

“An Unfamiliar Friend”

Reading: 1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33

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I've mentioned to you recently about the troubles I've had around here with groundhogs invading our yard. We actually had an episode earlier this summer that left us with one less groundhog to deal with, much to my surprise. I often let my dog Calvin out into the yard if I'm outside so he can run around and sniff all the things that dogs need to sniff, and of course one of his favorite places to sniff is around the shed where the groundhogs made their den. This particular time, he ran off around the back, and I heard an unholy squeaking sound. Normally the groundhogs are vigilant enough and quick enough that Calvin would never even get close to them, but this time, one of the young ones apparently strayed too far. So I ran back there, assuming that Calvin had picked a fight with a groundhog and had probably been bitten and I would have to spend the rest of the day taking him to the vet's office, but no, in a matter of seconds, he had gotten a groundhog and killed it.

Honestly, as much as anything, though I was pleased that Calvin was fine and I wasn't too upset that I had one less groundhog to worry about, what surprised me the most was how quickly Calvin killed it. I didn't know he had it in him. He's normally such a big, happy, friendly goof that I assumed that if he did manage to get hold of a groundhog, he either wouldn't know what to do with it or he would try to befriend it. But no, he's a dog, and for all his goofy lovability around us, he's still got that instinct to protect his herd. I had never seen that side of him before.

That happens sometimes among friends, where you suddenly see a new perspective on someone you thought you knew pretty well. Familiarity brings comfort, and comfort, though it isn't always a bad thing, can bring a certain dullness with it. You think you know what to expect, so you don't look for anything new. But occasionally you learn that your friend plays an instrument that you didn't know about, or that they suffered a great loss sometime before you met them, or that they had joined some cause in their younger days, and it shocks you into realizing how little you really know about them. There are whole chapters of people's lives that go unread unless we're very deliberate in asking them.

If that's true of our human friends, and if it's even true of my dog, how much more so with God. By the way, I maintain that there's a lot of good theology in dogs, so I don't feel too bad about drawing insights about God from my dog. But we have the whole of Scripture, and we have thousands of years of interpretations, and we have more sermons than we can count, and devotionals and blogs and articles all telling us about God and how to know Him and what He's like, and He can get a little familiar. Comfortable. Dull, even. It's not necessarily that we take God for granted or minimize the impact He has on our lives, but sometimes we can think that we've pretty well figured out how God works. Yes, He can do amazing things, but He does them in ways we expect. God may be very big, but I can still fit Him in my box. I know the answers, I can quote the Scriptures, I know God's laws.

But then there are chapters, maybe even entire libraries, about God that we have not yet read. Last Sunday we read the account of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people with only a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and now, as we continue the story, we find that Jesus' disciples are caught, maybe even on the verge of being crushed, by the immensity of the God who is present among them.

Jesus and His followers have just crossed the lake to get some solitude, if you remember, because they have received word that Jesus' cousin John was executed for preaching much the same message as Jesus. But they didn't get their solitude because the crowds met them in their remote place, and Jesus miraculously fed them. Once the crowds disperse, Jesus sends His disciples back across the lake in their boat and finally spends some time in solitary prayer on a mountainside. As we read, some unfavorable winds catch the disciples out on the lake, and they're struggling against the waves when they see Jesus walking across the water toward them. They're terrified, shaken up as much inside as their boat is tossed by the waves, because surely only a ghost could do such a thing. It reminds me of a previous time they were in a boat on a stormy sea, though that time Jesus was traveling with them, and thinking that their boat would be swamped by the waves, they asked Jesus to save them. He rebuked the wind and the waves, and the sea immediately died down, and they were amazed and wondered what kind of man this was, that even the wind and waves obeyed Him.

This time, again, they're shocked by the presence of this strange person. In Mark's telling of the story, they're still wrestling with the meaning of the multiplication of the loaves; they don't quite grasp the full meaning of these strange happenings. And who can blame them? This is not merely some miracle worker, not just some magician or illusionist, not just a great prophet or teacher who can predict what's coming and explain what's happening. This is someone who is doing impossible things and performing wondrous signs. How do you act around someone who can walk on water? How do you predict someone who can make bread from nothing? How do you follow someone who can calm a storm with just a word?

