

Gospel Reading: Mark 8:27-38

word count 2,256

At some time in our childhood, we begin to wrestle with spiritual questions. Some of them may have been about why we have to die and what happens to us when we do, or why does God not appear to intervene when terrible things happen. Are we alone in this experience, or do we share it with things unseen?

I was one of a group of kids who liked to hunker down in sleeping bags under the starry skies of the back yard. On such occasions we might aim flashlights at our faces while telling stories intended to both frighten and point to a developing idea that there was something beyond our comprehension that was deeply mystical and spiritual. It could be feared or embraced, and we tested that idea mightily. We might think of it as vast and only semi-distinguishable through our stories that point to a truth with which we resonate. Or, we might simply decide to adopt belief through a doctrinal understanding others in the past have embraced as being true.

Whatever way we finally arrive, I wonder if some of you can remember the sense of wonder, shared with young friends that caused the questions to start pouring out. Were you ever dared by your peers to accept a challenge that tested your courage? Did you ever have a moment of such clarity of belief that it caused you to be filled with emotion?

As a small child, I recall moving into a house in Long Island, where we lived for three years. It was a Dutch Colonial, painted dark red, with a white picket fence around it. It had beautiful windows set into the roof on the top floor.

It was the top level that intrigued me. Steep stairs led to an unfinished attic, and across the attic, filled with bric-a-brac and toys that had been moved to where worn yet still-loved objects go to rest; there was a finished and furnished bedroom.

My parents learned while buying the house that at least three owners ago, someone had lived up there. After that, no-one moved the old furniture out, because a finished room in an unfinished attic was neither desired nor needed. It was hot in the summer and cold in winter. My mother put a cover on the iron bed and a new shade on the lamp. The rocking chair still rocked, the rolling wardrobe wobbled on metal wheels, and the bureau drawers stuck, but these were filled with her sewing projects. Our old square, burgundy living room carpet was laid on the floor, and it became the craft room.

Someone else lived up in the attic room. It was their furniture. I dared myself to go up there alone, and stand at the threshold and look inside. I decided that if you jumped in and landed on our old carpet, you were safe. If you wandered across unknown territory into the room, you might be brought into the presence of the enigma that still inhabited that room while other homeowners came and went. You might learn more than you wanted to know and find yourself standing in awe. I was

pulled up the attic stairs every day, wanting to feel the trepidation of standing at the threshold of mystery.

In fact, it is a very real place, and one at which each of us stands at any given moment, yet it is rare that we acknowledge that such a threshold into the unknown lies before us.

If the attic room wasn't enough, my father gave me a tour of the basement and told me how there were things down there I had to stay away from. His power tools were off limits, as was the blackened oil furnace room. This meant that I HAD to go to the basement by myself. In the center of the room there was a small quarter-bathroom containing an old mirror. I would will myself to go down the stairs into this small room, and pull the chain on the swinging light bulb. While it gyrated back and forth, the dare was that I would stare into "The Old-Man's Mirror," so called because if I looked into it long enough, an old man's face would appear. When it did, I would look into his eyes as long as I could, and then bolt out and up the stairs.

The house in Port Washington is where I first learned that there is much that is unanswerable, and that we can learn to live comfortably with the mystery above and below us.

When was it that you had that deeply spiritual or mystical experience (or have you) that led you to believe that being human was invisibly intertwined with the huge mystery to which we feel we must attach some name or attribute to make it feel accessible or even friendly?

The greater the Divine mystery, made even more awe-inspiring with each new discovery of the cosmos beyond, or the unveiling of the cellular complexities of our own biology; the larger becomes the ground of all being we call "God."

Conversely, the more simplistic and earthbound the theology, with churches trying in a cookie-cutter fashion to factualize the unfactual, the more cardboard and unreal becomes the ark Noah built. If it no longer speaks to us, it gets moved to the attic collecting dust, with a broken elephant, missing a giraffe and sitting with the other toys that have been moved to where worn yet still-loved objects rest,

Jesus is now presented as your buddy who life-coaches you to succeed. He wants to spend as much time with you as possible as long as you behave like a certain kind of American who attends one very special church. He really doesn't like anyone else, anyway. Once you've made Jesus cry with your sin, your politics or your wayward religion, he is quite done with you. Or, so many of his followers claim.

