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Seven Questions Every Christian Asks

3. Who Is Jesus?

Luke 8:22-25a CEV One day, Jesus and his disciples got into a boat, and he said, "Let's cross the lake." They started out, and while they were sailing across, he went to sleep. Suddenly a windstorm struck the lake, and the boat started sinking. They were in danger. So they went to Jesus and woke him up, "Master, Master! We are about to drown!" Jesus got up and ordered the wind and waves to stop. They obeyed, and everything was calm. 25 Then Jesus asked the disciples, "Don't you have any faith?" But they were frightened and amazed. They said to each other, "Who is this?...?"

John 3:16-17 Complete Jewish Bible For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life, instead of being utterly destroyed. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but rather so that through him, the world might be saved.

As many of you know, once or twice a year, I am privileged to have a retreat time with my oldest friend and clergy colleague, Bob. We usually do a road trip together and have many helpful and deep conversations about theology, church, and Bible, along with evenings spent watching what we call "guy videos" – the kind with lots of action and often not a lot of plot. We call these times together "Boys Camp," a name which dates from thirty five years ago when we did our retreats as actual camping in actual tents in actual state forests. Over the years, as our knees got creakier and our backs stiffer and our wallets a bit more well-off, these camping trips turned into road trips and we exchanged our tents for the Hampton Inn and cooking over the Coleman for the hotel breakfast buffet. On our latest rolling retreat, last month, we started out from Kansas City, meaning to end up a few days later in St. Louis where I had a national church board meeting to attend.

When we began planning this retreat, I suggested that we drive to the very southeastern tip of North Dakota and then make a leisurely way back toward St. Louis. My wife Barbara, quite correctly said, "You're going to North Dakota?!? In February !?!"

Are you nuts?!?” Well, she had a point. Most years it would have been indeed a truly silly idea. This year, though, as our beloved earth sadly gets warmer and warmer, though, the late February daytime temperatures in the Dakotas, Minnesota and Iowa were all near 70 degrees! You’ll notice that I’ve avoided the most important question, though: Why?!? Why North Dakota? Well, the answer is simple: it made the 49th state that I have been to. And for two guys who love road trips and good conversation, that was plenty reason enough! So, we crossed into North Dakota on I-29, took a picture of me at the welcome sign, and then headed southeast, having stayed in North Dakota for 13 minutes.

But now imagine with me that someone were to ask me “What’s North Dakota like?” and I answered “Well, it’s all flat, and it’s really, really warm there in the winter, and it’s full of Native American casinos.” What’s wrong with this picture, what’s wrong with this answer? Well, the temperatures were actually an anomaly, the casino that sits on the state line actually represents one casino for every 10,000 square miles in the state, and there are stunning ranges of small mountains and buttes across the state.

Every one of us finds ourselves – sometimes inadvertently or sometimes even intentionally – making judgments on too little evidence, or making assessments based on what are actually unusual or non-representative things. We are all sometimes too quick to make premature judgements. It’s the same point that that old parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant makes; it may be a cliché but it’s nonetheless true that if you only grasp hold of one part of the elephant, and you can only “see” it by what you feel with your hands and if you are grasping it by, say, the tusks, you will be tempted to make what would be a very wrong judgment about what the whole elephant is like! All of this is also the reason that the best and deepest and closest friendships take time to develop. You can only truly assess other people when you’ve seen them from many angles, over enough time. It’s the same reason for that old tradition of long

engagements – they were designed to give the prospective marital partners time to see one another from lots of angles and in lots of situations, not just when they were all dressed up and at their best, but also when they were not! It is only with time and sufficient experience that we can learn to make good and true judgments that are based on enough evidence and which don't end up somehow mistaking a part of something for the whole thing.

