



*Living a
Christ-Formed Life
in Uncharted Waters*

Bearing God

MARLENA
GRAVES

Writing with the bold urgency of a prophet and the tender heart of a pastor, Marlena offers her readers an evocative image: You and I are called to become little boats bearing the compassionate presence of Christ into the uncharted waters of our bruised and broken world. To help us respond faithfully to this calling, she offers us navigational instructions that are accessible, practical, and helpful for our voyage. Reading her words with my South African eyes, I valued her constant emphasis on our Christ following being related to personal engagement with those who suffer around us. The generous glimpses Marlena shares of her own voyaging experiences give her written words the ring of deep authenticity and genuineness.

TREVOR HUDSON, pastor in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and author of *Seeking God: Finding Another Kind of Life with St. Ignatius and Dallas Willard*

Take your time reading *Bearing God* because author Marlena Graves invites us into the slow, ongoing work of soul formation. Graves reminds us that it is not enough to know or believe but that in a noisy world our actions speak loudly about the God whose image we bear.

KATHY KHANG, writer, speaker, and yoga teacher

What a captivating reflection by acclaimed theologian Marlena Graves, who asks what it would mean to be the little boat humbly carrying a restful Jesus across the raging storms of our lives in service to others. Could you fill that role? Could I? Her enchanting musings serve as an enthralling guide to exploring such a remarkable question. Brief and brilliant, *Bearing God* is a totally lovely manual for the thoughtful and brave.

PATRICIA RAYBON, Christy Award-winning author of the Annalee Spain Mysteries and *I Told the Mountain to Move: Learning to Pray So Things Change*

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For Mami, Myrna Proper (Deida Ramos-Negron)

May 3, 1946–June 27, 2021

You are the love of my life. And you loved us well, as best as you could. Thank you. We all miss you more than words can reveal. We are who we are because of you and dad and the great cloud of witnesses. I hope this makes you proud while in paradise with God.



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JOURNEY WITH JESUS INTO UNCHARTED WATERS

A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.

JOHN A. SHEDD

MY MOTHER IS DEAD. I sit all alone in the pew of the sunlit, pristine white sanctuary of Saint John XXIII during a Saturday evening mass in July. The décor is minimalist, and the otherworldly brightness of the sanctuary as the sun streams in through the windows makes me think about the description of Jesus' clothing during the Transfiguration: "His clothes became as white as the light" (Matthew 17:2). No one here knows who I am. No one knows I have spent close to ten months on rotation with my three siblings nursing Mami before and during hospice care. It's as if we were all suspended in time during Mami's final days. Time slowed to molasses, allowing us to enjoy our last moments

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with her while trying to figure out how to help our father cope.

After every treatment, the poison from radiation and chemotherapy sent her into the ER. So she chose to stop it so she could die in our presence. Had she continued the treatment and remained in the hospital, COVID-19 restrictions would have allowed just my dad and sister to visit her. No one else. She wanted to see her children, husband, and grandchildren in her last days. I remember the doctor saying that she had never seen a family care so well for one of her patients and for each other. I was shocked by her words, because—after all—what else would a family do? My attention returns to the service. No one has any idea what I've just gone through. And thus, nobody has the opportunity to care, to shoulder my sadnesses. But I am here to be close to Mami—to my childhood.

Blinking in the sunlight streaming through the windows and onto my face, I sit, tired and weary from what the world has laid on me. Thoughts swirl around in my head like thousands of falling leaves being tossed around and around, to and fro, this way and that, playing in a forest unsettled by autumn wind gusts. As I am playing catch-them-if-you-can with my thoughts, my reverie is interrupted again as the congregation stands in unison to listen to the priest read the Gospel lesson. Today's passage is from the book of Mark, chapter 4, where Jesus is asleep in the boat as it is tossed about by the storm's furies.

