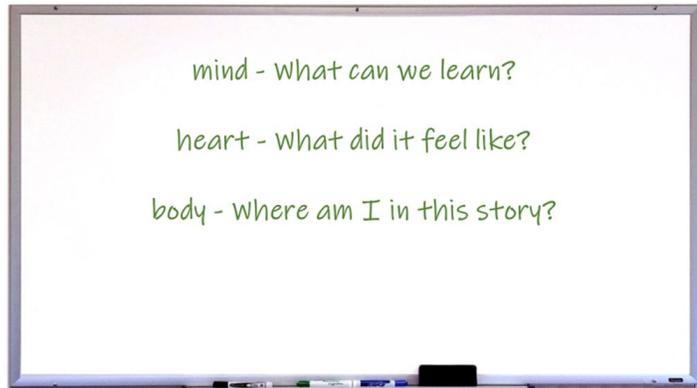


The Bible Unwrapped: Part 4 // Guided Meditation and Reflection  
2020-02-24 // Joe Heikman // Wildwood Mennonite Church

So this is the third week in a row we've heard this same story from the gospel of Matthew.

The first week, I talked about it from a critical, mind-focused point of view, looking for the meaning of the story, what it has to teach us.

Last week, we read the story with our hearts. Warren gave us a dramatic look at what it might have felt like from Peter's perspective. And I invited us to read with empathy and to consider the emotional connections that the story brings out for us.



This week, we're going to put ourselves into the story, not so much reading it as taking part in it. If the past two weeks were reading with our minds and then our hearts, this week it's about bringing our physicality into the story, connecting to it through our primal instincts and intuition, our guts.

We're going to do this through a guided meditation exercise. We'll have about 10 minutes of the meditation, and then after that I'll wrap things up with some of my thoughts about why this kind of thing is worthwhile.

So what I'm going to do is to invite you to paint a picture of this scene in your imagination, whatever you imagine of the details of the boat and the water and the storm to be. And then when you have the image in your mind, I'll invite you to step into the scene and see where it takes you. I'll give more instructions as we go along.

Just remember that it's not about getting the details exactly right. This isn't an exact role-play of the story as it is told in the gospels. This exercise is more about letting your imagination do its thing, playing along with it, and listening to what God might have for you in this setting as you participate in it, today.

So don't worry about whether or not you're doing it right. It's more of an improv exercise than following a script. It's less like singing in a choir and more like playing in a jazz band.

I know that's a bit of a stretch for a Sunday morning in a Mennonite church, but as we just sang ("[I Will Come to You in the Silence](#)", *Sing the Story* #49), sometimes the voice of God comes to us in the silence. So that's what we're listening for.

I'll invite you to be quiet and still, as much as possible. If you need to get up and move for any reason, go right ahead. Or if you're wrangling tiny humans, some noise is to be expected. There will be some background sound effects to help set the scene, so it's not going to be perfectly quiet the whole time anyway and a bit of chaos is part of the storm scenario. :)

So go ahead and put your body into a comfortable position. I'm going to turn down the lights and light a candle to help us pay attention to the Spirit of God among us.

*We spent the next 10+ minutes in a guided meditation. You can read the script below, or listen to an audio version here: [Meditation: A Voice In the Storm](#)*

*\*Background music is adapted from "[Litany for Lent](#)" by Inman and "[One In Ten](#)" and "[Arctic](#)" by Sleeping At Last.*

*As we begin, I invite you to close your eyes if that will help you to focus, or allow your gaze to soften. Take a few moments to connect with your body, take a few deep breaths, down into the pit of your stomach. Notice the sensation of your breath, notice the fullness and then the emptiness, the unforced rhythm of life.*

*As you breathe, let your body soften, let go of some of the tension in your muscles, relax and feel your body pressing against your chair, the sensation of your feet firmly on the ground.*

*As you feel your body relaxing and releasing, in your mind's eye, imagine a blank canvas or a white screen in front of you. Empty space, ready to be filled with whatever you choose to fill it with.*

*Now start to picture the scene from the gospel of Matthew, of a storm brewing over a lake. You're outside the scene, so you can see the whole thing. In your imagination you're painting in the water, the sky, the horizon line. Imagine yourself filling that blank canvas with the details of the scene.*

*What does the sky look like? Is it day or night, or an in-between time? What colour is the water? Can you see the shoreline with the distant hills in the background? Or are you too far away to see anything but water?*