Almost every time I have driven to see Barbara in Tacoma, I have made a stop, at least for a few moments, at Green River, Wyoming. This is a famous place. It's where John Wesley Powell's 1868 expedition to float down the Colorado River and map the Grand Canyon began. I urge you to read about that expedition sometime; it's utterly fascinating. And it was terribly difficult and challenging, with boats lost and food and supplies that molded and rotted. After a couple of months on that terrible and hard ride down the river, several of Powell's crew, despairing of ever succeeding, decided to leave the boat, and climb up out of the canyon and make their way on foot to civilization. What if a reporter had been at the top of the canyon to greet them and had asked them the question "*How did it go? Did you succeed?*" While they would have definitely been right in saying that it was a terrible trip in many ways, they would also definitely have been wrong in saying that the trip was a failure. Because, in fact, just a few more weeks proved the trip a great victory when Powell and his men emerged at the western end of the Grand Canyon battered, waterlogged, but having succeeded in their goal! I thought of Powell's trip and of those men who left the expedition early when reading our scripture for today, for it too tells of a terrible boat ride and it too is also a caution to us about not making judgments prematurely or on the basis of too little evidence – and thereby making a mistake about who Jesus is.

Recall the scene with me as Jackie read it. After a long day, Jesus and the disciples get into a boat, to cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. It's late. It's

pitch dark. And while the Sea of Galilee is actually more like a lake and really isn't very large, if you've ever been on a boat on even the smallest body of water when a storm came up, you know just how frightening it can be. And this sudden summer storm was apparently a doozy, with waves all of a sudden coming up so high and so fast that the boat was in danger of being swamped and capsizing. You know it must have been bad if the disciples – some of whom made their living as fishermen – were terrified, so much so that they woke Jesus and told him they were all about to die. And Jesus – clearly one of those people who if he'd been born in the 20th century could have slept through all kinds of turbulence on an airplane that had all the other passengers white-knuckled in fear – calmly looks around (and you can almost hear him sigh) and, the story says, speaks a word to the wind and the waves. And both stop. Instantly and utterly. And then Jesus says to them “Have you no faith,” or as some versions of the story have it, “Why are you afraid?” Jesus then presumably goes back to sleep, leaving the disciples wide-awake full of adrenalin, their mouths with that metallic taste you get when you've just been scared out of your wits, saying to one another “*Wow. Who IS this Jesus that even the wind and the seas obey him!?!?*” Or as Eugene Petersen's Message translation puts it, “*Who is this [guy] anyway?!*”

This is a rich story. There are lots of possibilities for the preacher here. But today I want to focus on just one thing: I want you to imagine with me what the portrait of Jesus would have looked like if all of the disciples had quit being Jesus' followers when they got to shore – and then began telling the story of Jesus based **only** on what they had experienced up to that point. If they had gotten to shore and began telling about who Jesus is, what would that picture look like? Like Powell's men who left his expedition before it was over and therefore had what turned out to be a very mistaken understanding of the story, or like an assessment of North Dakota based on a fifteen minute assessment, what would the story of *Jesus* look like if it were told *as if that story*

ended there on the lake? What misunderstandings would follow?

I think the most important misunderstanding would be this: to tell the story of Jesus only based on what happened up until that night would make Jesus into **nothing more** than a mighty magician or sorcerer. Now to be sure, scripture records that Jesus was indeed very powerful; the miracle stories attest to that. But there is more, isn't there? – there is the Sermon on the Mount with its stunning teachings. There are the life-transforming Beatitudes – those verses that begin “Blessed are they....” and which have been such comfort and such inspiration. There are Jesus' reassuring words about eternal life with God. There are Jesus' reminders that the rich abuse the poor at their peril, that the powerful and the well-off have a responsibility to the vulnerable and the hurting, that the stranger is not to be victimized but protected and honored. In short – if the question “Who IS this guy?” were answered **only** on the basis of what had happened up to and on the lake, we would only have a Jesus of other-worldly power, but not have a Jesus of goodness, a Jesus of morality. And, in turn, the God who is supposed to be shown through Jesus would be one of immense power, but not *necessarily* a good God, or a moral God. It might be a god whose power you'd want on your side, or whom you would want to placate, but whether this god is loving and caring would be a question left unanswered.

