

And I Did Not Know 2024
 Genesis 28:10-16 Mark 4:35-41

Genesis 28:10-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

Mark 4:35-41 (New Revised Standard Version)

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

"It was a dark and stormy night."

That's how I began my sermon from this Mark passage back in 1996,
 2 weeks after hurricane Bertha came ashore at Sneads Ferry,
 blasted through, and demolished much of our community.
 It was the first hurricane in 40 years to make landfall in our area.

Having gone through that storm and still processing the devastation,
 we were a lot more sympathetic toward the frightened disciples,
 for had Jesus been asleep on our couch that Friday night,
 I'm pretty sure Kathy or I would have tried to wake him up.

It's one thing to watch a weather channel report about a hurricane,
 and quite another to experience the howling wind gusts for yourself
 and feel that tight-tense anxiety that grips your belly
 as you see objects flying past & tall trees blowing over,
 or waiting with dread and trepidation for the storm surge
 as the flood waters all around your house continue to rise.

In this part of Mark, Jesus has been instructing his disciples

by using a series of parables to teach them what it means
to trust, obey and rely upon the promises and power of God.

I see the disciples being caught in a small boat in a storm at sea,
as serving like an audio-visual aid that will enhance the lesson
and provide a practical exam to see if they've got it, vs. 35~37,

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."
And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. ... A great windstorm
arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

That image **of a small boat at sea and caught in a violent storm,**
used frequently to symbolize the Church in earliest Christian art,
was also associated with the story of Noah's ark and the flood,
as a place of safe-sanctuary from **the raging storms**
of persecution, external threat & vicious attacks,
and a gathering place of God's hope, healing & salvation.

Notice, the disciples were doing exactly as Jesus had commanded them
yet they were still in grave danger & being threatened by the storm.

According to the writer of the gospel of John, John 21:25

And there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I
suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

This means that the gospel writers had to be selective and choose,
and of all lessons and stories that they might have included,
this one in particular was deemed important enough,
relevant enough to be retold in 3 of the 4 gospels.

So what is it about this story made it worth retelling and repeating
to those very early Christians and their Church communities,
and how did it fit and inform for the situations they're facing?

Consider that this story is about fear, storm and tribulation,
that involved those who were faithfully obeying the Lord Jesus,
and that while facing all that danger, yet Jesus was sleeping.

We know that those early Christians suffered & struggled terribly
under extreme persecution, severe danger and vicious threat,
and that Jesus had not yet returned as they were expecting.
Those were issues of grave concern to that persecuted early Church.

So too as we may question when amid trouble, trial and tribulation,
have I done something to deserve God's wrath and punishment,
or does my suffering indicate that I am outside God's will?
Under stress, haven't we wondered why hasn't Jesus fixed my problem?

I've heard shameless TV preachers promise, explain and guarantee,
that by living a faithful, good and moral Christian life
and by giving money generously to support their ministry

that God will bless proportionally and materially,
and that you will surely be healthy, wealthy & happy.

That is a counterfeit **gospel of prosperity** & a self-serving deception
which you won't find even suggested anywhere within Scripture,
and I know for a fact, at least one of even those TV preachers
doesn't trust in that false gospel of prosperity he promotes.

One time during seminary I heard a TV preacher promise his audience,
that by sending his ministry at least \$50 in *faith money*, then surely
God would definitely bless them with at least \$500, guaranteed.
Holding up a Bible, declared "Says so right here, God guarantees it!"

So I called his 800 number and made I thought, a very generous offer,
that if they'd send me, a financially strapped seminary student \$50,
then I'd happily let his organization keep the whole \$500,
that he said was absolutely promised & guaranteed from God,
but before I could say where to send it, the operator had hung up.

The truth is, God never promised, and it's not anywhere in the Bible,
that if we are generous, well behaved and faithful Christians,
that our lives will be smooth & easy, with no difficulty or pain.

Yes, Jesus is present with them right in the boat, but he's asleep,
so the disciples question, why isn't Jesus taking care of things,
and shouldn't faithful obedience be safer and easier? vs. 38,
But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him,
"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

As Christians, we know what it is to be caught out in a storm,
for we Christians struggle and suffer just as much as anyone,
because there is nothing about walking with Jesus that makes us exempt or
immune from life's struggles & storms.

God's promise is not that we will avoid life's trouble & tribulation,
but that God will always be with us in our boat – amid our fellowship
and God will use what we endure to grow & deepen our faith
as we are blessed by God through our life's stormy seas.

We're not delivered from the storm but we're brought through the storm,
& so our faith can grow as we are tried & proven through wind & wave.

It's clear that Jesus does have power, even over the sea and storm.
Our God is still very much in control and in full authority
even when it seems that storms threaten to overwhelm us.

Jesus continues the disciples' lesson, vs. 39 ~ 40,
He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind
ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

The disciples were challenged by Jesus asking about their faith.

