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Who ARE You?!?

(Mark 4:35-41) On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who, then, is this Jesus, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Back when Barbara and I lived in Hawaii, I recall one flight to the mainland during which I had a brief conversation with my seatmate. He asked me if I'd been on vacation, and I said that no, I lived in Hawaii. In turn, I asked him how he'd enjoyed his time in Hawaii. I still remember his rant. *"It was awful,"* he said. *"It was noisy, crowded, the food was mediocre and there was nothing to see. I might as well have been in Newark."* This is not the usual answer from folks who have made a trip to Hawaii! They may have some minor complaints about some things – like the sunburn they got when they didn't heed the warnings about the sun's strength near the equator, or \$14 hamburger at the resort they stayed at – but mostly folks seem to love having been there. So while I usually am not one to want to get into long conversations with strangers on airplanes, I was puzzled enough that I dug a little deeper. It turns out that he had been flying from Asia and had a layover in Honolulu. His plane had arrived at 10pm and the flight we were on had left at 7am. He had taken a shuttle crammed with people to the adjacent airport hotel whose rooms on the airport side are substantially discounted because of the noise. He managed to get some dinner from the hotel's restaurant, even though it had closed; they found some things that had been on buffet all day but which hadn't yet been thrown out. And then his alarm rang at 4:30 a.m. and

he was back on that crowded airport shuttle to check in at the crowded ticket counter. And that was his sole experience of “what Hawaii was like.” No wonder he mistook Hawaii for Newark!

Every one of us finds ourselves – sometimes inadvertently or sometimes even intentionally – making judgments on too little evidence, or making assessments based on what are actually unusual or non-representative things. We are all sometimes too quick to make premature judgements. It’s the same point that that old parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant makes; it may be a cliché but it’s nonetheless true that if you only grasp hold of one part of the elephant, and you can only “see” it by what you feel with your hands and if you are grasping it by, say, the tusks, you will be tempted to make what would be a very wrong judgment about what the whole elephant is like! All of this is also the reason that the best and deepest and closest friendships take time to develop. You can only truly assess other people when you’ve seen them from many angles, over enough time. It’s the same reason for that old tradition of long engagements – they were designed to give the prospective bride and groom time to see one another from lots of angles and in lots of situations, not just when they were all dressed up and at their best, but also when they were not! It is only with time and sufficient experience in most any area of life that we can learn to make good and true judgments that are based on enough evidence and which don’t end up somehow mistaking a part of something for the whole thing.

On my road trip to Tacoma a week and a half ago, I went through Green River, Wyoming. This is a famous place. It’s where John Wesley Powell’s 1868 expedition to float down the Colorado River and map the then-unknown Grand Canyon began. I urge you to read about that expedition sometime; it’s utterly fascinating. And it was terribly difficult and challenging, with boats lost and food and supplies that molded and rotted. After a couple of months on that terrible and hard ride down the river, several of

Powell's crew, despairing of ever succeeding, decided to leave the boat, and climb up out of the canyon and make their way on foot to civilization. What if a reporter had been at the top of the canyon to greet them and had asked them the question "*How did it go? Did you succeed?*" While they would have definitely been right in saying that it was a terrible trip in many ways, they would also definitely have been wrong in saying that the trip was a failure. Because, in fact, just a few more weeks proved the trip a great victory when Powell and his men emerged at the western end of the Grand Canyon battered, waterlogged, but having succeeded in their goal! I thought of Powell's trip and of those men who left the expedition early when reading our scripture for today, for it too also tells of a terrible boat ride and it too is also a caution to us about not making judgments prematurely or on the basis of too little evidence – and thereby making a mistake about who Jesus is.

Recall the scene with me as Norman read it. After a long day, Jesus and the disciples get into a boat, to cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. It's late. It's pitch dark. And while the Sea of Galilee is actually more like a lake and really isn't very large, if you've ever been on a boat on even the smallest body of water when a storm came up, you know just how frightening it can be! And this sudden summer storm was apparently a doozy, with waves all of a sudden coming up so high and so fast that the boat was in danger of being swamped and capsizing. You know it must have been bad if the disciples – some of whom made their living as fishermen! – were terrified, so much so that they woke Jesus and told him they were all about to die. And Jesus – clearly one of those people who if he'd been born in the 20th century could have, unlike me, slept through all kinds of turbulence on an airplane that had all the other passengers white-knuckled in fear – looks around (and you can almost hear him sigh) and, the story says, speaks a word to the wind and the waves. And both stop. Instantly

and utterly. And then Jesus says to them “Why are you afraid?” and, presumably, goes back to sleep, leaving the disciples wide-awake full of adrenalin, their mouths with that metallic taste you get when you’ve just been scared out of your wits, saying to one another “*Wow. Who IS this Jesus that even the wind and the seas obey him!?!*” Or as Eugene Petersen’s translation puts it, “*Who is this [guy] anyway?!*”

This is a rich story. There are lots of possibilities for the preacher here. But today I want to focus on just one thing: I want you to imagine with me what the portrait of Jesus would have looked like if all of the disciples had quit when they got to shore – and then began telling the story of Jesus based **only** on what they had experienced up to that point. If they had gotten to shore and began telling about who Jesus is, what would that picture look like? Like Powell’s men who left his expedition before it was over and therefore had what turned out to be a very mistaken understanding of the story, or like my airplane seatmate who had a very skewed and narrow view of what Hawai’i was like, what would the story of *Jesus* look like if it were told *as if that story ended there on the lake*? What misunderstandings would follow?

