

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
March 9, 2014
©2014

The ABC's of Faith J - Jesus

Mark 4:35-41 35On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38But 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?" 39He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Have you ever seen something and immediately said, "Ooh, I want that!" A few years ago I came across this wonderful brownie pan that was designed so that every brownie has at least two edges to it. Called, not surprisingly, the "Edge Brownies Pan,"¹ it is something, as a longtime lover of the edges and crispy parts of baked goods, I said "Oooh, I want that!" and my wonderful wife and daughter were kind enough to remember and talk Santa into bringing it for Christmas. Or maybe it's not something you see that you want, but something somebody *does* and you say to yourself "Ooh, I wish I had thought of that or I wish I could do that." That's my reaction to Jesus' actions as Mark describes them in our story today. Jesus and his brand-new disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee in a very small boat together. And while the Sea of Galilee isn't that big, any body of water when a powerful thunderstorm comes up can be a very scary situation. And that's what happened here. A few miles into their journey, one of those scary squalls comes up, the disciples are frantically rowing and bailing like crazy. Now, they've done this before. This wasn't the first such storm they'd encountered, and some of them had made their livelihoods fishing and so they were no stranger to storms on the sea. But that didn't mean they liked them. And this storm began to

¹<http://www.bakersedge.com/>

terrify even them. Their efforts at rowing and bailing were losing against the storm's fury and the boat was in danger of capsizing.

And what is Jesus doing? Well, like the airline passenger that you may have encountered who can inexplicably sleep through the most gut-wrenching turbulence, Jesus is peacefully napping in the stern of the boat. The storm is raging, Jesus' new disciples are increasingly frantic and scared. Finally they wake Jesus and in their fear and franticness say to him: "*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?!?*" And then, cool as can be, almost stifling a yawn as I see this scene in my mind's eye, Jesus speaks sternly to the wind, and then says to the raging sea, "Peace! Be still!" And then, as Mark describes it, "Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm." When I hear this story, I think to myself: **Cool**. I wish **I** could do that. I wish **I** could do that when I'm driving and it starts sleeting and freezing rain (which, in Colorado, is usually the day after it's been 70 degrees). '*Peace! Be still!*' I wish **I** had had that gift on some of those occasions when our four children were in the back of a car on a long family vacation and squabbling and fighting and finding the silliest things to argue about ("He's looking out my window!"). It would have been so **cool** just to be able to say into the back of that fractious mini-van "Peace. Be still!" and have those squabbling siblings suddenly silenced.

Peace! Be still! Oh how I wish I could have had that ability on other much more freighted occasions. In that regard, I am struck by what one preacher has to say as he reflects on this story; listen to his words:

Psychologists tell us that infants come into the world with only two inborn fears—the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. All other fears are either acquired or induced. There is no denying that as we grow older our fears multiply. The list is endless, isn't it? Fear of failure, fear of losing a job, fear of illness, of responsibility, of losing a loved one, of being left alone.., of growing

old, of death. A woman recently said to me, "I really don't know what I'm afraid of. I have this nameless, shapeless anxiety that hovers over everything I do and say. It is robbing me of my energy. I feel helpless and hopeless."²

Have you known occasions like that? Wouldn't it have been wonderful to be able to simply say: "*Peace, be still*"? When your daughter comes home one day in what is perhaps life's most cruel age, middle school, and tells of how she was made fun of, something in me oh-so-wished I had that gift that Jesus had: to rebuke those that had caused that storm of hurt to her and to make it all better: *Peace! Be still!* Or on those days when I become overwhelmed at how the madness and meanness of humanity seem far more in evidence than its gentleness and goodness, when wars rage on, when children are the victims of violence and hunger, when terrorists full of satisfied and smug certitude commit horrors on land and sea, when hundreds of thousands of babies around the world die each year from something so mundane and embarrassing as diarrhea, when food is used as a weapon, and when people must make decisions between whether to eat or whether to buy medicine – doesn't something deep down in you want to be able to do what Jesus did and rebuke all those awful things and to somehow, indeed, command: "*Peace. Be still.*"

So I'm a more than a little envious of Jesus' capability here! For there have been too many occasions on which I've felt helpless amidst those storms that life throws my way and where I'd like, indeed, to have the power to still those storms of fear, of sometimes nameless anxiety, of pain, of unearned suffering and hurt. *Peace! Be still.* I want that. I want that.

But we don't have that, do we? Yet I believe that this story can nonetheless tell us something about Jesus that can be key to living a faithful life, but to see what that is,

²http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/winkler_4404.htm

let's return to the story after Jesus has done his storm-stilling. As I imagine the scene, after this spectacular miracle, Jesus returns to his perch at the stern of the boat and goes back to sleep. But not the disciples. In Mark's typical terse way of telling things, he says this of them: **"And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'"** Who **IS** this guy?? Jesus has gone back to sleep, the stars and moon have now come out making into a beautiful night what was such a terrifying one only moments earlier. And the disciples are huddled up near the bow, letting the lazy breeze that came up after the calm take them slowly towards the shore. Huddled there, sodden, dripping wet, whispering to one another, full of, indeed, "great awe."

