

Sinking: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33; and Charlottesville

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As the children leave, I ask of you a moment of personal privilege. As Head of Staff, Cynthia Jarvis could have insisted on preaching today, even though I was on the schedule. She could have, and she probably wanted to, because any preacher worth her salt wants to be in the pulpit today speaking love in the face of hate. Instead, she has chosen, however reluctantly or unwisely, to trust me with a word that must be spoken. I am grateful for that trust, and for your trust, and for the gospel which has been entrusted to all of us as people of faith. I also share with you that this week Cindy cleaned out her closet, so if it's any consolation to anyone, I am literally wearing Cindy's shoes. In light of this fact, I take the liberty to remind you of something Cindy has said in the past—that a pastor's role in preaching, like the shepherd's staff, is twofold. Sometimes sermons draw you near and bring comfort. Sometimes they prod and agitate. This sermon falls in the latter category. It is intentionally provocative. It may make you uncomfortable or even angry. I'm not flippant about that; all I ask is that you hear me out, and I promise to afford you the same courtesy should you want to remain in conversation. I believe our relationship as a family of faith can hold that tension.

Keep your eyes open and pray with me: Lord, may your light shine. Lord, may your steadfast love endure forever. Lord, may justice flow down like water, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amen.



The snout of the Athabasca Glacier in the Canadian Rocky Mountains is just a few hundred yards away from Icefields Parkway, a stunning, scenic route between Banff and Jasper National Parks in the province of Alberta. When our family stopped to see the glacier just a few weeks ago, I underestimated the reflection of the sun off the ice and sustained a wicked sunburn. So I brought back from Canada souvenir tan lines which prove my lack of good judgment. But what has stuck with me even more than the sunburn is the memory of small historical markers along the walking trail leading to the glacier's edge. I might have missed the first one on the far side of the parking lot just off the highway, except that my four-year-old was climbing on it. No more than 2 feet high, and definitely off the beaten path, the stone marker blended into the background. It simply said, "The glacier was here in 1843." As we hiked toward the glacier's edge on a trail of rock and rubble left behind by the glacier itself as it has receded, I noticed more of these markers—off to the side, unobtrusive, and yet still quietly telling the sad truth that the glacier is receding at an alarming and accelerating rate.

"The glacier was here in 1908" read the marker at the foot of the path. A ways later, "The glacier was here in 1925." Then "The glacier was here in 1935." We walked on, sometimes slipping and stumbling on the rocks left in the glacier's wake. "The glacier was here in 1942." We helped the children on the steepest parts of the climb. "The glacier was here in 1982." By the time we reached the marker showing where the glacier was in 1992, the message these markers conveyed was growing painfully clear. At the 1992 marker, we were only about halfway from the parking lot to the glacier's current position. You're probably already doing the math. In the last 25 years, the glacier has moved roughly the same distance it had moved in the previous 149 years.

I could go on about shrinking glaciers and the truth they tell us about the damage we are doing to the environment God has entrusted to our care, but that is a sermon for another day. Because what I must name today is the myth my privilege once allowed me to believe. There was a time not so long ago when I could believe that racism in this country was something like that glacier. Sure, it still existed in the distance. I could easily see and even trip over the rough terrain, the scars it had left behind, but it was receding, or so I thought. There was a time when I could sit in the comfort of an American history class, watching black-and-white reel to reel films of the Ku Klux Klan. I could see blurry footage of men on horseback, clad in bed-sheet hoods and carrying torches as they terrorized communities, burning crosses on lawns and lynching Black lives—and I could regard those films as shameful, horrific scenes, relics from a backward and terrifying time in this country's past. Though I've known for some time now that racism is alive and well and thriving, I confess with sorrow that I did not realize soon enough that the vitriol of those earlier days has never disappeared, nor has it retreated. I am not naive enough to be surprised by the events of yesterday and Friday night in Charlottesville, Virginia, but I am horrified anew as I am unmistakably reminded once more that the marker for racism in 2017 is in the exact same spot as it was in the 1950s and 60s. I do not mean to minimize the torture of those who endured the rage of white supremacists *then*, but I think it may yet be possible that history will show that things are actually getting worse. Klan members now feel free to carry torches in broad daylight and see no need for fashioning bed sheets into hoods to mask their identities. Indeed, they can openly carry weapons and act as a de facto security force for so-called "protesters" who are, if we are being as honest as we should be, hate-filled domestic terrorists. I hope in light of yesterday's events that we have all

considered how different would be the fate of black or brown men (non-law enforcement) openly carrying weapons under similar circumstances.

I don't have to tell you that a storm is raging. You can pick that up from whatever news outlet you favor. I am no journalist. As a pastor, I am not called to give you a rundown of the news. My call is to preach the truth and the hope of gospel as it speaks into the events of our lives.

The truth is, we are sinking.

Yesterday a colleague of mine who responded to the clergy call in Charlottesville was harassed by white supremacists as she walked to her car after everyone was asked to disperse. She wrote to a group of our colleagues, "It became apparent very quickly that I was not safe. I encountered a large, very loud, all male group of white supremacists who were looking for a confrontation. The police officer and legal observers watching were not a deterrent...again, in broad daylight, in a bustling city full of police officers and legal observers and volunteers...I encountered armed white supremacists."^[1] My colleague is thankfully safe in her home, preaching this morning to her congregation, but she is lucky. One young person^[2] who was there to speak love into the face of hate was killed when a car drove into a crowd of people who had been peaceably protesting the "Unite the Right" rally. At least 19 people were injured by that car, and the number of people who are reported to have been injured in Charlottesville continues to rise.