*There is a boat in this picture. What do you imagine it looks like, as you paint it in? How big is it? Does it have a single mast with a simple sail, or is it something more complicated than that? Is this vessel weathered and worn, or new and untested? Does it float high in the water, or is it already sitting dangerously low?*

*There are people on board--how many do you see? Can you see their faces, or is too dark to see the details? What are they doing, as the storm wind picks up?*

*Now, as you're standing in front of this picture in your mind's eye, I want you to look for yourself in this scene. Where are you in the picture?*

*Are you in the boat, maybe busily tying ropes or straining at the oars? Maybe hiding in the back? Taking charge and shouting instructions? Desperately clinging to your seat? Are you Peter, at the center of the story? Or one of the secondary characters, part of the supporting cast?*

*Or maybe you're not even in the boat. Maybe you've already been thrown overboard and are swimming for your life. Or maybe you're not one of the human characters at all, maybe in this moment you feel like some other part of the picture, maybe you are the boat. Maybe you're a bird flying above the storm, or a fish swimming beneath it. Or maybe you are one of the waves, a cloud driven by the winds, the fury of the storm itself.*

*Take a minute to place yourself in this scene. Don't over-analyze why you are in that place, just observe yourself there.*

*What does it feel like to be in the scene? What are your senses telling you? What do the rain and waves feel like against your skin? Beyond the general noise of the storm, what specific sounds do you hear? What does it smell like on the lake, in the storm?*

*Take a minute just to be in that space, to immerse yourself in your imagination. What emotions come up as you experience the storm? Don't critique them or try to explain them, just notice them. How is your body responding to the situation as you picture it?*

*Now, from wherever you are in this setting, something changes. A new figure emerges into view, you can see them moving towards you. And their face is a familiar one. This is someone you know, someone with whom you have been through a lot together. Someone who puts you at ease, maybe, or someone who challenges you and brings out the best in you. Someone you are glad to see. Someone you trust.*

*Go ahead and put a face to that picture. Obviously in the gospel story, this figure is Jesus...but this is your story, go ahead and give the figure whatever face feels right to you in the moment.*

*Even through the storm, you can hear their voice.*

*What are they saying? This person that you trust, they're trying to tell you something, in the middle of the storm. What is it? Is it a question, a reassurance, a challenge? Are they asking you to do something? Are they reminding you of something you already know?*

*Listen carefully through the storm.*

*After they've spoken, something changes. The storm begins to wane, the winds slow.*

*What other changes do you notice to the scene? What does the sky look like, now that the storm is moving on? Is there light on the horizon? Has the boat moved closer to the shore? Does the growing calm bring a sense of relief and lightness, or is it something else?*

*Take a moment to be present in the scene now, after the storm has passed.*

*Is there something in this experience that feels like the presence of God? Is God saying something to you through this image? Or maybe you were speaking something of your own heart, as a prayer, or a rant, or a call for help. There was something true about this, what was it for you?*

*Take a final minute to sit with that idea, to test it and play with it in this calm, safe place.*

*And now you step back away from the scene and it shifts from a 3-D experience back into the two dimensions of a picture. The lake and the boat are images on the canvas again. You're outside of the painting again, Feel yourself breathing, feel your body relaxing. And whenever you're ready, go ahead and open your eyes and come back into the room.*

So, how was that for you? I know some of you really dislike it when we do things like this, so thanks for humouring me. We will be back to our regularly scheduled sermon format throughout Lent, just for you. :)

I got the idea for this meditation in a session with my spiritual director. She often gives me space to sit quietly with a scripture verse or image, whatever we've been talking about in the session. For whatever reason, last month I thought of this story of Jesus in the storm.

I was having a turbulent week, and I think my hope was that Jesus would calm the chaos and confusion that I was feeling that day. And I was a little bit frustrated with myself because that's such a cliché. Also I really didn't have the faith to believe that God would calm the storms for me; that's just not how my life works. But that was the metaphor that came to mind, so I went with it.

But as I thought through the story, instead of picturing myself as Peter or as one of the other disciples in the boat, I found myself drawn to the water. I imagined myself as a drop of rain splashing into the sea in the middle of the storm.

Which should have been a frightening thought--the raindrop is chaotic, driven by the wind, pulled downward by gravity, and then it splashes into the sea and becomes part of the wave, which is even more wild and out of control.

