



“SEA CHANGE”
SCRIPTURE: JOB 38: 1-11; MARK 4: 35-41
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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Job 38: 1-11

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? “Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? When I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Mark 4: 35-41

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 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?” ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” 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?”

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The pressure was on. My whole family was coming to visit us in California, all 20 of them. My parents, my sisters and spouses, and all my nieces and nephews ranging in age from teenagers to babies in strollers, were coming all the way across the country to spend Christmas with us—and I was charged with figuring out things this crew would like to do.

So I booked a whale-watching cruise from the Monterey Bay for the whole family—it was our gift to them.

About 3 minutes and 20 seconds into the 3-hour cruise, I was the first to hit the deck. We hadn't even left the bay yet for goodness sake. But 13 foot swells rocked our boat every six seconds. I know that because I later found out that those are the sea conditions that mark the worst they will let it get and still take out commercial cruises like this one.

The Mount family has many strengths, but being able to deal with rough seas is not one of them. Within the first 15 minutes, the whole family was down for the count—except my dad, who had gone up to the upper deck to see the whales, and was apparently oblivious to the travail of his family right below him.

I realized several things during those three hours of unrelenting rough seas. One is that my dad missed his calling—college professor and minister suited him fine, but he should have been the captain of a ship. He saw whales and sea birds and had a great time with not even a touch of sea-sickness while the rest of us were either in the process of anticipating or recovering from a marathon of retching.

The other is that I would have been just like the disciples in our scripture passage today. I would have been right there with them: “Jesus! Wake up! Do you see what is happening right now? Please make it stop.”

In fact, I believe I prayed those very words over and over again every time I got the courage to open my eyes and peer through the little hole in the ship where I was laying on the ground, not caring what anyone thought of me. Every time I peered through that hole and didn't see land, I prayed again for Jesus to make the sea change.

I told myself over and over again, “you made it through nine months of pregnancy feeling like this, you can make it through 3 hours.”

You know when you are in those horrible situations in life—where you are in pain and you are trapped with no relief in sight, you lose track of a lot of things—the passage of time (one minute can feel like a day). You lose track of what it feels like to not be in pain. You lose track of your connection to a big world—you forget that you are not the only one ever to experience pain.

And when the pain is over, how quickly we can retreat back into a place where we think the worst things couldn't possibly happen to us—and that when bad things happen to other people they must have done something to deserve it.

Whether we like to admit it or not, human tendency is for pain to divide and conquer us.

That's where Jesus comes in. That's where he meets us—in our pain, and tells us to see him and trust him and walk toward him, follow him. Calling out to Jesus is not enough when we are in pain, we are also called to listen to him. He tells us not to be afraid, not to be paralyzed, not to believe the lie that tells us we are alone.

That's the Gospel you know—that pain and suffering will not have the final word in our lives. That following Jesus means we hold on to that promise especially in the pain, we hold on to the sensations of the calm seas of Jesus's presence, the gentle floating feeling of being held by God's love, a love that conquers the powers of hell.

The Gospel means we are at home in God no matter what it is that is happening to us. That our rock is beneath us. That our sure and present help is all around us. That our redeemer is already at work turning our suffering toward a healing opportunity.

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it! Who wouldn't want that, right?

But here's the hard part, we're called to embody that peace, that truth, that courage, that power to heal, that saving, transforming love in the midst of the storm, not just when the storm is over.

That's the hard part, sisters and brothers. And that is why we need each other so much. Church is where we help each other remember that the greatest of all storms is over in the midst of the other intermittent storms of life—God has delivered us from despair and fear and perceived isolation. The church is who sings that lullaby of hope and faith to the world when the seas are rough.

That is why we are called to speak truth about our pain and the world's pain. Because how can you love me if you don't know what I need, if you don't know where it hurts.

Because how can I love you, if you don't tell me what you need, if you don't tell me where it hurts?

Because how can Jesus love you and me, if we don't tell him what we need, if we don't tell him where it hurts?

It is an honor and a gift when anyone finds the courage to tell us about their pain. And we are God's people, Christ's body. So we are the ones called to listen when the world cries out.

Can you hear the cries? The storm of voices who are in pain—who suffer under the yolk of oppression and injustice and racism and misogyny and homophobia and mental illness and poverty and affliction and fear and loneliness?

Can you hear the cries?

And here's the harder question.... if you hear them, can you go toward the cries like someone who believes in a mighty God, in a suffering God, in a God who hung on a cross and rose again, in a God who can calm the storm and release the captives, and make rivers in the desert, and heal your lonely, shivering, cowering soul?

These tumultuous times are no time to lose your faith, brothers and sisters. These are the days when faith is our most powerful weapon against violence, against hatred, against the commodification of people, against the criminalization of poverty, against the failure to see and respect the humanity of all people.

