

“Who ARE You?!” – Mark 4:35-41

They couldn't figure him out. There he lay, calm as can be, snoozing away while they were about to drown. What was the matter with him? Why didn't he wake up and do something? The wind was howling, the intense flashes of lightning tore apart the premature darkness, revealing all too clearly the boiling black clouds, the whitecaps sheared off the towering waves, the water filling their tiny boat, and highlighted the fear in all their faces. Well, all faces but one.

There Jesus sat, lolled against the bulkhead, sleeping peacefully like a baby while all around him was in chaos and terror. They couldn't understand. They simply couldn't figure out why this incredible man, whose call they couldn't refuse, who made the lame walk and the blind see and the lepers clean, wouldn't, or couldn't do something to save them. Their hearts were pounding loud enough to be heard over the shrieking wind and the crashing thunder, and his pulse rate looked like it was about 40. Who IS this man, they wondered, who would save strangers, and foreigners, and women and children, but who wouldn't even wake up to help them. “Teacher, do you not care that we are dying here?” they demanded of him even as they shook him awake.

And that's where their real fear took over. We can't be sure what the disciples had in mind when they interrupted Jesus' nap. We won't ever know for sure, but judging from their reaction I suspect they expected that he would somehow make sure that the boat didn't sink, that none of them would get washed overboard, that the howling wind would drive them ashore on some safe beach, where they could finally wade through the crashing surf and drop exhausted onto the sand. I'm pretty sure that's what they expected, because instead of being comforted those badly shaken disciples were even more terrified by what actually did happen.

“Cut it out!”, Jesus said, rebuking the wind and the sea. And the wind and the sea did just that – cut it out, that is. Instantly, or at least immediately, all was dead calm. The only sound was the hammering hearts of the now fully-terrified disciples, standing in the now peaceful boat in the middle of a calm sea, and perhaps the sounds of their jaws dropping onto the deck. “Who IS this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?!”, they ask of each other, now filled with great awe. Actually, what the text tells us is that they now “feared a great fear”. I guess so! They could not have expected that the answer to their desperate request to Jesus to save them would be displayed in such dramatic fashion. They could not have been prepared for such an incredible display of power over not just illness but over the very elements of the cosmos. Who IS this man who can stop even the wind and waves with nothing more than a half-sleepy “cut it out!”

Who, indeed? The answer was, and is, as obvious as the demonstration of offhand power. The only possible answer is that this man, this Jesus, had at his command the power and authority of God, and that understanding terrified them. Rightly so, since they had obviously come face to face with one who not only spoke with great wisdom and insight, who displayed great gifts of healing, but who at the mere issue of a spoken command the power of God to control the cosmos. With such a dramatic display of the power of God in him and at his beck and call, how could the disciples not have been in awe, in terror of having come face to face with God himself? The answer to their question, “Who IS this?!” suddenly and powerfully came all too clear.

Who, indeed? That question is still asked today, although the answer is somewhat easier to get now than it was for those terrified disciples. They had to learn the hard way, through living alongside Jesus just who he was, and it was at best confusing. Amazing displays of power seemed offset by incredible weakness and gentleness. All seemed lost at his trial and execution, but then all came clear as Jesus reappeared to them, risen victorious over even death. The answer to their question, “who IS this?”, eventually came clear that this Jesus was truly the Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, who responded to their plea to save them. The answer is easier for us in many ways, because we have not only scripture but two thousand years of witness by the faithful.

But I find their question, and that same question today, to be a bit of a problem. You see, when they asked the question, “who IS this?”, they were asking the wrong question of the wrong people. They were asking each other about Jesus, instead of asking Jesus himself! Instead of “who IS this?” they should have been asking, “who ARE you?” Now I can understand why they didn’t ask that question instead – it’s tough to ask such a confrontational question directly of someone you think is odd, unusual, weird even. For example, try that here on “Crystal Corner” (Davie & Bute) and see what kind of reaction you get – but make sure you have someone standing by to call 911 before you try it!

There are some good reasons why the disciples were reluctant to ask the question directly of Jesus, “who ARE you?”, but there’s no good reason why we don’t ask the question today, and yet we don’t, do we? So much of the Christian faith today – all across the spectrum from the most conservative to the most liberal, from evangelical to institutional – so much of our faith talks about Jesus instead of helping us talk to Jesus. And of course the biggest problem with that approach is that when you’re talking about someone instead of talking to/with them, you’re not listening to them, either!

As many of you know I’m taking another (the last, hopefully!) course toward my ThM degree next month. The course will be lead by Joe Driskill and is called “Ethics and Spiritual Care”, and I’ve been working through the course readings – fascinating material! I’ve always kind of shied away from the topic of ‘spirituality’ because most of the people who have raised the subject with me have been advocates and practitioners of what I call “the eyeballs rolled back in the head” mumbo-jumbo kind of religiosity. But I’ve discovered authors who share my own views (which makes them very clever authors, indeed!) on the subject, and from whom I can still learn much. And perhaps the most important validation I’ve had in these readings is the importance of dialogue with Jesus. And by dialogue I mean not just praying to, but talking with, Jesus – and that most importantly means listening for the answers.

Now there’s way too much on this subject to ever discuss in one sermon, and I’m not even going to try. But I hope that I can plant a seed of insight in your mind by pointing out the critical difference between asking the question, “who IS this?” about Jesus and the question, “who ARE you?” to Jesus. The first is the kind of question that gets answered in every church, in every Sunday School, in every encounter with evangelicals on street corners, in every commentary on the Bible, and in many ways in the Gospels themselves. That question, “who IS this?” is answered in every pamphlet, every seminary.

But the real question is, “who ARE you?”, and it is a question we can only ask of Jesus himself, and wait with faith for the answer, or answers. Those answers also come from scripture, from Sunday School, from churches and seminaries, but with faith those answers come also from Jesus himself. In a wonderful book called “Listening to God” John Ackerman tells the story of being in a conference of spiritual directors, clergy, teachers, dedicated laypeople, at which a person asked the guest speaker, “I’d like to know what to do next. I do centering prayer for 20 minutes, twice a day. I read the Bible contemplatively. Through the day I practice the presence of God. What’s next?” The guest speaker paused, smiled slightly, and said to the questioner, “I don’t know. Why don’t you ask Jesus?” At first the answer seemed to Ackerman to be too simple, even too simplistic, but he came to realize that often we focus on knowledge and even spiritual practice, as if it were a contest of sorts.

Perhaps this is why Jesus’ response to the terrified disciples in the boat was to challenge their faith – in Mark’s gospel Jesus even alludes to their cowardice, although that challenge gets softened in Matthew’s gospel. But faith is the key issue – not the strong, belligerent, “I can do anything” kind of faith, but the simple, honest, sometimes shaky belief that if we ask something of Jesus, he will indeed respond. Perhaps the second question to ask directly to Jesus, right after “who ARE you?”, is, “please help me to hear your answers.” Try it – and let me know what happens.