

## **Falling In**

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Matthew 14:22-33

“Jambo” means “hello” in Swahili. It was also the given name of a male Silverback gorilla who lived in a zoo on the Isle of Jersey, off the coast of France. Male Silverbacks can weigh more than 600 pounds and have been observed throwing truck tires forty yards. On August 31, 1986 five year-old Levan Merritt fell into Jambo's enclosure and lost consciousness. Jambo placed himself between Levan's motionless body and the rest of his gorilla troop. He stroked the boy's back until he awakened. Levan started to cry, which scared all the gorillas. They retreated into a small hut across the enclosure. Then three zoo employees entered and rescued the boy. The Jersey Zoo has erected a life-sized bronze statue of Jambo to honor his memory.

Cases of falls ending well do exist. We read of two such cases in today's Scripture passages. First Joseph's brothers tossed him into a cistern, a water storage tank installed in the dry pasture lands of central Israel. Hand-dug channels carried water from the winter rains to those cisterns. That water sustained both humans and their flocks during the drier months. They could easily accommodate a seventeen year-old boy, which our text tells us Joseph was.

Until the wars Israel had with its neighbors in the 1960's and 70's, one of the

world's busiest caravan routes ran from central Asia through Damascus, crossing the River Jordan into modern Israel between the mountains of Lebanon and the Sea of Galilee. From there it angled southwest to the Mediterranean Sea, where it picked up the ancient highway that ran north and south along the shore. The traders who passed Joseph and his brothers had come the whole way. The “gum, balm and myrrh” came from today's Kazakhstan, more than a thousand miles to the northeast. Their cargo had great value. They were rich and well-armed. They willingly bought Joseph, counting on selling him for a tidy profit when they reached Egypt, their ultimate destination. In his book, Preaching by Sense and Story, Tom Long writes, “These Midianite traders who buy Joseph know what his brothers do not: the traders paid the country rube rate, but they will sell the boy at the city-slicker price.”

Yet while things look bleak for Joseph at the end of our passage, in next week's we will learn that his life took an incredible turn for the good. His gift of knowing the meaning of dreams will bring him to the attention of the Egyptian pharaoh himself. That nation would prepare for a severe famine Joseph used the dreams to predict. All would happen as he foresaw, and his star would rise like a rocket at court. He became rich and powerful. And none of it would have happened had his brothers not thrown him into the cistern.

Peter voluntarily got out of the boat. Along with many of the followers of Jesus he had just witnessed the miracle of the feeding of thousands with just a few loaves and fish. Jesus then sent the twelve away in a boat so he could pray in solitude. (He

had wanted this quiet time since recently learning of the execution of his cousin, John the Baptist.) Now a storm blows up. The text tells us the disciples, who include at least four professional fishermen, cannot control the boat because of the wind and waves. In his novel, Lake Wobegon Summer, 1956, Garrison Keillor first presented a story he later told on his Prairie Home Companion radio show. Pastor Linqvist, whom Keillor used as a recurring character, attends a conference at Lake Wobegon. At a barbecue he and 23 other Lutheran pastors crowd onto one pontoon boat. They motor out a short way onto the Lake. A storm approaches.

Now it is important to understand that in Keillor's world the one thing Lutheran pastors are above all else is *nice*. They say please and thank you. They do not complain. So these pastors, though worried about the weather and the boat, just stand on its deck. Nobody suggests they ought to return to shore. By the time their "captain" realizes that might be a good idea to turn around it has grown too late. He cannot control the wheel, and the boat faces into the wind. The waves begin to slop over the deck. The pastors, still quiet, edge back. This causes the front of the boat to lift, and the wind catches it. Still silent, the pastors are thrown even farther back. The boat's prow raises even more. Now the stern drops and water starts overrunning it. And finally, one after another, the pastors slip off into the water. They find they can stand on the lake bottom with the waves slapping up against their chests. Most of them still holding the plastic cups in which they had carried their lemonade on board, they just start wading toward the beach. When they reach the sand they finally speak. "Whew!" they say, "that sure was something, wasn't it?"