What do you risk losing in the depth of the storm, when your fear is kicking in full force, when you are desperate for something to change? May God help us if we let the storm take away our mutual regard for all other human beings.

A poem by Warsan Shire

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat

unless the water is safer than the land...¹

God have mercy on us if we let the storm wash away our capacity for compassion and solidarity. “No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.”

What desperation parents must feel to risk everything, even separation, to give their child a chance to live with more possibility and less violence.

Christ have mercy on us if we have let the storm deafen us, if we have let the storm blind us.

If you have read any news, if you have turned on the TV once, if you have glanced at social media... unless your head is in the sand, unless you have willfully avoided being a part of the human family these last two weeks, then you have heard the cries.

You have seen the ugliest of what Reinhold Niebuhr called “man’s inhumanity to man.” You have seen the profanity of so-called policies and procedures that can justify the worst kinds of torture and trauma. You have seen the horrible reflection of a world drunk on its own idolatrous hunger for power and dominance. You have seen a blood chilling lifting of the veil of part of what has built this country’s wealth and military dominance—the willingness to build it on the humiliation and violation of black and brown bodies, to build it on the backs of poor people who are desperate with no place to go.

Lest you think you are seeing something new, don’t let the storm take away your historical memory—the courage to know where we come from, the courage to see our country’s complexity clearly.

There was no Twitter when the United State government led the forced migrations of Native Americans. There was not Facebook on the slave auction block when the American economy normalized selling a 3-year old child, ripping him from his mother’s arms. There was no Instagram when concentration camps in this country held Japanese Americans during WW II, including at Montreat. No going viral of pictures when Presbyterians went onto the Pueblos in New Mexico and forcibly removed children from their families to attend boarding schools so they could be “civilized.” We avert our eyes about the ways poverty, racism, and homophobia separate families every day.

So, maybe we’ve forgotten, maybe we’ve resisted admitting the truth. Rev Traci Blackmon, UCC Pastor in St. Louis said at the General Assembly this week, ripping families apart is not unusual in America. No, “these are ordinary times.”

And church is called to be the Gospel speakers and Gospel seekers in this tumult of the ordinary, in this unrest of normalcy, in the diminishing returns of the status quo.

Because you see for us, for Christians, the ordinary just isn't good enough. We know the seas will change.

I have been to many General Assemblies in my day—I lost count a while ago but suffice it to say I have not missed many of them in the last 25 years. And boy were they often stormy. Coming home from GA could feel like emerging from a whirlwind, a tsunami, and a hail storm all at once—arguments, hurt feelings, broken relationships, misunderstandings, manipulation and disrespect. The highs were really high and lows were really low—kinda like 13 foot swells every six seconds.

This year was different. There are lots of reasons—and one of them is not that the seas have changed—indeed one could say this assembly convened in some of the most tumultuous waters our country has seen in the last 25 years. The difference is not in the stormy conditions, the difference, I believe, is in our disposition in the storm.

What I saw this week was Holy courage and the faith to take risks. For the first time in the history of the Presbyterian Church in this country, the GA took to the streets to protest injustice for the poor. St. Louis has a complicated history that stretches back even beyond the days of the Dred Scott case and the expansion of slavery in the United States.

The power of seeing an old white women with a limp and a cane walking alongside a group of African American teenage girls, a white man in his 70s in a suit and tie striding down the street in the hot sun arm in arm with an LGBTQ+ person with a tank top and tattoos. Two married women walking down the streets with their arms clasped together with brothers and sisters in Christ from Columbia, Egypt, and Puerto Rico. Together we walked arm in arm to the justice center with \$47,000 of bail money collected at the Assembly. I heard yesterday that the number has grown to \$54,000 since Tuesday! This bail money was to bail out those who were incarcerated basically for being poor—they couldn't pay for a traffic ticket or some other minor, non-violent offense and so they were jailed and unable to pay their cash bail. They become then free labor for the city, living in squalid conditions in what is called "the work house." It amounts to a debtors prison and slave labor.

And we sang and shouted affirmations of our faith—that God yearns for the liberation of the oppressed, healing for the afflicted, that God yearns for humanity to become beloved community.

We, church, are called to follow Jesus not just when the storm ends, but when it is raging on, when people are reeling, desperate, and in pain.

Faith is believing the storm will end while the storm rages. Faith is working, risking and believing that things can and should get better in this world. That justice can and will roll down like a mighty rushing river. That the captives will be released and the poor will be liberated from chains of neglect and deprivation. That the demons that possess us and diminish us will be exorcised. That the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and the child shall dance over the adder's den.

"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Jesus said it. How will we answer him?

Thanks be to God.

¹ "Home" by Warsan Shire, <http://seekershub.org/blog/2015/09/home-warsan-shire/> Warsan Shire is a Kenyan-born Somali poet, writer and educator based in London.