

Proper 7 B
Mark 4:35-41
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“More Than Just Another Miracle Story”

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On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 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?’ 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. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ 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?’

*Tossed about as we so often are
by the storms of love and life and loss,
speak peace to us now, O God. Amen.*

I love Mark’s gospel. It’s spare and simple, not simplistic, but simple. It lacks the flourish and detail of the other gospels. It lacks the highfalutin language of Luke, the philosophical and theological developments of John, and the rootedness of Matthew in the Jewish story and experience. There’s no birth story or Nativity scene, no post-resurrection encounter or ascension story, no equating Jesus with God, and there’s certainly no Trinity. But, there is Jesus—a complex character who is fully human,

but also anointed of God; a carpenter who is also a messiah; a teacher who is also, somehow, the lesson being taught; a prophet who, not without reservations, accepts that he will do more than speak truth to power, he will die for that truth.

Mark's is the oldest of our four gospels. It's the shortest of our four gospels. And it's the most poorly written of our gospels, from an academic perspective. And yet, it was most certainly a common source used in the composition of at least Matthew and Luke.

Perhaps more clearly than any other, Mark's gospel is a communication between the author and the hearer or reader. Mark regularly pepper's the text with questions, like the one in today's reading. These are usually the questions of the disciples to Jesus or the questions that Jesus directs to the disciples. But, they're also literary devices meant to engage the audience as the story unfolds. The author begins their gospel account by stating that they are writing "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." The rest of the story is meant to be completed by the audience—by those who hear Mark's story and choose to act on it.

Today's episode is more than just another miracle story. This is narrative Christology—a story meant to affirm particular characteristics of Jesus. This text is not really about an event, not really about the calming of the storm. The event points beyond itself to that truth which Mark is ultimately writing to convey. "Who then is this?" Mark asks. For Mark, there is a correct answer to that question. Up to this point, the whole gospel narrative has been building toward it, and it will continue to do so until it's somewhat anticlimactic end at the empty tomb on Easter morn. But Mark's answer may not be your own so, what do you say: who then is this?

The truth is, it matters what we believe about Jesus. For Mark, his belief inspired a story—a gospel, an account of the good news. Others’ beliefs about Jesus inspire other responses. For example, those who believe that Jesus’ death paid the price for sin in the eyes of a justice-demanding God, may be inspired to access grace through a born-again relationship with Jesus or through the sacraments of a church body. Those who believe that Jesus saves souls from eternal damnation, may be inspired to seek that salvation for themselves or to preach that salvation to their family, friends, and neighbors. Those who believe that Jesus’ service-oriented life sets an example for others to follow, may be inspired to live lives of peace, charity, and goodwill. Those who believe that Jesus’ prophetic ministry sets the agenda for others and for the church, may take up the cause of justice and speak hard truths to power. The bottom line is, though, what we believe about Jesus is meant, not as an end in and of itself, but as a driving force for how we live, in light of our belief. If, at the end of the day, our beliefs don’t inspire a response, they are quite frankly of little more use than a pacifier to an infant—a source of temporary comfort.

“Who then is this?” Mark asks us. What do you say? What do you believe? And why does it matter? What does it inspire you to do?

In 1779 the Enlightenment writer and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published his most famous work, a play called “Nathan the Wise.” In an exchange set between a Muslim sultan and a Jewish scholar, Lessing beautifully illustrates the primacy of action over belief. The episode unfolds this way:

A wealthy sultan of the Muslim faith, Saladin, once approached Nathan the Wise, a Jewish scholar, with a question: “Your reputation for wisdom is great,” said the Sultan. “You must have studied the great religions. Tell me, which is the best, Judaism, Islam, or Christianity?”

Nathan the Wise found himself in a predicament. If he answered “Judaism” his Islamic friend would be insulted, but if he answered “Islam” he would lose his own integrity. Nathan the Wise thought for a moment then responded with a parable.

“Once upon a time there was a king who possessed a magnificent opal ring. It glowed with thousands of colors, but its true power lay in the fact that it made a person beloved of God and others. For many generations the ring was passed down from parent to favorite child, until finally it came to a king who had three children all equally favored. What was the King to do? He decided to fashion two more rings, each identical in appearance to the original. He then gave one to each child, with each believing they had the original ring.

“But instead of harmony the three rings brought conflict. Each child believed they possessed the true ring and therefore the right to inherit the throne. The tension was escalated when the rings were examined but differences between them could not be determined. . .

“The quarrel among the three children became so great it was brought before a judge. The judge listened as each child explained their case. When the time for judgement came all listened with great interest. ‘I have been asked to decide which of these rings is the original.’ began the judge. ‘As the original ring made its wearer beloved of God and people, I can only conclude that none of you have the original ring, for your rings have brought hatred and strife between you. None of you is loved by the other, so I must conclude that the original ring perished with your father and that all three you possess are counterfeits. Or it may be, that you father, was weary of the tyranny of a single ring, and made duplicates which he gave you. So let each of you prove his belief in his ring by conducting yourselves in a manner that befits those beloved of God and people.’¹

¹ Source: Adapted from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan der Weise* (1779).

Belief is important, to be sure, but ultimately, it's action that really counts. So, I'll ask Mark's question one final time: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" And how does your response to that question inspire you to live?

May we all live and love, speak and serve as Jesus did. Amen.
