

Setbacks and Storms

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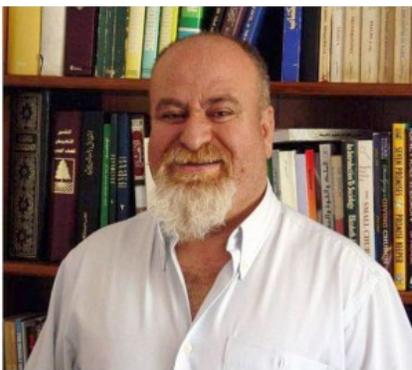
It was 4:00 in the afternoon on Tuesday, and I was in my office here at church. 4:00 in the afternoon is not my best time. It's the time when I go into a slump and head for the coffee machine.

However, I didn't have time. Someone named Fannie Chow had made an appointment with me, and I wasn't sure who she was or what she wanted.

As she walks into my office she is with a gentleman whom I later find out is going to be a speaker at Menlo Church that Sunday.

I remember now that Fannie worked for Partners International – a fantastic mission organization that supports people doing all kinds of work overseas who have amazing stories.

The gentleman shakes my hand, and instead of telling me his name – which I later find out is Afeef Halasah – he says...
“Good to meet you Pastor Kim. I am a Moabite.”



Has anyone in the last week had anyone introduce themselves to you that way? Hello I am a Moabite. Sort of unusual right?

. Moabites were enemies of the Jews. Jews were to have nothing to do with Moabites.

And theres this book called Ruth in the Bible.
Guess who its about?

Ruth.

And Ruth...is a Moabite who is in Jesus' genealogy – which speaks to the amazing grace of God. That this enmity between these two people groups was made one in Christ.

My Moabite friend continued and I felt as if I were thrown back into ancient Biblical times.

He said, "I was a persecutor of Christians and Jews. I hated them all.

But then I met Jesus. I met him when I went to attack and disperse an evangelical house church in Syria, broke down the door, but the people were so kind to me I couldn't persecute them.

They offered me food and drink.
So I stayed to listen to the message.

It wasn't very well presented.

The guy who was giving the message was a nervous wreck because it was his first time ever giving a sermon and to top it off I was sitting there.

He was a Campus Crusade for Christ guy (now its Crew) and he was talking about the four spiritual laws, the importance of asking Jesus into your heart.

Despite the poor delivery, at the end I prayed.

I had done a lot of bad things to people over the years. Things I was not proud of.

I had an external bravado but inside I knew I needed forgiveness.

So I prayed "Jesus, if this is real, come into my heart."

That's all I did.

Afeef said that as he prayed that prayer it was like a cloud washed over him. He said, *"It was then that I knew that Jesus loved me...I'd never had an experience like that before. I had always thought of God as stern and aloof and demanding. I never knew that he loved me."*

I went home, and asked for a Bible – we didn't have Bibles around. But my sister just had been given a Bible randomly by someone, and

I spent two weeks in my room with the door closed reading it cover to cover”.

And I saw who Jesus really was.

I couldn't stop reading the scripture.

Folks, Do you see how powerful scripture is to transform us?

Do you see why we as a church engage in these things called Bible studies and Adult Education?

We take it for granted but that book that is in the pew rack in front of you is living and active and if you don't read it, if you don't take time to understand it, you are missing out on seeing the richness of the power of God at work in your life.

That book in the pew rack in front of you, transformed Afeef Halasah.

Today Afeef, is leader and a general director of **Arabs for the Arabs (AFTA)** which is **a ministry of reconciliation between the Arabs and the Messianic Jews** – Jews who believe in Jesus;

Afeef says we bring them together to worship Jesus, we educate them about each other and lead them to accept each other and to appreciate each other.

At one point they gathered together and washed each other's feet and just wept.

We bring Ishmael and Isaac together, Esau and Jacob together, and that can only happen through Jesus' reconciling presence.

Needless to say, I didn't need coffee that afternoon.

However, as he continued talking I realized how much he had suffered.

I realized that this kind of ministry – reconciling Jews and Arabs in Christ - pushed against the grain of every kind of cultural taboo and custom that is practiced in the Middle East.