We are sinking. We are in a pit, well on our way to being enslaved by the powers of this world. Like Joseph we have brought it on ourselves to be sure; those of us in positions of privilege have been wearing that privilege like a robe with long sleeves. Like Joseph we are responsible, but neither are we entirely to blame. That robe was handed to us not because we deserved it, but because our lives were seen as more valuable than other lives. We are culpable and simultaneously ensnared in a system in which hatred of those who differ from us, who are not as privileged as we are, is as old as time.

We are sinking. The boat we thought was sturdy is being tossed around like it's made of popsicle sticks. We are being shown just how frail, how thin the veneer between us and the storm waged by hate really is. Not only are we inside the storm; the storm has made its way inside us.

We are sinking. White supremacists spout Nazi slogans like "Blood and soil," yet our president—who is characteristically unapologetic about offending people—goes out of his way not to offend white supremacists or to implicate their actions as evil. With the same lips that threaten nuclear war as if it's a game of chicken, the leader of our nation generically condemns "hatred, bigotry, and violence on *many* sides,"^[3] (emphasis mine) instead of specifically condemning the actions of domestic terrorists. Never before have I so deeply questioned what year this is. Never before have I been so confused about who we are. Never before have I so fervently prayed for the soul of our country.

I am well aware that I have just agitated approximately half of you. I pause here to clarify that if you think this sermon is about politics, you are mistaken. Our political stances and the deep

divisions they cause are symptoms of an underlying illness. They both reflect and impact the way we treat other people—the way we *other* people. This sermon is not *about* politics. This sermon is about whether we today have more or less capacity than our predecessors to look into the face of our neighbors and see in them the beloved image of God.

We are sinking. And this sermon asks what we will do in the midst of the storm. Will we have the courage to say of nuclear war, as former counselor of the State Department and long-time professor at the Institute for Advanced Study George Kennan did in a 1980 speech, “For the love of God, for the love of your children and of the civilization to which you belong, cease this madness. You are mortal men. You are capable of error. You have no right to hold in your hands—there is no one wise enough and strong enough to hold in his hand—destructive power sufficient to put an end to civilized life on a great portion of our planet”[4]?

We are sinking. As the storm rages about us, will we be able, with integrity, to recite and to live the words of the Belhar Confession (written in Afrikaans in 1982 and recently adopted by the Presbyterian Church (USA)), which says in part, “We reject any doctrine which . . . sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ”[5]?

We are sinking. Will we have the faith of the Reverend Traci Blackmon, a black woman who preached a sermon yesterday in Charlottesville inside a church that was surrounded by white supremacists—surrounded to the extent that law enforcement deemed it unsafe for the worshippers inside to exit the building?

We are sinking. Will we have the sheer guts of the students who stood peaceably protesting hate even as they were encircled by torch-carrying, weapon-toting white supremacists?

We are sinking, and this is not our only storm. Some of you have lost loved ones this week and in weeks past. Some of you mourn the loss of loved ones long ago. Some of you are exhausted from seeking employment, others are scarred by estrangement from family or friends. For others, your health or the health of those you love is in the midst of the storm. Whatever your storm, and however inconvenient more wind and waves might seem, *this* storm in which we all find ourselves today, day one after Charlottesville, demands our immediate attention and our immediate action. I began this sermon by telling you about the markers at Athabasca Glacier, the small, easily overlooked monuments to the glacier’s receding movement. What I have not told you is that there are also large signs at Athabasca. Warning signs that cannot be missed. Signs that come more frequently as one nears the glacier’s edge. They say things like: “Hold fast to your children,” “Many have died here,” “Do not cross the barriers,” “There are no rescue missions when children fall into crevasses, only recoveries,” and “Hypothermia will kill small children who fall into the ice before our expert recovery teams can reach them.”

Even closer to the snout of the glacier are memorials for those who have slipped into the crevasses—several toddlers and small children, a nine-year-old boy whose story I remember because he died the very day Mark and I were married. The memorials include even a handful of older children and adults who fell into impossible to see cracks in the ice and froze to death despite the warnings.

The journey ahead of us—ahead of Charlottesville—is treacherous, the crevasses hidden, the consequences deadly. More deadly, in fact, for our brothers, sisters, and siblings who are targeted by hate groups than for most of us in this room. Watch your step. Hold fast to the children. Many have died here. The edge of the glacier is right here, just where it’s always been. And it’s not moving, at least not anytime soon. If we are going to put distance between the ugly disease of racism in this country and us, we are going to have to stand at its edge, stare it down, and forbid it to come any closer or to claim the lives of any more children.

The storm is as strong as ever. We are sinking. But the hope of the gospel is this: if we are willing, the one who walks on the waves—the one who is unmoved by the storm—will command us to do the impossible—to get out of the boat we’ve been clinging to—to abandon the vessel, the privilege we thought would protect us—and to trust him instead. If we are willing to get our feet wet doing the work of justice; if we are willing to struggle toward Jesus knowing we don’t have what it takes to reach him; if we are willing to call upon the only one who can save us when we falter, I believe we will find ourselves firmly within his grasp. In the meanwhile, may we have the good sense to pray as Peter did, this day and every day, “Lord, save us.” Amen.

^[1] <https://www.facebook.com/allison.unroe> August 12, 2017

^[2] The name of the victim of the car attack was later revealed as Heather D. Heyer, age 32. For more information, see <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/heather-heyer-charlottesville-victim.html?referer=https://www.google.com/>

^[3] <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/12/politics/trump-statement-alt-right-protests/index.html>

^[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1981/05/24/george-kennans-30-year-nightmare-of-our-final-folly/1c90c056-73c9-4804-9b52-f9e07ad33512/?utm_term=.4dca94f656a9

^[5] (10.6) https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/the_belhar_confession-rogers.pdf