If you happen to know any Lutheran pastors—especially those from the Upper Midwest—you would find this story completely believable. Most of them wear clerical collars wherever they go. Like the Christian fish car ornament that kind of forces people to drive nicely, these pastors often feel constrained by that visible symbol of their faith in Jesus to watch their tongues and their actions. But in the New Testament Jesus' followers tend to behave more honestly. His appearance on the water “terrifies” them. They think he is a ghost. Though he tries to calm them they “cried out for fear.” Unlike the Lutheran pastors, they lose their cool. To be fair, they face a far greater danger. The pastors could stand in the water and wade to shore. The disciples had sailed “many furlongs from the land.” A furlong is 1/8 of a mile. The Sea of Galilee can get quite deep. In ancient times even people who worked on the water rarely knew how to swim. Of course they cry out in fear.

And here comes Jesus, showing off. Or is he? This happens in the “fourth watch of the night”, between 3:00 and 6:00am. It is dark. It is stormy. Just what in the heck is this apparition approaching them? It is Jesus, using the fastest available method of reaching and comforting them. In fact, once Peter recognizes him, he asks whether he can try it, too. So let us pause here for a moment. Would you? Do not answer too quickly. “No!” might seem like the obvious answer. But remember, Peter has just witnessed Jesus performing two miracles—feeding the thousands and walking on water. Peter at least for the moment trusts Jesus' power.

Commentator D.A. Carson observes, “Peter's problem came not when he got

out of the boat. So long as he kept his eyes on Jesus he managed to duplicate his feat. It was when fear of the overwhelming danger the storm presented him came to dominate his feelings that he sank.” Which of us can claim we would do better? Again, *very* few of us would get out of the boat in the first place. At an earlier point in my life I could fairly be described as a strong swimmer. I was on a team. I got all the Boy Scout and American Red Cross life saving credentials. I did the mile swim at Scout camp. And I can categorically state that I would not have gotten out of the boat. On the contrary, my training taught me to stay in the boat for as long as possible! And all of us would have to fear the wind and the waves. So let us give Peter credit for having the courage of his convictions. In fact, does it not strike us as a bit unfair that Jesus calls him “O man of little faith?”

Of course Jesus calms the storm and all the disciples “worshiped him”. With awe they say, “Truly you are the Son of God.” And here we come to the happy ending for this particular case of falling into something. Though we often lack faith, though we refuse to get out of the boat, in the end Jesus accepts our worship. Moreover, he *loves* us, as he loves the crowds he feeds and the thick-headed men in the boat. I have “Josie’s” permission to share this story, though she has asked me to change her name. Josie, her daughter and her parents are charter members of the church we helped start in 1997. They were there from the start. They were instrumental in helping it get off the ground. Josie served as an elder. Unbeknownst to us, she also has an addiction to opioid pain pills.

The father of Josie's daughter physically assaulted Josie on several occasions. The ER docs gave her pills. Her body and mind and soul decided she needed them in perpetuity. She started doing whatever it took to get the money to buy them in darkened parking lots and the country western bar on the south side of town. *Whatever it took.* Including things no Presbyterian elder ought to consider. Including stealing cash from the offering plates. Our financial secretary immediately knew something was up when on consecutive Sundays we *had* no cash offering. So we set a sting, a trap, and we caught Josie. When another female elder and I confronted her with the evidence she crumbled immediately. Referencing a famous commercial she said, "I fell, and I can't get up."

In a rare moment of ministerial clarity, and charity, I looked at the other elder and said something like, "You need help, Josie, and we're going to try to give it to you." The other elder, a social worker and one of my best friends in the entire world, immediately agreed. So we arranged care for her daughter and grandson, and helped her make the brave decision to check herself into a rehab facility. She came out clean and has stayed so for nine years. I heard confirmation of this from her the day before yesterday. Her rehab facility employs the AA model, which relies heavily on spiritual resources. She fell, and the love and grace of Jesus helped her get back up. Praise God! Opioid addiction is by all accounts one of the deepest holes into which a person can fall. But when we trust in the miraculous power of God that power can pull us up out of any fall. Trust that, and live your life accordingly.