

“Marked”  
Mark 4:35-41  
Mary Kathleen Duncan  
July 5, 2020

*On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’<sup>36</sup> And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.<sup>37</sup> A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.<sup>38</sup> 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?’<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’<sup>41</sup> 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.**

Many of you know that as a congregation, we have been walking through the Gospel of Mark in a variety of ways. Leigh has been teaching through the book for the past several weeks as part of an adult education offering. In the month of June, our Youth Group read through the gospel and Lauren has been highlighting weekly stories for our children from it. So, that means, I have been thinking about Mark’s narrative a lot this summer. I even used the story of Jesus calming the storm two weekends ago when I led a graveside service for David’s grandfather in Charleston. Larry Duncan died back in March from complications due to a brain aneurism and we finally had a socially distanced graveside service to celebrate his life and commit him to the Lord on the first day of summer. I chose this passage for the service because of its resonance with Larry’s life. You see, Larry, was a boat dealer.

He lived on the water, was more comfortable on a boat than anywhere else, and we laid him to rest in a cemetery with a view of the Ashley River. He was raised near here, in the Upstate, but he got down to Charleston, near the water, as fast as he could. And he was also no stranger to the storms of life. Boats and a love of the water were marks of the life of Larry Duncan. They are the legacy he passed on to his children, his grandchildren, and his great grandchildren.

You know, Jesus wasn’t born on the water either. We learn from the other gospels that he was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, but he spent nearly all of his ministry near the water, mostly in the Jewish towns along the Sea of Galilee. As an adult he made his home in the seaside town of Capernaum. Once I started to think about this theme of being marked by something –

a region, a favorite pastime, a significant life event – I began to see how this story, as it functions in the whole of the Gospel of Mark, marks something significant in the life of Jesus and his disciples. At this point in the narrative Jesus has been baptized by John, called and appointed the 12 disciples, done some significant healings, begun to challenge the religious authorities, and taught great crowds by use of parables. But he has not shown the type of power he does here, in this story, when rebuking the wind and the waves. And he has not gone outside of his home region of Galilee. The end of chapter four and the beginning of chapter five change all of that. With this story of the calming of the storm, Jesus' ministry and that of his disciples is marked in a new way.

Just for a moment, let me tell you about what happens immediately after this story. Jesus and his disciples enter a non-Jewish territory – the country of the Gerasenes in the Decapolis, a group of ten city states of the Roman Empire. As soon as they get out of the boat, Jesus is confronted by “a man with an unclean spirit”<sup>1</sup> named Legion. At this point, Jesus has healed others suffering from unclean spirits, but nothing on this level and not a person from a foreign region. Legion lives among the tombs and no one can come near him or control him. Even chains cannot keep him bound. But Jesus completely heals him in rather dramatic fashion and when the man begs to accompany Jesus and his disciples, Jesus implores him to stay saying “tell them what the Lord has done for you.”<sup>2</sup> Legion, too, is marked...by his encounter with Jesus and subsequent healing. This instance of Jesus healing a foreign, demon-possessed man in dramatic fashion is just the beginning. The narrative takes off in a major way as we transition from chapter four to chapter five and beyond in this gospel. Healings become more dramatic and significant. Boundaries are crossed again and again. Authority is challenged and the large crowds aren't only taught, but miraculously fed. And it all begins with the storm in the boat. When the disciples are afraid and Jesus is asleep. That experience marks them. It marks the gospel story. And it marks us.

What are the things that mark your life? Are they moments of joy, favorite pastimes, family traditions? Are they major milestones, traumatic events, important realizations, challenging periods? Most human beings are marked by all of the above. What do these marks do to us? Do they define us? Encourage us? Shape us? Hinder us? Empower us? Paralyze us? Once again, probably all of the above. Now I want you to take a moment and think about what marks you in your Christian journey. What experiences, milestones, joys, sorrows, and encounters mark you as a Christian? Perhaps they overlap with the other marks of your life, perhaps they are unique to your journey of faith. When I think about being marked, my mind happens upon the stories of some Biblical characters from the beginning of our story of faith, the book of Genesis – Cain who bore a physical mark from God after he murdered his brother, Noah who had the memory and promise of the rainbow imprinted on his heart, Abraham and

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 5:2

<sup>2</sup> Mark 5:19

Sarah who were marked by the sign of the covenant, Rachel who was marked by the pain of infertility, Jacob who walked away from his nighttime divine wrestling match with a limp. These are just a few stories among many in that beginning book and the whole of Scripture that tell of how the people of God are marked and shaped by life experiences and encounters with the holy.