Reflections on Jesus' first nature miracle often focus on

Jesus' ability to calm the storm despite the disciples' lack of faith. This miracle demonstrates Jesus' divinity; even the foul weather and menacing waves obey him. It also reminds us of our humanity. Just as we are prone to do, the disciples fail to realize that wherever they are with Jesus, they are truly safe. There is no need to fear. I once heard Dallas Willard say, "The Kingdom of God is the safest place on earth." This begs the question *Then whom or what shall we fear?*

As I sat erect, concentrating on the passage as Father Herb read from Mark 4, I immediately found myself immersed in the story. But this time I was not one of the terrified disciples lacking faith, wondering if I was going to drown and miffed at Jesus for remaining asleep and undisturbed by the perilous storm—oblivious of our impending doom. Neither was I Jesus, exhausted down to the marrow of my bones, so tired from ministry that I peacefully slept through danger—even though I was terrifically exhausted. Nor was I the wind or the waves.

No, during this reading, in what was one of the biggest surprises of my life, God impressed upon me that I was the little fishing boat carrying Jesus in the storm. A tiny vessel in an uproarious storm on the great Sea of Galilee! Call me the *Santa Marlena*. Up and down I went as waves crashed into me. I rolled to one side, then to another. The disciples furiously scrambled to keep me from capsizing. All the while Jesus was sleeping like a baby, without a care in the world. I had certainly never imagined myself being the Jesus boat. As I sat in shock, it occurred to me that, like Jesus' mother,

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Mary, and like a fishing boat in which Jesus curls up to sleep, I, too, am a God bearer. As I set out to sea, or make my way back into port, I carry Jesus. Indeed, we are all Marys, or in this case, all little vessels carrying Jesus as we journey throughout our lives. That is, of course, unless we send him overboard, ejecting him from his resting place.

That evening, I savored the thoughts of being the little boat and kept them close to my heart. Later in the night during my evening prayers, and in the context of my epiphany, some of the implications of being the boat began dawning on me. First and foremost was the reality that as a Jesus boat, I would have to traverse stormy seas. It seems obvious given the passage in Mark 4, but I had not extended my imagination beyond bearing Christ until then. And so, after the thought occurred to me, I spoke up: *I am tired and weary. If I am the boat, keep me docked close to shore. Let me rest. No more sea voyages for me for a while. No more hard assignments, please.* Perhaps my words were motivated by a different exhaustion than Jesus'. His exhaustion from ministry allowed him to sleep peacefully through the storm. My exhaustion resulted from being tossed, bruised, and battered by the vicissitudes of life as I sought to journey with Jesus. Well, maybe our exhaustion wasn't so different after all. What I really wanted was to bear God for a spell while tethered to the shore in a safe harbor as the waves gently lapped the shore. Maybe change careers and become a tugboat or a ferry that takes passengers back and forth across the bay. I wanted God to call a time-out for me from storms so I could

*It occurred to me that,
like Jesus' mother, Mary,
and like a fishing boat in which
Jesus curls up to sleep, I, too,
am a God bearer.*

avoid hurricanes and squalls. Semiretirement from difficulties. After all, I have faithfully put my time in.

Of course, God promptly responded to me during our evening conversation. It was basically *No can do*. He told me that boats are not made to remain tethered to the shore but to go out to sea. I understood that “going out to sea” meant embracing God’s will for my life instead of refusing it. He kindly reminded me that I am not the captain of the ship, nor the captain of my soul. God is the captain of the ship and my soul, despite what William Ernest Henley’s poem “Invictus” might have me believe: “I thank whatever gods may be / For my unconquerable soul. . . . I am the master of my fate, / I am the captain of my soul.”¹ However, God, as captain, has always been one to take input from lowly me and others—contrary to what some theologians might have us believe. God takes our desires into consideration, so I felt the freedom to let him know my opinion. Did not Abraham negotiate with God about Sodom and Gomorrah? Then I, too, could enter negotiations.

A month or so later, while the idea of me being the little fishing boat carrying a resting Jesus in me marinated within my soul, I stumbled upon John A. Shedd’s coincidentally similar observation about a ship’s purpose: “A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.” *Okay, Lord. I get the message loud and clear.* How very like God to underscore the point—just in case I didn’t get it the first time around.