Peter, who so often represents and speaks for the rest of the disciples, speaks out first. Maybe he's looking for something to hold onto, because suddenly the boat doesn't seem as real and solid as this person walking on the waves. "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water," he says. Not the first proof I'd ask for, but that's what he does. And then comes this moment that is so insightful for the state of our souls: he steps out of the boat in faith, trusting Jesus, but as soon as he takes his eyes off Jesus and begins worrying about the waves, he sinks. It had to be an overwhelming event: yes, this one walking on the water is powerful, but is He the sort of being that you want to embrace? It's one thing to get out of the boat because of His power, but it's another thing to get too close to Him. When someone is so powerful, so different, so *other*, can you really trust them and know them?

And so we see that the compassionate friend is also an apocalyptic Lord. He is not only a gracious dispenser of bread for the hungry, He is also the terrifying master over the elements. The one who hands out loaves of bread also holds the stars in His hands. He is the creator of the waves; they will not overcome Him. His power is revealed in His compassionate feeding of the multitudes, but His power is also revealed in raw ability to command the stuff of creation.

The disciples of Jesus are once again coming face to face with the otherness of God. It's always a tension we struggle with when talking about God, because we dare not make Him too familiar or we will diminish Him, but we also dare not make Him too distant and unknowable, because He has come near to us so that we can know Him. We learn from the story of our creation in the book of Genesis that God created us in His likeness, in His image; there's something about us that resonates with the very being of God. We were intended to be like Him. And yet we also learn that we have rebelled against God's authority, and as a result of that rebellion, the image of God in us has been tarnished or

damaged, and our eyes have been clouded so that we have a hard time recognizing the one who made us. In fact, we've fallen so far from what we were made to be that when we do catch a glimpse of the majesty of the one who would have walked with us in the cool of the garden, it can overload our senses. Jesus' disciples are seeing this as their rabbi comes walking toward them across the waves.

It's something that we see repeated regularly when people encounter God closely. Sometimes the closer you get to God, in fact, the stranger He becomes, and the more He demolishes the pictures you had of Him in your mind. When God really begins to reveal Himself to you, you may be shocked at how little you can understand Him, how different He is from you, how difficult it can be to bear His presence. His holiness and power and other-ness can be overwhelming, if the accounts of Scripture are any indication. One example is in our reading from 1 Kings, which tells about an episode in the life of the ancient prophet Elijah. This great prophet who did mighty things for God is at a low point in this story; his life is threatened and he thinks he's on his own. God leads him to a mountain far in the wilderness, and promises to reveal Himself to Elijah there. This theophany, this revealing of God, is not what we would expect: a wind so powerful that it shatters rocks, as powerful as it is, is not God. Likewise with an earthquake and a fire. The Lord reveals Himself in a gentle whisper instead, and we're left with a sense of quiet awe in this one who is so unexpected, as though our sense cannot even perceive how majestic He is.

We could also look at Isaiah's vision of God, when he sees God enthroned and cannot help but cry out that he is ruined, because he is unclean and he is standing before the Holy One. Or the prophet Ezekiel, who unexpectedly has a vision of God while he's living in exile. Even the attendants of God are impossible to imagine, and God is surrounded by impenetrable light, and he's knocked off his feet. Or Daniel, who has a vision of a divine messenger, and it leaves him nearly dead. John the Revelator, too, can't keep his feet in the presence of God and His servants. This God that we worship is so shocking to us that He may be hazardous to your health, and yet it is a sign of a healthy spiritual walk with Him that we are, from time to time, shocked by how little we know of Him.

And yet this God who is, in our darkened state, so foreign to us, so unknown to us, so alien to us, this God is also *for* us. He has, in fact, become God With Us. His strangeness and His unpredictable power have become enfleshed to walk among us so that we can know Him. The one who ought to be unknowable to us because of our sinful rejection of Him does in fact come to us and love us as our good Father, and He grants us an inheritance in His kingdom by the blood of Jesus, and He offers to fill us with His own Holy Spirit. "Take courage! It is I," Jesus said to them in their wave-tossed confusion. "Don't be afraid." His power and majesty and holiness are terrible to behold in light of our own sin, but He has shed His own blood to atone for our sin.

And so today we conclude by pondering the strange majesty of this God who loves us. It's good, from time to time, to be shocked out of a comfortably dull relationship with God, and to be reminded of how much greater He is than me. He has compassion on the needy, and He fills the hungry with good things, but He also treads across the surface of the water and calms the storm with a word. He is both Savior and Lord, mighty and terrifying and indescribable, and loving and good and generous.

In Psalm 46, He says, “Be still and know that I am God.” Let us take a moment in the uncomfortable stillness to listen for the voice of God.

Benediction: Draw close enough to God that you need to hear Jesus say, “Take courage; don’t be afraid.” And then go out into a darkened, wave-tossed world to share the awesome mystery of the God who has come near to us.



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