I've been doing a lot of reading during this particular season of life. I read to entertain myself. To distract myself. To educate myself. To comfort myself. To challenge myself. By my count, I've read 15 books, lots of children's bedtime stories, countless articles, one gospel in its entirety, and a myriad of scripture passages and biblical commentaries. One of the books that has stuck with me is a theological memoir by Serene Jones, the President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City titled, "Call It Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World." In it, Jones walks us through the things that mark her life – her home region of Oklahoma, family system and heritage, childhood church participation, educational background, significant relationships, major national events, the birth of her daughter, and career milestones. As she takes readers on a journey through those experiences that have marked her, she explores how these marks have shaped her Christian faith, knowledge of God, and discipleship. One of the most significant marks in her life came on April 19, 1995 when American terrorists bombed the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City. Jones was teaching on the East Coast when this happened, but her grandfather, sister and brother in law worked in downtown Oklahoma City and she was unable to make contact with them for hours after the bombing. It turned out that her sister hadn't made it in to work yet, her grandfather had already been in and returned home, but her brother in law was parked next to the truck the terrorists drove that day and he experienced non-life threatening injuries from the blast. In the days, months, and years after the bombing Jones dealt with a great deal of hatred relating to the perpetrators. The hatred consumed her and fueled her rage. It left her unable to pray, reflect theologically, or effectively teach her students. Remembering that time and the trauma and hatred that marked her, Jones calls hatred "the least divine impulse there is," and shares, "Not a drop of blood had fallen on my hands, not even a drain of concrete dust had touched my lungs...but I was quaking inside."<sup>3</sup> The hatred that marked her eventually led Jones to have a deeper, more intimate, and transformative experience with the forgiveness of God. One that would not have been possible without being marked by the hatred that followed the events of April 19, 1995. Of forgiveness she writes, "The hatred that we believe shields us is the hatred that kills us..."

To forgive is to let go of what weighs us down so that we are freed to do the world of love in the world." Serene Jones was marked, but also propelled into deeper faith by the hatred and understanding forgiveness that came as a result of the Oklahoma City bombing.

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<sup>1</sup> Call It Grace, p. 164

One of the articles I've read recently that resonated with me is a CNN opinion piece published in late June by a Presbyterian pastor named Joanna Adams. Adams is highly respected, retired pastor in our denomination who lives in Atlanta and was raised in Mississippi. In the article, she shares about two experiences that marked her. The first was parade in her home-town of Meridian, Mississippi when she was a girl. She recalls watching the parade and seeing the float from the black grammar school in town approaching. As it came into view, three white teenagers standing near her began to yell racial slurs and when the float passed by them, they spit on the children who were standing upon it. Adams recalls that no one, including her spoke up against those boys and their racist, unjust, horrible actions. To quote her, "my shame for the rest of my life." The second experience is that of living in Atlanta where Rayshard Brooks was killed on June 12, a place, she says, "where spit has turned to bullets." Adams vulnerably shares of two experiences that have marked her life, specifically her life of faith. One, paralyzed her by shame, regret, fear. The other is propelling her. She concludes her opinion piece,

*"White southerners, we must speak up now -- Black lives matter. Our souls are at stake, as is American society. Too many of us observe the parade of Black deaths and close our eyes to the scourge of white supremacy and say not a word.*

*Neither do we do much of anything that matters or helps bring about change. You and I can never know what it is like to be Black, but by God, we can do better than we have done for generations. Shame on us if we don't."*<sup>4</sup>

Marked and propelled. I think the disciples who were in the boat with Jesus that evening knew something about both. They and their story can teach and encourage us in this moment and as Christ's disciples in 2020 America. First, we all go through storms in life. I, myself, have uttered the cry of the disciples, "do you not care that we are perishing?!" many times in 2020.

On behalf of myself and the world. It isn't a bad cry. It isn't unfaithful. It can be productive because it acknowledges our fear and does something with it. It invites Jesus into the conversation and allows him to answer. We just need to remember that the answer may not come in our time, but in God's. Sometimes it comes sooner than we are ready and sometimes it comes past the time we think it should have arrived. Second, just because Jesus is in the boat with you, doesn't mean it isn't hard. The peace of Christ is a welcome gift, but, as Leigh Stuckey reminded me when we were discussing this passage, it is not the absence of conflict. Sometimes, to achieve peace you have to have difficult conversations, you have to face unpleasant realities, you have to have courage to speak up, and you have to have the patience and fortitude to listen and learn.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/23/opinions/white-southerners-must-speak-about-racism-adams/index.html>

Third, water is vital. Our world is made up of 70% water, our bodies 60%. Water causes plants to grow and flourish which gives us food. And we need water to drink and to clean. Water is also a powerful conduit of God's grace. Just think of the waters of baptism. In the story of our beginning, from Genesis 1, we learn that water equals chaos. But it is also the means by which life is brought forth. Again and again, when God's people need either the chaos or grace that water offers, God provides it. And this story of the storm on the sea is no exception. In the presence of water, in the chaos and grace, God shows up, lessons are taught, and life is propelled into a future that is unknown, but held by God.

In this story, the disciples don't know what's coming next, but we do. Things get real. Things get serious. They don't automatically become perfect disciples. Because we know what happens, we know that they will continue to make mistakes, blunder through situations, and not fully understand. But because of their experience, because they have been marked by the grace of Christ and seen the authority of Jesus powerfully at work, more is expected and required of them. They are held in God's grace and propelled forward... I can't help but wonder. Is this what is happening now? Are we in the boat with Jesus? Will we continue to call out to Jesus and to invite Christ into the conversation? Can we be receptive to a peace that is not absent of conflict? Can we remember the power of water and hold fast to the promise that in it we are marked as Christ's own forever? Will we let this experience, this time, this season, mark us, and ultimately, propel us forward into a deeper, more at stake, riskier discipleship? We don't know what's coming, but God does. Amen and amen.