he sinks – one hand reaching back towards the boat, one hand stretched out towards Jesus. When he gets too far away to count on the boat, he gets caught up in the waves and wind. It is only then that he calls out to Jesus and reaches out with all that he has. Too often in our own lives it is only when we are in the very bottom of the hole or only when it feels like the water is about to swallow us up that we finally reach out to Jesus. And even then, even if we've been just mostly trusting in Jesus, even then Jesus will reach out a hand. Even then, even if we've been less than 100%, Jesus will still reach out a hand and will save us.



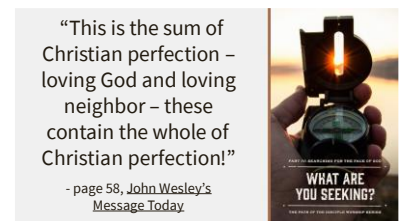
In the passage, Peter cries out and Jesus immediately catches him, saving him from the depths. Jesus says to Peter, *"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"* I imagine Jesus looked



Peter in the eye and said it to him before pulling him up out of the water. And I imagine that Jesus has said this of me now and then. In those times when I have prayed yet sought my own solution, in those times when I've sought Jesus and yet tried to keep a hand on the steering wheel, I know that Jesus has said this to me, *"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"* Like Peter, I too am a work in progress. The same is likely true for all of you.

The concept of being works in progress has deep roots in the Methodist movement. John Wesley called the Christian journey one of "going on to perfection." While often taken to mean perfection here in this life, that is not what Wesley understood this to be. Here is the prayer that Wesley prayed every Sunday.

It comes from the Anglican tradition in which he was raised: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name” (page 55, John Wesley’s Message Today.) Wesley understood that growth was an essential part of life and that included one’s faith. In terms of ‘perfection’ Wesley connected his understanding mostly to the Greek word *teleio*. This word means ‘to make perfect, to fulfill.’ Drawing from this meaning, Wesley saw “going on to perfection” as the process, the growth, the journey towards perfection - perfection in love. To summarize his thoughts, Wesley wrote, “This is the sum of Christian perfection – loving God and loving neighbor – these contain the whole of Christian perfection!” (page 58, JWMT.)



As we close, one last thought. No matter how many times I’ve wanted to be “all in” yet have failed, Jesus remains present and faithful. That’s God’s covenant love for us. No matter how little my faith is, no matter how great my fear or doubt, the truth is that Jesus will reach out, saving us in our time of need. And, like the disciples, as Jesus gets back in our boat, stilling the storm and bringing us peace once again, we say again and again, like the disciples said, “*Truly you are the Son of God.*” We say that each time that Jesus grabs our hand, believing it a little bit more each time.



When I ask, “What are you seeking?” that is what we are seeking. We are seeking to live a life of faith that demonstrates that we really believe that Jesus is right there every time, ready, able, and more than willing to take us by the hand. And, my friends, when we seek to live life that way, we witness that faith to others, helping them to find what they are seeking – a friend, a shepherd, a savior – Jesus Christ. Alleluia and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. We all want to trust Jesus more fully. How has your trust grown each time that he has been faithfully, reaching out in your times of need?
- 2) *Pray*. Where are you seeking God – in a situation, in a relationship, in a decision? Take some time to seek God's presence and direction this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read Genesis 44. Why do you think Joseph does this to his brothers? When have you been tempted to test someone to see if they have changed?