

Finding God in the Unexpected

Gen 28:10-19a; Matt 13: 24-30, 36-43

The film, *Gravity*, opens with Sandra Bullock's character, Dr. Ryan Stone, trying to fix an integral component of a space satellite. At her side is Matt Kowalski, a veteran astronaut on his last mission before retirement. Behind her you can see Earth in all her glory: seemingly close, yet miles upon miles away. The Earth is huge and magnificent amidst the vastness of our universe.

Ryan takes a moment to look around her and is mesmerized by the gloriousness of Creation. When she returns to her work, she is dedicated and focused. She's definitely a newbie. She is a little rough around the edges; nevertheless, she's highly skilled at the task at hand. Ryan and Matt are accompanied by a team of fellow astronauts who are busy at work on their own tasks: operating the shuttle and completing maintenance projects on other parts of the satellite.

Suddenly, news comes from the NASA control center in Houston. A satellite was destroyed over Russia and the debris field is heading towards them with accelerating speed. Rather than panic, Ryan tries to complete her work. Matt, using all of his authority as her commander, exclaims to Ryan, "Not one more second. Shut it down. That's an order." He reminds her that this project can wait. Their lives are in danger. They have to leave now!

Ryan's team suffers catastrophic losses. As the debris field reaches the crew, Matt and Ryan find themselves the only survivors. The two drift through deep space tethered to one another: trying to do their best to make it back to safety. Eventually, Ryan is all alone to fend for herself. Travelling from one space station to another, Ryan comes close to death time and time again. On several occasions she thinks to herself she isn't going to make it.

Ryan's thoughts of giving in to what seemed inevitable is cut short when, in a dreamlike state, she is visited by Matt. Matt appears to Ryan in much the same way Jacob was visited by God. Matt reminds Ryan what is needed to survive. He offers her support in her struggle and, through his very presence, reminds her she is not alone. After this visitation, Ryan gains the strength to change course. She chooses to move forward, and begins to hope for a new reality. She gains the courage to see what was previously unimaginable. She begins to grasp for the one thing (which just a minute ago felt impossible) her safe return to Earth.

All around her the universe is littered with the destruction unleashed by the blown apart satellite. For the first time, since she had her crew with her, Ryan recognizes that she's not alone. Just as Jacob, in our Genesis reading, recognized he was not alone in the wilderness. In her struggle for survival, God breaks in and the words spoken to Jacob ring true. "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." (Gen 28:15)

Ryan's vision clearly differed from Jacob's. This vision was not of God per se. It was of Matt; however, it was this vision that gave Ryan the strength to press on. Sometimes, God breaks into our lives and we recognize that it is God. Sometimes, God breaks in and we see it in the face of a friend, a co-worker or a stranger.

With Matt's words of encouragement, Ryan presses on. I am happy to say she did not die that day. Miraculously, she finds her way to a space station and is able to program a reentry plan into a space capsule. She splashes down into a body of water near the Gulf Coast.

Ryan's journey begins with an unexpected complication. Our Genesis reading this morning begins with a complex journey. Our main character, Jacob, is a complicated fellow. His history is a little sketchy, and he doesn't yet know where his life will lead. Jacob's very name means "heel holder" and "supplanter". He received his father's blessing after pretending to be his brother, Esau. He fled his home and family to avoid his brother's wrath under the pretense of going to find a wife. Jacob's flight from the southern city of Beer Sheba to the northern city of Haran goes in the opposite direction of the much-heralded journey of his grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, who traveled from their homeland in Haran to the land God promised them and their descendants. (Genesis 12:1-9)

Jacob is not a quintessential hero. He is not necessarily the good guy we might want to emulate. He is real. He is messed up and imperfect like the rest of us. His story offers those of us who try our best, but sometimes miss the mark, hope that we too can make amends. We, too, can one day reconcile with those hurt by us, or on our behalf. Jacob will eventually offer reparations to Esau. He will do the work necessary to reconcile with his brother.

