
What Kind of Journey is Faith?

The Reverend Beth Knowlton
Proper 7, June 21, 2009
The Cathedral of St. Philip, Mikell Chapel
7:45 & 9:00
Mark 4:36-41

Are you a journey person or a destination person? By that, I mean are you more likely to be focused on where you are going or how you get there? Obviously these two are not mutually exclusive, but my guess is that we naturally gravitate towards one pole or the other. While I increasingly have respect for the journey in and of itself, my natural tendency is to be fixed on the destination.

As a child this played itself out by a complete impatience with childhood as a stage unto itself. Its main benefit from my perspective was getting me to adulthood---and the faster the better. Like many children I believed there would be some magic point in time when I would cross the line, be over the threshold, and be an adult. Unless I simply missed that point, or am still not there, this increasingly seems nothing but an illusion.

One problem with being solely focused on destinations is that you can find yourself in a tremendous state of anxiety should you not arrive when and where you anticipated. Or you are so focused on arrival, that when you get there, you don't really know what the next step is. You can't be at the destination, you just need to look for the next one and be on your way. Because you are not necessarily invested in the journey, any shift in plan can leave you vulnerable and not at peace.

This was certainly true for me when I arrived at graduate school the first time. I had left college a year early to begin a masters program in public policy. I was so focused on arriving at the program, I didn't really think about what my next two years would entail or what my transition might involve. So, I arrived in Ann Arbor and started to explore what this new place was all about.

Of course I was with a bunch of other people doing the same thing. Many of them too suffered from "destinationitis." In fact, they had been applying to more schools for a longer time than I had, and were having trouble shifting out of application mode. We would gather in the lounge area and I listened to them talking about their standardized test scores, which were always higher than mine. The other more prestigious schools that they were still wait listed at, and what amazing schools they had already graduated from.

I got used to seeing a quizzical look when I said I was still technically enrolled at Albion College and would not graduate for another year when these credits transferred back. If they were from out of state, they had no idea where Albion, Michigan was or why one would even admit to such an academic inheritance.

I was twenty years old and I got royally intimidated. So intimidated, I could barely function. I was consumed with anxiety and sure I was going to perish with each quiz and test that came my way. When I didn't ace everything, I became convinced that I had been let in by some cosmic admission mistake. I was overwhelmed and terrified. I wanted someone to see what was happening to me and save me.

It must have been a similar feeling to that of the disciples in the gospel of Mark. They have been invited by Jesus to go to the other side of the sea and leave the familiar crowd behind. As they set out on their journey, things shift quickly. All of a sudden they are in the middle of a storm and they become consumed with fear. They lose their bearings and all the while their leader is asleep at the switch, or at least on a cushion.

This is such a vivid scene in so many ways. You can imagine the disciples starting to bail as the waters come over and all the while Jesus is calmly taking a nap. Finally they can stand it no more and they wake him up. You can almost hear their shrieking tones as they ask, "Teacher, do you not even care that we are perishing?" Jesus rebukes the wind and creates a space of calm so the disciples can gather themselves together again.

My response to the storm in Ann Arbor was to just get out of the boat for awhile. So, after a few weeks I went home for the weekend. I had every intention of dropping out and going back to the safe realm of Albion College and joining up with my friends for a relaxing senior year of pizza and beer.

When I got home I had the expected conversations with my parents as they tried to help glue me back together. In particular I remember a conversation I had with my dad. I told him I felt like I was in this program by mistake and I couldn't possibly succeed. He told me at the time he had often felt that way, and that feeling that way did not mean I wasn't going to make it. Given my father's intellect and credentials I found this new shocking. I couldn't believe he had ever felt the way I was feeling.

Somehow I pulled myself together and got back to school. I'll never forget a kind professor who invited me into his office upon my return. He said, "Beth, I've checked with your other professors and you are doing fine in all of your classes. In fact you're in the top half of all of them. Your problem is you're used to being in the top 10% of your class so you feel like your failing. Everyone who is here was in the top 10 % of their class. You need to adjust your expectations and you'll be fine."

He was right of course and over time I gained confidence and made my way through the program. The bravado I had heard in the lounge in those first few weeks diminished as we all found a new way to navigate.

But I've often wondered whether my initial response was a lack of confidence or faith or instead a lack of appreciation for being on a journey. A journey that would include some storms. If we are constantly surprised by the storm, it is hard to remain centered or at peace. Because the waves always come. To be faithful is not about avoiding the turmoil, but experiencing it in a new way.

The power of Jesus in this passage is not just the miracle of stilling the storm. It is in his ability to be at peace while the storm is raging around him. He is not asleep because he doesn't care, but rather because the storm does not have the power to throw him into the same state of anxiety of the disciples.

I think that when Jesus says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" he is not telling them they should have expected the miracle. He is asking why they were surprised by the storm in the first place.

He is asking them to commit to a journey that will not be easy and will often be unexpectedly difficult. But he assures us that there is a way for us to be in those storms that will not leave us feeling filled with terror. That is the peace of God which passes understanding. It is the times when we think we will drown and miraculously still find ourselves on the other side. It is grace.

But we also don't need to make perfect faithfulness another destination like adulthood or success. We need to be on a journey of faith. Jesus doesn't expect us to have arrived. He is willing to be patient while we are still afraid. He does not rebuke the disciples and tell them to stick it out in the waves. He calms the waters and then reminds them that they didn't have to experience the storm in that way. We are not alone on the boat. Our cries will be heard. And as we journey along, some nights, we might just be able to sleep next to Jesus on that cushion.

Amen

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