I think the most important misunderstanding would be this: to tell the story of Jesus only based on what happened up until that night would make Jesus into **nothing more** than a mighty magician or sorcerer. Now to be sure, scripture records that Jesus was indeed very powerful; the miracle stories attest to that. But there is more, isn’t there? – there is the Sermon on the Mount with its stunning teachings. There are the Beatitudes – those verses that begin “Blessed are they...” and which have been such comfort and such inspiration. There are Jesus’ comforting words about eternal life with God. In short – if the question “Who IS this guy?” were answered **only** on the basis of what had happened up to and on the lake, we would have a Jesus of power, but not have a Jesus of goodness, a Jesus of morality. And, in turn, the God who is supposed to be shown through Jesus would be one of immense power, but not *necessarily* a

good God, or a moral God. It might be a god whose power you'd want on your side, or whom you would want to placate, but whether this god is loving and caring would be a question left unanswered.

Now, what is the point of this imagined scenario? Just this: this sort of thought experiment can remind us that in every age and in the heart of every Christian is the temptation sometimes to **make Jesus too small**. *To make Jesus too small*. To paint a portrait of Jesus that is more to our liking in this way or that. To focus on only one aspect of Jesus and blow it all out proportion and ignore the rest of the evidence. In the 1700s, Thomas Jefferson "re-wrote" the four gospels by taking out every miracle story in them. Jefferson loved the teachings and parables of Jesus but he disliked the miracle stories; he was so impressed by the wisdom and compassion of Jesus, that he re-made Jesus after his own liking. In the South there is a small network of churches who have focused virtually their entire worship services on one line near the end of the gospel of Mark (a line, that, by the way, never appeared in the earliest manuscripts of that gospel) in which it is said that Jesus' followers will handle poisonous snakes and suffer no harm. And every Sunday in worship they bring out the rattlesnakes. Or in the 1920s, a man by the name of Bruce Barton looked at the close relationship that Jesus had with his disciples and decided that who Jesus "really" was was the epitome of a successful businessman, a Savior who practiced "sound business principles" and knew how to "close a deal."

But this temptation to make Jesus too small also happens in our lives; it certainly does in mine. I remember once having put one of our children on an airplane and then hearing a garbled story on the radio about a plane that having an in-flight emergency. And I immediately said to myself "I hope it's not his plane." Which of course is mightily

understandable. But where it gets dangerous is when this is understood as a plea to God, to Jesus, that in effect says “Let it be someone else’s child” – one of those other children, after all, that Jesus loves just as much as he loves my child! Or sometimes – and this is so the nature of the slogan-slinging, politicized age we live in, isn’t it? – I find myself wanting Jesus to join my political party so that I can know that my opinions are totally on the right side of things. Or, most seductively in a time of fear and war, when I slide my way into assuming that God is on my side rather than one who weeps at injustice and hurt wherever it happens and to whichever of the children that He has made.

They are real temptations, aren’t they? To make Jesus, to make God, too small; to make God in my image. To want a Jesus who is comfortable and never challenging. Remember what writer Anne Lamott says? *“You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”*¹ But when we succumb to that temptation we very often end up hurting other folks and we too easily end up missing out on what Jesus, what God most truly is – and that is better than any magician or powerful sorcerer. For one last look at the today’s story will remind us why: for look, indeed, at what Jesus **didn’t** do. He didn’t magically transport that boat to shore. He didn’t magically beam the disciples, Star Trek-like, to the beach. He didn’t wash his hands of them and pick a new set of followers. No, he stayed in the boat with them. *He stayed in boat with them.* His presence in that boat, his presence in **our** lives, is real and abiding. The storms won’t shake that presence and the waves won’t drown Him. He is with us. And whether we are steering our boat well at this or that point in our lives, or whether we are just muddling along seemingly rudderless, whether the water is glass-smooth or terribly turmoiled, *Jesus stays with us* in our boats – caring for us, teaching us, sometimes prodding us, always loving us – and always

¹http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7113.Anne_Lamott

reminding us not to make him too small. And that is the faith, that is the gospel, that through the ages has been the star by which Christians have navigated safely home. That is the best and truest answer to the question "Who ARE You?!?" For that good news, thanks be to God. Amen.