

*After the Storm: What Happens at the End of the Road?*

Matthew 5:17-48

In ancient times, maps had a name for territory that had not yet been explored, places past where the mapmakers knew about. What lay beyond the known world might be either land or sea, but it couldn't be charted, because they hadn't seen what was out there. What they did know was that it was dangerous, because everything we don't know much about seems a little dangerous. And so they would write on the map, beyond the familiar places, *Here Be Dragons*.

Here be dragons. It feels sometimes like we live in that territory, doesn't it? Especially when storms hit our lives, when we are buffeted by winds and rain that are out of our control, we can be driven into a place where the road we have been following ends. Our next steps are into a landscape we have not entered before. The landmarks and road signs that have guided us have disappeared. They don't provide the direction we need. Now what?

In fact, we live in this uncharted territory more often than we're conscious of. Every day presents us with questions about how we will behave in situations we have not seen before. Every interaction with another person—even someone as familiar as your spouse or your child, or the co-worker who has been sitting in the next cubicle for years—requires a new choice about who you will be at that moment, how you will respond.

Imagine this. You're driving. The driver next to you tries to turn into your lane, never even turns on their turn indicator. You could slow down and let the car in, or speed up and assert your right to the fifteen feet of pavement ahead of you. You don't know the driver of that car; you've never seen them before in your life. But instantly, unconsciously, your brain sifts through its on-line history for similar experiences, previous decisions, stereotypes to guide your action. You look quickly at the driver. Oh yeah, you say (maybe not out loud); you did that because you're a pushy woman, or an aggressive man. You're too young to be driving, or maybe you're too old. Or, "all those gas-guzzling SUV drivers are the same."

If you already think every person who fails to use their signal light is a jerk, or that every driver who doesn't anticipate their next turn ahead of time is unqualified to be on the road, you're likely to respond the same way whether or not the driver of that car just arrived from another country doesn't know this city at all, or has a crying baby in the backseat. Your action isn't about what's going on in that car; it's about what's going on in you. If you want to insist that driving be done the "right way", you'll speed up, every time. You'll make sure that driver doesn't get any space on the road she doesn't deserve. If you did that, you would not only be following the law; you'd actually be enforcing it, making sure that orderly driving is maintained.

Jesus was all about challenging order for the sake of something more important. He told stories that had surprising, unexpected endings. He reminded people that the way they'd always done things before was not necessarily God's way. He showed them how to look for and see something holy in situations they had thought were way off the holiness map.

In the sermon he gave up on the mountain, our text today and all through these weeks of Lent, Jesus was talking to people who were pretty sure already about what God required of them. The road that had been built by their scriptures and their tradition stretched way back into their history and way out in front of them, as far as they could imagine ever going. Just like us, probably sometimes their lives worked well and sometimes they didn't, but I'd guess those people would say they had just about the right number of rules to keep life orderly and predictable.

"I have not come to demolish the Scriptures or that tradition," Jesus began. That's good, the people no doubt thought. We don't need anyone dismantling things. The old laws have been working just fine. But Jesus kept going. "What I came to do is to complete your picture of God. I know you have rules that tell you what you have to do to keep God from being angry with you. But there's something beyond rules. You can live in a way that will make you God's partner, help accomplish what God hopes for creation. What I'm talking about, he said, can't be contained in a map of familiar territory or an instruction manual. It's thinking in a whole new way. It's going out beyond where the current road ends."

And then Jesus went on to give them some specific examples. You know that law that says, "Don't murder? That law is right; it's good not to murder. But you know what would really make a difference? Rooting out the anger that leads to violence. The point of the law isn't to enforce murder statutes; it's to reconcile people, to create right relationships. That's what matters to God."

Jesus goes on to say similar things about divorce and adultery, obeying orders from people above you in the hierarchy, enforcement of property rights, dealing with people who are out to get you. Every one of these lessons he began with the words, "You have heard it said..." and he continued with "but I say." In every instance, he seemed to be saying, it isn't technical compliance with the rules of your tradition or the law that matters to God. It's a different mindset, committing with your whole heart to well-being—your own, creation's, other people's, even your enemies'.

This is definitely off the map for us. It's hard for us to get our arms around Jesus' message in any way that sounds like concrete, practical advice—especially two thousand years later. And sometimes, the words seem hopelessly obscure to us. We want something that reads like a map—a reliable, easily-readable navigation device for this confusing world we live in. We'd like the Bible to be a neater package of timeless wisdom and moral certainty—sort of a divinely-inspired *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

But the Bible is not that. It's full of tangled up, wild poetry; stories of unruly characters who weren't much better at channeling God than we are; contradictions; images that throw us off balance. It's not a master plan; it's a collection of stories about what life looks like with a God who is always alive and moving, always just beyond our grasp. The Bible's stories are a map that shows us a road traveled by people who came before us, looking for God. The road began in the distant past, and it continues all the way to the present. But it is not finished. It doesn't project itself into the future, because it can't. No road can do that

This is a problem for people who require clarity, who look to the Bible for a fixed and unchanging moral code to live by, a predictable road with well-marked signs. People who look for order and predictability from their religion tend to find it—maybe impose it—on the Bible, to read its stories in a way that tames and domesticates them until the road ahead looks identical to the landscape of the past. That’s not faith in God. It’s faith in a book.

People who find themselves at home in a church like this, a tradition that reads the Bible less literally, tend to be more comfortable with leaving open some space on the map, room to imagine that God speaks to us in new ways that sometimes reflect biblical stories and sometimes do not. We pay attention to our own experience about how God is leading us now and will lead us in the future, sometimes more than we trust the experiences of people who came before us and whose stories make up our tradition.

But this too can be misleading. In 1985, University of California sociologist Robert Bellah wrote *Habits of the Heart*, a book about patterns of religion and spirituality in the U.S. since the country was founded. Americans at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he said, tend to think of religion as a private matter. They’re often not looking to a church for shared beliefs. Bellah used the example of a young woman he named Sheila to illustrate his point. Sheila would say, *"I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church or read the Bible. My faith has carried me a long way. Just my own little voice...It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other."*

“Sheilaism” is the name Bellah gave to this religion. Sheilaism has no sacred text, a God with no particular history. It’s good for Sheila, but it doesn’t gather a community around it, because it doesn’t need one. Only Sheila knows what Sheilaism demands of her, and she only knows what that is when something “doesn’t feel right.”

Whether you’ve heard of Sheilaism or not, I bet you know people who follow their own version of it. Maybe you’ve tried it for yourself. And it can carry you for a while. But this too is not faith in God. It’s faith in yourself.

If we are people willing to stay on the road beyond the edge of our known world, we need a map to point us in the right direction. That’s what we do in church: we read the map. We tell the stories of people who have sought truth and found God before us—even the stories about how they failed and even the parts of the Bible that we don’t understand right away. Because all of those stories show us something we can’t always see for ourselves, about who God is, what God looks like, where God shows up. They tell us timeless truths we will need as we enter the unknown territory ahead:

- That God has come into this world—our world—and enters it again and again, to find us and to give our lives meaning.
- That what matters to God is right relationship, the kind of love that brings forgiveness, reconciliation, peace.
- That what our faith calls us to is to trust the God who promises, beyond where the road ends, even beyond death, that all shall be well.

