

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020

St. John's from home

Gen. 37:1-4, 12-28; Ps. 105:1-6, 16-22, 45C; Rom. 10:5-15; Mt. 14:22-33

*Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien,
the land of Canaan*

“Jacob settled.”

This pronouncement should come with fanfare. Why? Because the story of God's promise to Abraham, the settling in the land of promise—Canaan—is one of the central elements of the plot till now. Abraham—Jacob's grandfather—had been promised a number of things, including *land*. Abraham was promised that his descendants would inherit the land right where Jacob settled. “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess ... To your descendants I give this land,” says God to Abraham.

It's a promise made again to Abraham's son, Isaac—Isaac, the father of Jacob. The Lord appeared to Isaac too and said, “settle in the land that I shall show you ... for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath that I swore to your father Abraham.”

And this same promise, the one made to Abraham, and to Isaac, was again made to Jacob, grandson to Abraham, and son to Isaac. “And the Lord stood beside [Jacob] 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.’” Jacob called that place Bethel, and despite the promise, he did not remain in Bethel long. Instead, we find Jacob on the move, coming close to the promised land, at one point even sending his family ahead of him into the promised land. On the move, Jacob will go back to Bethel and the land he was promised. But only to leave it again.

Jacob never *settles* in the land promised—till *now*. Finally: “Jacob settles,” and Jacob settles not just anywhere. He settles “in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.” Jacob settles, finally, in the land that was promised to his grandfather, to his father, and to him, the land promised to all their families and children. And with this, God, it would seem, has kept his word: Jacob has settled in the land that was promised.

So it feels a bit strange that there's no fanfare, that there's no party or final hurrah, no celebration that God has kept his word, and that this major plot point concerning the promises of God has come to a resolution. There's but a thin matter of fact sentence: "Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan." And the question comes to mind: why is that? Why the reserve, why step back from the fact that God has kept his promise? It's almost as though our narrator knows something about the promised land that we have yet to realize, and that perhaps there's more to the story of the promised land to God, to Jacob, and to the people of God.

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It's not very often, in the gospels, that we read stories about the disciples lounging on the beach. The closest we get to lawn chairs and cold beer and a nice breeze on the beach is in John—but even that day on the beach followed a long long night of work, and included an invitation into more work yet. Instead of days of leisure, in the gospels we get stories of the disciples with Jesus in jostling crowds. Or Jesus and the disciples encountering demanding and hopeful people. We get a lot of listening to Jesus preach. But we get very little evidence of anything approaching a story that would include a sentence like "then the disciples unfolded their lawn chairs, opened the cooler, and stopped for a while because they were hoping to get a bit of time in the sun."

Instead we get more crowds, and then some more demanding and hopeful people. More people to feed and even more preaching to listen to. The disciples are always, it seems, on the move, stopping to listen and to serve, following this slightly bonkers itinerant preacher willing for his own solitude to be interrupted, and bent more on feeding and healing and preaching and dying, than anything like leisure.

Along with all that though we also get storms and boats. This is the *second* time in Matthew that the disciples find themselves on a boat in a storm. And it's almost like Matthew is saying something here. "*Life with Jesus is rarely*

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one of sitting still. Life following Jesus is more like being on a boat, and on a boat during a storm at that."

What we learn in both stories is that Jesus is Lord of the Storm and the Waves. In the first story, once Jesus wakes up (Jesus is apparently at such peace in the storm that he can take a nap during it), he first rebukes the disciples: "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" And then he rebukes the wind and the sea. And "They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'"

The second time the disciples are in the boat *without* Jesus, at least until Jesus (quite nonchalantly, by the way), saunters on by walking on the water. And the disciples were afraid (as disciples often are) but Jesus says, more reassuringly this time, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And again when Jesus gets into the boat, this time with a soggy and slightly sheepish Peter, "the wind ceased." But this time, the disciples *know* what kind of a man is this: "those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'"

It's almost as though Matthew wants us to know something about the Christian life. That it's less like lying on a beach, and more like being in a boat, on the move, and feeling a bit fearful, feeling a bit of danger. And yet at the same time Jesus is there, extraordinarily comfortable, not in the calm but in the tumult, and whispering in our ear, "do not be afraid—you are with me, the Son of God, you are with the Lord of the Wind and the Waves. And you *will* find rest, not *from* the tumult, but in *me*." And so we worship.

And thus it was for Jacob. Sure, "Jacob settled." Sure, Jacob settled in the land that was promised to his grandfather and all his grandfather's heirs, the land that was promised to his father and all his father's heirs, the land that was promised to him and all his heirs.

But not for long. So there is no fanfare, and there is no arrival celebration, because this is not yet the final destination. Because Jacob and his sons would follow Joseph—the beloved son Jacob thought he had lost—far from Canaan. And the heirs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would settle, not in

the promised land, but in Egypt. His heirs would come to possess the promised land, but only centuries later; and even that would be temporary. Jerusalem would be destroyed, and the people sent in exile from the land. And even after being restored to Jerusalem, Abraham's heirs would be dispossessed from the land again. The promised land is a land of respite, but not one of permanence—at least not yet.

“Jacob settled,” and I imagine he enjoyed being settled. Perhaps he did take a break, maybe he did pull out a lounge chair, perhaps he did sit back and enjoy the sun. But the permanent settlement in the promised land, despite being in it, remained for Jacob a future hope rather than a present reality.

I wonder if we may have been blessed too, for the past number of years, as a church, with relative peace, relative prosperity, and a good bit of stability. And it has been a joy. But I wonder if this may not be the norm in the big picture, and the sorts of disruptions we are feeling now, not just with COVID, but with all the changes we face—cultural changes, demographic changes, and a changing sense of spiritual need—this storminess, this unsettledness, is closer to the norm for the church than is peace and prosperity and stability.

Perhaps the Christian life is more like being in a boat in the storm, than it is to be settled, whether that be in Canaan or on the beach. And perhaps it is precisely in these times that we are given the eyes to see that as our settledness begins to feel temporary, as we feel mercilessly buffeted by the winds and waves of this time, that there is indeed one thing that does not change: the Lord is with us, and it is the Lord who saves us.

And that it is in him, the Holy One of Israel, the perfecter of the promise, the Son of God and the one worthy of worship: that it is with him *in* the storm, and not *apart* from it, that we find our peace and our strength.

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