

Sermon for July 25, 2021

Gospel reading: Mark 6:45-56

Immediately [Jesus] made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. Jesus Heals the Sick in Gennesaret When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

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The other day I overheard someone asking another person, "What do you do for a living?" And I sort of internalized the question. What would I say if a random stranger in a coffee shop or whatever asked me what I did for a living? And I found myself answering with something unexpected...

"I'm a storyteller."

That's certainly one way to describe what I do. "I tell stories." Well, that's not altogether true... I really only tell ONE story. The same story, over and over. And while I have been known to repeat certain stories with great frequency, even those stories are in service to the main story... the one that I'm always telling. And that is the story of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation between God and mankind.

It's a pretty big story. And fortunately, it can be told in many different ways.

When I say that I'm a storyteller, you may get the wrong impression. The image of a storyteller is that of a person who tells made-up, make-believe stories that are not true. That's not even close to what a professional storyteller does. They always tell THE truth. They tell stories that are TRUE, even if the story isn't a true story. It's always a story that tells the truth.

For example, the fables of Aesop. Aesop was a storyteller in Ancient Greece. (Although historical sources say he may have originally come from Ethiopia.) He told fanciful stories of intelligent animals who could walk and talk and do all kinds of things that have implications for teaching children -- and adults -- about the world

they live in and what is wise and good about how to live in this world. He used the attributes of rabbits and tortoises, for example, to teach a moral lesson about being fast and about being slow. And how being slow and steady often gets you further ahead in life's race. The story is both totally true and totally made up.

Jesus often taught using parables to get his truth across. If you can understand THIS story, then you can begin to understand and appreciate or apply the truth it reveals.

And it all comes down to telling the truth. I'm not a storyteller who tells lies. I'm a storyteller that tells truth... THE TRUTH. My office is bigger than simply a storyteller, a preacher, a proclaimer... as a pastor of both WORD and Sacrament... there is healing, and service as part of my job description.

So if someone were to ask, "What do I do?" I think the answer, "I'm a storyteller" would open a door wider these days than to answer and simply say that I'm a pastor.

I tell you all this because I see a big challenge in telling you the story presented in our gospel lesson for today. Because I'm just not sure what the truth is supposed to be... What is the truth being revealed to us in this story?

In Mark's version of the story, Jesus walks on water. No one else does. Just Jesus. Mark leaves out the part about Peter asking to walk on the water too.

Since that is an unnecessary complication in Mark's account, I'm happy to ignore it too. Matthew seems to have some other lessons for us in his retelling of the events, giving us the account of Peter and his experience, culminating in the proclamation of them all that Jesus is the Holy One of God and they fall on their knees before him in worship. But John, like Mark, is content to give a brief account, not including Peter. But also not including the detail that Mark gives us concerning Jesus' earnest desire to pass by them. John simply says that he came out to them on the boat, walking across the water.

It's that detail that bothers me. Why include it, good St. Mark? What are you trying to tell us about Jesus that we are meant to know?

Mark makes a point of telling us this little detail like it matters. And the words he uses are simple and clear. Jesus is coming out to them on the water... walking on the water. They can see him approaching. But they can also see that he wasn't intending to stop, but to keep on walking... giving them a little wave of the hand as he passed on. (It reminds me of a Droopy cartoon, where Tom the cat is sailing hard into the wind and barely making any headway, when Droopy comes tooling by on a little speed boat waving at the cat as he goes by. And then the cat's eyes bug out or something.) But what's the point of that other than humor? And it almost seems like Jesus is doing something similar. But it's only because the disciples react with fear that Jesus alters course.

Look what's happening prior...

It's a long day. It hadn't gone to plan, because of the crowds. Jesus works a grand miracle and feeds the 5000... they respond wanting him to do this all the time... They are finally sent home, and the disciples struggle to sail back across the lake while Jesus goes up the mountainside to pray and reflect. It's dark... I imagine so are his thoughts... so why not liven things up with a call back to his divinity. Jesus does this for himself because he can, and there is nothing wrong about it. Self-expression has its rewards. At least to my way of thinking and in my experience. Doing what you are able to do has a joy about it. Why should it not be true for Jesus too?

The disciples are not able to wrap their heads around what Jesus can do because of who he is... Matthew's version seems to be telling us that it's right about this time in the story that the disciples are starting to get the idea. Mark's perspective is... Yeah, but not quite yet. Then BANG, the next thing we get from Mark is a bucket of cold water... Before we are even ready to process what just happened, we are back on shore and once more they are dumped right back into the middle of the maelstrom.

There was peace for the moment on the boat with Jesus in control. Wow! We just had an amazing Mary Poppins moment with Jesus... AGAIN... and then... The rain washes away the chalk painting and we are back in the real world with real problems and real pains. Back at WORK. Nose to the grindstone.

I don't think I want to make a big deal out of the detail that Jesus intended to pass them by, because I don't think there is anything deeply theological about it. I think it adds fun to the story. Whimsy. It's part of the spectacle that is THIS miracle. It's not FOR everyone. It's just FOR them. It's like going to a haunted fun house maybe... Some "scares" are meant to be playful. But sometimes they make the children cry instead. Oops, we say, don't be scared it's just me. I won't hurt you. Reassurance.

That's a truth we can tell. Sabbath rest is another truth...

Those moments of miracles and mysteries, followed by a return to work as usual reflect our mundane lives lived day to day, interrupted by little visits with God that we refer to as worship. Maybe if we began to see these encounters with the sacred on Sunday mornings as being transported however briefly into the unusual... the transcendent... the mysterious... then coping with the mundane world of ordinary life among broken people would be that much easier to endure. Because we have had a moment of peace and calm to sooth and reassure us.

In the Chronicles of Narnia series, "The Silver Chair," Puddleglum the Marshwiggle has a rather remarkable speech he makes to the evil witch who has trapped the heroes underground and tries to convince them all that the real world is only the world they can see, and that there is no such thing as a world above, or a kind and benevolent ruler called Aslan (a noble lion who is the allegory for Jesus Christ). Here's what he says to the witch:

One word, Ma'am. I'm a chap who always liked to know the worst and then put the best face I can on it. Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things -- trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a playworld which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for our supper, we'll be leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland. Not that our lives will be very long, I should think; but that's a small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say.

The story inspires us to live like Christians, because the story of Jesus Christ is worth believing in. C.S. Lewis' perspective is that the story of our salvation in Jesus Christ is worth living as if it were true... even if it isn't true, because the story itself speaks of a truth worthy of living by. More than that... the story is SO noble and good... it MUST be TRUE. Because there is no story BETTER than salvation by faith and not by works. That salvation story makes it possible for anyone to be saved, and not just the privileged few.

A story as great as this must be true, because it must come from God. For God must be that which no greater can be conceived of... this is the greatest story ever told. The story of sinful, fallen broken human beings being reconciled with God, because God made atonement for them. And all you must do to receive this gift is to *believe* the story is true. And even the grace to believe is the free gift of God.