I had tears running down my face as Afeef shared with me the struggle of this reconciling work, and how he put his life on the line again and again, and narrowly escaped death many times because of this calling.

Why am I sharing this story with you as we begin our journey through Mark? (And I am hoping that even though there was a Teddy Bear Fair yesterday you all had time to read Mark 1-4 in prep for this sermon and Adult Ed.)

I share this story with you because this Ministry of reconciliation and Afeef's suffering that ensued is exactly the way Mark portrays the ministry of Jesus...

Jesus ministry saved so many people but it went against every cultural taboo, and expectation...

Jesus pushed against religious formality and put people first...

And that sounds great, but that's why he was killed. Mark's whole gospel builds, and builds, toward the cross – as you see this antagonism just brewing in the religious leaders...

Everywhere you see this premonition of the cross looming...before Jesus... Mark hints at this in so many ways

All of the healings, and all of the teaching on forgiveness and God's grace are met with hard line resistance, and persecution and even cynicism from the keepers of tradition.

Now Jesus has mobs of the common people following him everywhere. They couldn't even eat - people needed him so badly... Mark really emphasizes this again and again. The common people heard Jesus gladly But not the religious people.

How ironic.

Jesus was constantly getting in trouble with the religious people – *they* were the problem - because Jesus let compassion trump the law every time.

He put people in front of protocol.

He spoke the truth, he cut through the hypocrisy of religious formality that had no heart, and it enraged the religious people who were trying so hard to be good.

Because their religion was all about them.

And they hounded Jesus at every turn...(quotes from Mark)

Here are some quotes from Mark's gospel 1-4 that illustrate this...

“He has gone out of his mind.” Mark 3:21

“They (the Pharisees) watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath so they might accuse him.” Mark 3:2

“The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” Mark 3:6

How can you heal, on the Sabbath Jesus? Don't you know you are breaking the law?

How can you pick corn and eat it on the Sabbath Jesus? This is not what God wants us to do. (Mark 2:23-28)

The religious leaders had a very severe legalistic image of God.

Life Afeef did before he met Jesus

They were preservers of tradition, and the establishment, and religious formality, and they hated him...

And it was hard on Jesus....before he heals a man with a withered hand (whom the religious leaders said he shouldn't heal on the Sabbath) the scripture says...

“He looked around at them (religious leaders) with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart.” Mark 3:5

There's that emotion of Jesus mentioned that we talked about last week that characterizes Mark's gospel. Jesus is truly human in Mark.

Here he is grieved and angry. They don't get it

Now what about us, as we try to follow Jesus – we will experience the same kind of thing...

especially when we are following what God is calling us to do...and at times it will seem like everything is going wrong -

Whether you are a missionary, caring for an elderly parent, trying to raise children to love Jesus, ...these are all callings...and it isn't easy cause the world doesn't like it when we stand up for the things of God. If Jesus experienced antagonism in this world, so will you and I.

So I have three things for you to remember that come right out of the pages of the first four chapters of Mark to help you hang in there when God's calling becomes difficult and you want to give up.

1. In The Midst of Setbacks and Storms We Need To Remember Who God is
Mark 4:35-41

Remember Afeef...Never realized who God really was until he had that experience of Jesus. Especially in storms its hard to keep the truth of who God is before us...

We read this morning about the storm at sea. Often on the sea of Galilee storms erupted. People called them squalls.

Fishermen were used to them.

People of the sea expected storms to happen.

But from the text, this was a storm to end all storms.

This was a violent wind and rainstorm that threatened to capsize the boat.

Evidently Jesus is exhausted.

He has left all those crowds behind, and he asleep on a pillow.

And sometimes when we go through setbacks and storms, trying to do God's will, trying be God's messenger...and things go wrong it seems as if God is asleep.

And what is the disciples first statement as they wake Jesus in a panic?

Don't you care that we are perishing?

There is something called **Theistic Determinism**- GOD IS A DISINTERESTED OBSERVER...could care less about this world.

He set in motion long ago and then took huge Giant step back and said I don't want to be involved anymore.

But Mark's gospel tells us that's not who God is.
Yes we may think often when storms hit –that God doesn't care.

But Mark puts this story in his gospel to tell us that's not the case. Not only is Jesus God, cause only God can calm a storm.
But also, **Jesus is a God who cares about our storms.** He is right there in the middle of it with us and has the power to help.