If by faith, they really do fully believe and trust in the Lord,
then why isn't it making more of a difference,
and why has the storm caused them such panic?

**Their boat has become a place for continuing Christian education,
that it's not about our strength, but resisting fear with faith.**

When Jesus had calmed the storm, the disciples were amazed, vs. 41,

And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

An important point of this is to reveal and identify who Jesus is,
which makes the boat a place of divine presence and revelation,
**a safe sanctuary set apart for the purpose of God,
and where they encountered God in a very special way.**

In the Genesis 28 passage, at a seemingly most unlikely place,
**Jacob has an encounter with God in a very special way,
where he is empowered to live out the promises of God.**

In the Genesis passage we read earlier, Jacob was on the run.
He was alone, afraid and fleeing for his life from
the raging storm of his brother Esau's justified wrath.

One time when his brother Esau was very hungry,
Jacob wouldn't even share a bowl of stew with him,
until he agreed to trade away his birthright,
his rightful share of the family inheritance.

Then in perhaps the first case in history of identity theft,
Jacob had managed to exploit his aging father's blindness,
and deceived Isaac into falsely giving him
the paternal blessing he intended for Esau.

That was finally too much for Esau, enraged enough to kill him,
and so his sneaky deceptions have finally caught up with Jacob,
and he has lost it all, family, home and his future.

All alone and estranged in the wilderness he stops for the night,
and falls into the exhausted darkness of a troubled sleep,
**of having to face the truth and the harsh consequences
of his dishonest scheming & total lack of integrity.**

But then, there at Bethel, a most unlikely place to see grace,
while he was running away, **Jacob has an encounter with the Lord God.**
In that place God offers a vision of unexpected blessings and hope.

It's not the harsh judgment Jacob deserves, but incredible grace,
the promise that God will be with him and bless him always, vs. 13~15,

And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD ... Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

God was binding himself to this dubious and devious character.

**God will provide the grace of sanctuary, promise and blessing,
"I'll be with you always and bring you home again, transformed."**

Jacob is stunned by the graciousness and mercy of God,
surprised that the Lord is with him, has always been with him
even in this place where he has had to flee in fear & guilt,
and because of God's Presence, it has now become an awesome place.

Through his life's storm of desperation, danger and adversity,
Jacob has now come to recognize himself as loved & precious to God,
has been assured that the Lord has a purpose for his life,
and that God will fulfill those intentions and promise.

Jacob has lived shamelessly, yet God promises to love and bless him.

Even without having to be worthy, deserving or earning it,

**God makes an unbelievably gracious promise,
"I love you and I will take care of you",
and here, this encounter with God's gracious care and mercy
will initiate a process of reshaping Jacob and his life,**

and I'd like to think that sometimes here in this sanctuary,
we too can possibly be changed and transformation initiated
when we encounter the truth of God's amazing grace and mercy.

Certainly we reject Jacob's deplorable lack of integrity and ethics
but what an amazing and wonderful picture and truth about our God,
who loves even Jacob, even before Jacob has started to reform,
before that grace had even begun to reshape his life.

Jacob experienced and recognized God's grace present in that place,

and in mystified wonder he declares, vs. 16,

"Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

This story about Jacob's encounter with God

tells us much about the mercy, compassion and grace of God,
who continuously invites us and always welcomes us
into an ever deeper into a more authentic relationship,
for when we truly encounter God, our lives begin to heal.

Like the disciples in the boat and Jacob there at Bethel,
we too need places where we can be found by our seeking God,
for though God is everywhere and sovereign over all that is,
we need places set aside for respite, to worship the Lord.

Our world can be a graceless place opposed to God's compassion,

but the promise is that Jesus is always with us and for us,
The God who with plan and purpose created all that is,
does have the power to bring us through the chaos.

Sometimes our life's storms reveal the shallowness of our faith,
as we are called to task, and forced by circumstances
to draw nearer and let God's grace do its work in our lives.

**If we'd never had a problem, if we'd never gone through a storm,
we wouldn't know all that God can do or how very much God loves us.**

It is when we respond to life's storms with faith and with hope,
that we grow, and our spirits soar, seeing God's power with us
as there amid raging storm we experience his Presence most fully.

May our church be sanctuary from the chaos and serve to remind us
as a place of grace in a world that often rejects God's truth,
as a place where we are drawn toward God in mercy, hope and love.

and where God builds us toward a faithful discipleship
of reflecting God's grace and healing out into the world,
to worship and be equipped to serve and make a difference.

May this sanctuary and the fellowship we share always be a reminder
that this is a special place, a sacred and holy space and people,
where the promises & blessings of God are uplifted & shared,
as we experience **the mystery of God present here among us,**

the promise and hope of sanctuary just as God promised in *Genesis 28*,

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, ... for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. How awesome is this place! Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!