As we continue this sermon series on "The ABC's of Faith," I have wondered what could be said fresh about that most obvious choice for the letter **J** - Jesus. As we move into Lent, a time to focus on Jesus' life and teachings, a time that our Elders are leading us through the Lenten Devotional Booklet to ask what is God seeking to create new in us, to transform us, I wonder what I might possibly say that preachers and writers and lyricists and poets and artists and musicians haven't said a zillion times and said better. And yet, there is no better choice of this letter of the alphabet as we continue to look at "the vocabulary of faith" and what I have decided, as I hinted at a moment ago, is that I want to name something about the story Jesus that you might not have thought of in quite this way, something that can help us live more faithful lives, and it is this: *the story of Jesus is the story of One who wants us always to ask good questions.*

To get there, though, let us again go back to those disciples there in that boat after the storm. To understand the full extent of their awe, their wonderings, their questions, we have to remember that this story occurs very early in the course of Jesus'

ministry. It has, in fact, only been a few weeks since Jesus burst on the scene and began attracting such attention. Those few weeks had been kind of an exhausting whirlwind of activities, almost frenzied. In fact, the full complement of twelve disciples had only been appointed a few days before our story for this morning, and before that there had only been four or five disciples that Jesus had managed to appoint in the midst of his frenetic round of teaching and miracle working. And these newly-minted disciples don't have the luxury, like we do, of 2000 years of hindsight, of knowing how the story ends. No, what they have is a few **days** of following this man as he teaches and as he seeks to heal people. But even in that short time, the opening chapters of Mark show, there were those who had different explanations of who he was. Some just thought he was plain crazy. The scripture tells us that even some of his family was sort of embarrassed by him and what he was doing. There were those who thought he was a subversive revolutionary finally coming to rout the hated Roman occupiers. There were leaders among the religious establishment who saw him as a threat because they tried to keep a very low profile in hopes that Rome wouldn't make their lives worse than it already did. Jesus had indeed set tongues wagging and minds wondering in the few short weeks he'd been doing his thing.

So put all of that in your minds as you imagine the disciples there in the bow of that boat quietly and urgently talking about what had just happened to them, Jesus once again sleeping at the other end. Who **IS** this? Who **IS** this? Is this really the Messiah? Or are the skeptics right about him? Maybe, some of them might have said, we ought to take our cue from his family who seemed to be saying "we didn't raise him to be like this!" and see him simply as a bit of an embarrassment to such a nice family. Who **IS** this? Who **IS** this?

Now with all that context under our belts it's time to finally say what I mean with the assertion that Jesus is the One who seeks to evoke in us good and faithful and life-

transforming questions: You see, the story of Jesus, as it is told in the gospels and particularly in the gospel of Mark, is not simply the recitation of the things we must believe, of the **answers** we must accede to. No, the story of Jesus is also the story of people asking good **questions** about the nature of reality, and Jesus **encouraging** those questions. It is the story of people at times being skeptical of what they are seeing – even skeptical, sometimes, about Jesus and God! Have you ever wondered why all of these speculations and questions were kept in the story, all of these questions about whether Jesus is an embarrassment or even a little crazy? It might seem that that would be blasphemous, and Mark, writing 40 years after the time of Jesus, certainly **could** have taken those questions out and made the story more pious, more respectful, less full of continued questions aimed at Jesus and at God. But he didn't.

Why? Well, this is where those who raised those questions as Jesus first began his ministry and those disciples who were asking themselves what he was all about finally connect with **us** and what I think God wants **from** us as we live our Christian lives, and we walk our Christian walks. I can put this no better than does a preacher by the name of Francis Wade; listen to his very wise but very startling words: *"...there is an important principle in leading a Christian life which applies here. The principle is that people are better prepared for life with good questions than with good answers."* Rev. Wade knows how startling that sounds, so he goes on and repeats himself, saying almost sternly:

Listen to that again. People are better prepared for life with good questions than with good answers. It means that rather than having a formula or a set of rules for life... it is better to live and act with a sense of wonder about what is right and good and best. **God is better able to work with and through people who are kept open by questions than with those who are closed off by**

answers.³

God is better able to work with and through people who are kept open by questions than with those who are closed off by answers. What an extraordinary way to put it. But how very, very true. The disciples in that boat asking about who Jesus is, or you or I asking questions about life, about purpose, about what is truly important, about how we should treat people, or about how we ought to behave when faced with hard choices, about what God wants of his as we balance our obligations to both Him and to country, community, and family. Do you begin to hear that long list of questions that every honest life is faced with? The worst evils in this world have been committed by those who are absolutely certain of their own cause, their own righteousness, absolutely certain they are speaking and acting on God's very behalf. And these ones are the ones who see questions, skepticism, honest doubt as things to be crushed rather than encouraged. How many times has it happened in history? How many people in your life have you known who were so full of certainty that they made you uncomfortable?

Let me summarize: This short story of the stilling of the storm reminds us that a life of faith and a life of purpose and a life that is most satisfying and a life where transformation is most apt to occur is one where you keep asking questions, where you fail to fall for misplaced certainties, where you keep on wondering about what is good, what is right, what is true, what is worthy. For Rev. Wade is right: God will continue to be able to do far more with us, just as God ended up doing with those disciples who honestly asked "Who IS this Jesus," when we keep ourselves open, when we equip ourselves with good questions, when we use the minds that God has given us. As we begin this Lenten season then, as we follow Jesus and seek to know more of him, may we too be like those disciples who kept themselves open to God's transforming and

³http://day1.org/842-whose_life_is_it Emphases mine.

renewing power by asking good questions in the company of our fellow travelers. For who knows what God will yet do with us? I'm eager to find out; how about you?