In our reading, he is not there yet. He is in the wilderness. He stole from his brother, fled his home and his beloved mother, and is traveling to Haran. It is on this less than auspicious journey that God visits Jacob in a dream. God breaks into Jacob's life right where he is (laying on the ground with a rock for a pillow) in order to connect with him.

Jacob was surprised to find God in this unexpected place. He proclaims the space holy. He calls it the "house of God", Bethel. Jacob isn't magically changed in this encounter. He will continue to struggle to be the person God is calling him to be, but continue on in the struggle he will. In fact, on the night before he attempts to reconcile with Esau, he wrestles with God and is given the new name of Israel, "the one who strives with God."

Strange and awesome things can happen when we are at our lowest. When we think all is lost, and we cannot find our way back, we find we are not alone. In fact, we were never alone. The aloneness of isolation is not all there is. The isolation of social distancing in an already distanced rural community is not all there is. We find God in the very places, and in the moments, we never thought possible. You may already have stories of finding God in some place or some space you wouldn't have thought of in the "before times."

Christ tells us the world is filled with both calamity and benevolence, both weeds and wheat. It's without question; this world is filled with much joy and wonder, as well as much turmoil and pain. The kingdom of heaven manifests itself in this liminal space, the mixed context of good and bad. The presence of weeds does not destroy the entire field.

In today's parable, Jesus says that the evil-doers, the weeds, will be collected and thrown into a furnace of fire. It's interesting to note that the word furnace does not refer to the hellfire and brimstone that's so often invoked in this parable's telling. The word used for furnace here refers to a place for smelting or purifying materials. When the harvest comes, Christ will amend the weeds. Our world will be transformed out of futility and out of suffering.

Such a transformation does not have to wait until the distant future. Individual and collective suffering can be ameliorated in the here and now. Jesus tells us God's workers are to continue their toil in the fields for the benefit of all.

Carlos Omar Montes was an inmate at South Bay House of Corrections in Boston when he was accepted to Project Entrepreneur at Boston College. This entrepreneur boot camp goes

into prisons to educate inmates on ways to take charge of their lives and create a better future. It is known that the pattern of returning to prison can be stopped with gainful employment. Yet, a felony drug charge never goes away. While Massachusetts is a “ban the box” state, employment applications are barred from asking about convictions, a conviction does come up in a background check and offers of employment are often rescinded. As a result, more than a quarter of formerly incarcerated people are unemployed, and half are re-arrested within eight years of release. In an effort to combat this, Boston College established a program to teach inmates how to run their own businesses.

Carlos Montes is passionate about barbering. He learned how to be a barber while in prison and wants to share his love for helping others feel their best with men who are often forgotten. Montes wants to start a mobile barbershop that will go into group homes, nursing homes, and homeless shelters. He wants to offer an “old-fashioned experience” of care and attention in the form of hot lather and warm towels to men who are confined to facilities. He aims to “connect people to the happiest time in their lives, bringing them freedom, convenience and [joy].” (Boston Globe 7/12/20; Fields B1) Montes doesn’t let the pandemic slow him down. He works in two local shops while building relationships with facilities who are in a position to partner with him once visitors can be allowed back inside.

Montes, like Ryan and Jacob, is hoping for more than what already exists. He is motivated to create a way forward out of no way. It is the work of (re)connecting people to their God-given, beloved selves in which we are spurred to the kinds of actions that amend the weeds of this world. It is the self-care and self-awareness work which amends the weeds that grow deep inside each one of us.

Jesus tells us that the *field is the world* and the *good seed are the children of the kingdom*. Christ is calling us to the actions of good and proper seed. He is calling us to grow into abundant wheat, the kind of wheat that honors the glory of God.

May we have the strength to be the wheat that grows rightly, gives jobs to the jobless, mends division and nourishes community in places of familiar comfort and in the arid inhospitable places.