Now, what is the point of this imagined scenario? Just this: this sort of thought experiment can remind us that in every age and in the heart of every Christian is the incessant temptation to **make Jesus too small**. *To make Jesus too small*. To paint a portrait of Jesus that is more to our liking in this way or that. To focus on only one aspect of Jesus and blow it all out of proportion and ignore the rest of the evidence. In the late 1700s, Thomas Jefferson “re-wrote” the four gospels by taking out every miracle story in them. Jefferson loved the teachings and parables of Jesus but he disliked the miracle stories; he was so impressed by the wisdom and compassion of

Jesus, that he re-made Jesus after his own liking. In the South there is a small network of churches who have focused virtually their entire worship services on one line near the end of the gospel of Mark (a line, that, by the way, never appeared in the earliest manuscripts of that gospel) in which it is said that Jesus' followers will handle poisonous snakes and suffer no harm. And every Sunday in worship they bring out the rattlesnakes. Or in the 1920s, a man by the name of Bruce Barton looked at the close relationship that Jesus had with his disciples and decided that who Jesus "really" was was the epitome of a successful businessman, a Savior who practiced "sound business principles" and knew how to "close a deal."

But this temptation to make Jesus too small also happens in our lives; it certainly does in mine. I remember once having put one of our children on an airplane and then hearing a garbled story on the radio about a plane that having an in-flight emergency. And I immediately said to myself "I hope it's not his plane." Which of course is mightily understandable. But where it gets dangerous is when this is understood as a plea to Jesus, that in effect says "Let it be someone else's child" – one of those other children, after all, that Jesus loves just as much as he loves my child! Or sometimes – and this is so the nature of the slogan-slinging, politicized age we live in, isn't it? – I find myself wanting Jesus to join my political persuasion so that I can know that my opinions are totally on the right side of things. Or, most seductively in a time of fear and war, when I slide my way into assuming that God is on my side rather than one who weeps at injustice and hurt wherever it happens and to whichever of the children that He has made.

They are real temptations, aren't they? To make Jesus too small; to make God in my image. To want a Jesus who is comfortable and never challenging. Remember what writer Anne Lamott says? *"You can safely assume you've created God in your*

*own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.*¹ But when we succumb to that temptation we very often end up hurting other folks and we too easily end up missing out on who Jesus, who God most truly is – and that is better than any magician or powerful sorcerer. For one last look at the today’s story will remind us why: for look, indeed, at what Jesus **didn’t** do. He didn’t magically transport that boat to shore. He didn’t magically beam the disciples, Star Trek-like, to the beach. He didn’t wash his hands of them and pick a new set of followers. No, he stayed in the boat with them. *He stayed in boat with them.* His presence in that boat, his presence in **our** lives, is real and abiding. The storms won’t shake that presence and the waves won’t drown Him. He is with us. And whether we are steering our boat well at this or that point in our lives, or whether we are just muddling along seemingly rudderless, whether the water is glass-smooth or terribly turmoiled, *Jesus stays with us* in our boats – caring for us, teaching us, sometimes prodding us, always loving us – and always reminding us not to make him too small.

He is with us. But let us never, ever forget that He is also with all of those, in every place, who are His children and therefore our brothers and sisters. He is with the Syrian refugees who have faced such horror and deserve His and our compassion, not our fear and disdain. He is with those children in the South Sudan who are dying from famine and drought and whose lives are just as valuable as yours and mine. He is with the folks who are hurt and maimed and killed every day because some of his followers are too feckless to not allow unstable people access to weapons. He is with those outside our doors who think that their sexual orientation has banished them from His love and who too often think that “the Church” is a place where bigotry is taught and celebrated.

Jesus is with us, there in the boat, helping us to navigate. And let us never, ever

¹http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7113.Anne_Lamott

forget that he calls us to care for those whose boats have capsized and who need our help. For after all, God indeed so loved this world that He sent His only Son – sent Him not to condemn or judge but that everyone, everyone, might know life abundant. Everyone. Everyone. With our help, may it ever more truly be so. Amen