But in that moment, sitting there with my spiritual director, imagining myself as the raindrop in the storm, it didn't feel like chaos. It felt like a homecoming, the raindrop welcomed back into the sea, not *driven by* the wind or raging against the storm, but the raindrop was *part of* the storm. That's where the raindrop belongs, the wildness isn't happening to it, it's part of it, part of its nature. The raindrop belongs there in the storm.

And as I sat there, thinking this through, I got chills--maybe the out-of-control feeling that I was struggling with was actually a point of connection with my humanity, my identity.

Maybe I was feeling the chaos because I am part of the storm, we are all part of the storm together, and so rather than struggling against it, I could embrace the storm as a signal that I belong.

And *that's* what I wanted--more than peace and calm, I wanted a place of belonging. I didn't expect to find it in the middle of the storm, but that's where it was.

Maybe that sounds cheesy to you. In that moment, for me, it was a gift. I could *feel* that sense of belonging, acceptance, being part of this life that is bigger than me, that is far out of my control, but where I still have my place.

I would say that was an experience of the voice of God for me that day. It wasn't a vision or a prophecy or anything like that, it was just me and my imagination. Searching for some truth in this metaphor, and being surprised with what I found.

Is that an appropriate way to use Scripture?

The part of me that preached two weeks ago is quite skeptical of that, to be honest. I mean, this is not at all what the gospel writers and editors had in mind when they put this story into the gospel of Matthew. If I had submitted that interpretation of the story in a seminary paper, I would not have received a passing grade.

A lot of us have been trained in "exegesis and hermeneutics," reading to understand the meaning of the text *back then* and faithfully bringing it forward to apply it to our lives now.

My experience with my spiritual director, the meditation we did today, this is something totally different from that. This is experiencing the Bible as a dynamic entity, something alive and active and present now. It's not interpreting what God said to them back then, but listening for what God is saying to me right now.

If that makes you feel cautious, I'm with you. There's a significant possibility that what I experienced was a projection of part of my fragile psyche. Maybe I was just latching on to some naive, feel-good message about everything belonging that I heard once in a Pepsi commercial or whatever. Maybe I was just talking to myself and hearing what I wanted to hear.

But I don't think that was it. That's not what I sound like when I talk to myself, for one thing. For another, who's to say that God can't speak through a Pepsi commercial?

Either way, the message about belonging in the storm, that does sound like what my mind and my heart know of God. That resonates with what I read elsewhere in the Bible. So it may not be true to the original intent of the writers of this story, but it does ring of the capital T Truth of God's Word.

Our Anabaptist tradition has long embraced the head-first approach to scripture, and that has been reinforced in the past century with the heavy emphasis on Sunday School, Bible school and seminary studies.

A lot of us have also been heavily influenced by the emotional approach to Scripture through the evangelical emphasis on personal devotions, charismatic preaching styles, and the general growing attention to emotional intelligence.

And though this experiential, intuitive approach to Scripture is less familiar to many of us, it also is part of a broad and historic tradition. Several in fact.

We've talked before here about [the practice of Lectio Divina](#), the slow and careful reading of Scripture, listening to hear what stands out to you in the moment. That goes all the way back to the 3rd Century Christians, carried on through the Catholic monastics through the Rule of St. Benedict.

Some of you are familiar with the Society of Friends, the Quakers, whose understanding of God's Word comes through the Inner Light, reading the Bible ["under the immediate direction of the Holy Spirit."](#)

Or maybe you've been to a service in [one of the Orthodox churches](#) in our area. Their worship is all about visuals, pageantry and drama. They aren't merely listening to the Scriptures or having a preacher explain them, but they are experiencing the Word through icons and incense and physical contact. They participate in the divine drama, they take part in the Scriptures.



Perhaps you can think of other Christian traditions whose practice some kind of experiential Bible reading.

I think there is room for all of these, and I think our spirituality benefits when we make space for all of them.

At its best, Scripture is always a conversation between the words on the pages and the people who read them. When we do that with our whole selves, we get a more full knowledge of God.

The words of Jesus, from the gospel of Matthew:

*“Ask and keep asking, and you will receive. Seek and keep seeking, and you will find. Knock and keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who keeps asking, receives. The one who keeps seeking, finds. And the one who keeps knocking, enters.*

*“Is there any among you who would hand your daughter a stone when she asked for bread? Would one of you hand your son a snake when he asked for a fish? If you, with all your faults, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Abba God in heaven give good things to those who ask!*

May God bless the reading, and the readers, of the Word. Amen.