And he says to you and to me...**"Peace be still. I've got this."**
And I want to say to all of you going through storms...God does care...He does see...He does know...and he will deliver

2. In the midst of setbacks and storms **WE NEED PEOPLE** **Mark 2:1-12**

The way God helps us most often is by bringing people around us

Jesus gathered twelve disciples around him. He created community at the outset.

Mark 2 tells us the story of the paralyzed man. Here again in Mark, huge crowds are surrounding Jesus.

No one can get in the door of the house where he is teaching. And here comes these people bearing a paralytic on a stretcher trying to get him to Jesus.

They may have waited at the door for a long time...who knows?

But there was No fast track.

So they say forget this...we care so much about our friend that we are going up on the roof, we're going to dig a hole and we are going to let him down through the ceiling...

Let me ask you...

Could the man have reached Jesus without his friends?
Sometimes we are just plumb tuckered out with all the setbacks and storms

We can't even try to be spiritual anymore

We've had it; we're paralyzed; we're out of it....

One great thing you can do as a friend of someone who is weary and paralyzed is to say...

Let me do your praying for you for a little while. Let me carry you to God...

I've said that to many people and you should see the relief in their eyes.

Well, when Jesus saw "**their faith**" (the faith of the friends of the paralytic)...what did he do? He healed the man.

What a great story of community, of persistence in the midst of difficulty, of doing for the man what he could not do for himself.

Scripture tells us to... "**Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ**" (Galatians 6:2)

So let me ask you if you are in a storm today...

Who are your stretcher bearers?

Or perhaps you are called to be a stretcher bearer for someone...

Whose stretcher bearer are you?

'Cause no one was meant to go it alone....

**3. In the midst of setbacks and storms WE NEED GOD'S INSIGHT
Mark 4:20**

Jesus tells a parable in Mark 4 about seeds, and a sower and its all about how a seed that falls on rocky soil – it just can't grow.

But a seed that falls on good soil, grows and yields a huge crop.

And the disciples go to Jesus and ask him, what is the meaning of this parable?

And Jesus tells them that those who receive God's word in their heart – that's good soil and it will create a great harvest for the Lord...

One of you emailed me and said – ***Why did Jesus only explain this parable to his disciples?***

Maybe I am wrong but I think it is because **They asked him!**

They cared enough about the things of God to want to go deeper. Not to just stay on the surface of things. Its up to us to choose to seek first Gods kingdom.

The disciples took the time to ask, to wonder, to listen, to ponder. They made the deeper things of the faith a priority.

As we experience setbacks and storms; as life may buffett us about I want to encourage you to ask God *what he is doing* in all that is happening. One great prayer is not so much “Why are you allowing this to happen to me God?” but rather...

“Lord help me to see you in this. Clue me in on what I can learn from this, on how I can grow in this, on how you want me to go through this. Help me understand. Give me insight...cause I don't get it....”

Every time the disciples came to Jesus in Mark, puzzled, confused, worried, Jesus always took the time to explain things to them. And he will do the same for you. And it will give you new insight...God is good at giving insight

Because **if you can begin to look at all trials as opportunities to GROW**, if you can see your circumstances as a chance for God to show up for you...to once again prove his faithfulness

You will live fearlessly!

You will say **“Bring on those setbacks and storms!**

I have a God who is faithful to calm storms. I have a community of stretcher bearers who will help me connected to Jesus no matter how badly I feel. And I know that every storm is a chance to grow closer to him! Bring them on!”

No storm or setback is ever wasted in God's economy...

Even though God doesn't cause everything...God will indeed use everything...

As Afeef was leaving my office that day I said to him,
“You have suffered so much.
There have been so many hurdles, so many difficulties.
So many people are angry at you.
Jews and Arabs aren't supposed to hang together.
They aren't supposed to be Christians.

You've almost been killed multiple times for going against the status quo. Of challenging the established order of things...
How do you go on? ”

He turned to me and said with a big smile pointing to the heavens,
“After what he sacrificed for me? After all he suffered? After all he gave? I have suffered nothing compared to him. And It's a joy. And he's walking with me through it.”

He's walking with you too.

Let us pray...