It is no wonder that people have difficulty reconciling the huge questions of the universe and a hunger for the spiritual with any religion that has been boiled down to self-help and a support squad for the status-quo.

So, how do we talk about following Jesus today? Who is Jesus for us in this church? I know from your stories that many of you have been badly burned. A colleague of mine told me the

other day that members of her congregation told her not to talk about Jesus so much. She is a progressive UCC pastor. I must make you crazy.

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the “twelve most effective preachers in the English language,” tells the story of guest preaching at a large church in the Pacific Northwest. On her way into the worship service, the church’s senior pastor turned to her and said, “Now, don’t be afraid to mention Jesus. They need to hear it.”

In today’s passage, Jesus asks the question. He says, “Who do you say I am?”

This is the question that is still being talked about in churches all over the world. One might think there was some agreement to be found, but depending on what church you attend, the answers vary. In some places, the answer is simple. “The Messiah.” It says so right in the text. And, that means “Messiah” in the Christian sense, rather than in the context of the text, which refers to a more regional messiah who would come to save and liberate Israel.

In other places, people might quote the Jesus Seminar, and point out that while this story in Mark is a part of the Jesus tradition, the words themselves are not attributed to him.

If Jesus walked into this room today and asked, “Who do you say I am?” how would you answer?

This is a smart crowd. Someone might volunteer to try to sum up our understanding by offering, “Well, Karl Barth says that you are the totaliter aliter, the vestigious trinitatum who speaks to us in the modality of Christo-monism. Yet, Tillich would propose that you are he who heals our ambiguities and overcomes the split of angst and existential estrangement; you are he who speaks of the theonomous viewpoint of the analogia entis, the analogy of our being and the ground of all possibilities.”

Another person (probably at *first* service) might stand up and argue, “Yes, but Reinhold Niebuhr calls you the impossible possibility who brings to us, A: your children of light and, B: your children of darkness, the overwhelming oughtness in the midst of our fraught condition of estrangement and brokenness in the contiguity and existential anxieties of our ontological relationships. And still, Marcus Borg and Bishop Spong might characterize you as Divinely Human; pointing us in the direction of understanding that God is not a supernatural person, but instead, the Ground of All Being.”

And Jesus would say, “Huh”?²

In the story the gospel writer creates, this is hard for Jesus’ disciples. When Jesus talks openly about his suffering and death, Peter takes him aside and essentially says, “Ix-Nay on the Essurrection-Ray.” But Jesus quickly turns the tables and rebukes Peter, saying, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

So the primary task of being a faithful follower of Jesus is this: setting your mind on divine things, not human things. But what does this mean?

This month's issue of "Homiletics Magazine" gives these illustrations:² Jesus calls together the crowd with his disciples and says to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." That's the key to being a disciple: following Jesus. And this, unfortunately, is something the church hasn't done a very good job of teaching people to do. "A good church upbringing will do many marvelous things for you," write Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in their new book "ReJesus." But one of the unfortunate things it does is "convince you that Jesus is to be worshiped but not followed."

Think about that. The church always seems to do a better job of teaching people to worship Jesus than to follow him. But when you read the gospel of Mark, you discover that Jesus is less concerned about people pledging allegiance to him than he is about people following him. Father Richard Rohr, in an address to Yale University medical students (November 2005), said: "You know, Jesus never once said, 'Worship me.' He said, 'Follow me.' One of the cleverest ways to avoid following someone is to worship him. It really works; it's very clever. You just put him on a pedestal, you make God out of him and you pay all kinds of homage to this God figure, and then you don't have to do what he did."

Alan Kimber, senior minister of First United Methodist Church in Lodi, California, disagrees: "If the church truly worshiped, I don't think following would be a problem. The problem is that we seem to have defined Messiah narrowly as 'personal savior.' In other words, it's all about what Jesus can do for me. We have also defined follower as 'religious consumer,' not as disciple of Christ. The sadness is that when we approach worship with these understandings, then worship usually misses the mark, even though we may not even realize it."

Jesus says, "Follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." The Follower of Jesus absolutely has to include acts of sacrifice. This might include working to make sure that others enjoy what you might enjoy—healthcare, civil rights, enough food, clean water and air the world over. How can we call ourselves Christian unless what we're doing is built squarely on the rock of the message Jesus taught? That's where the job description comes from, and that is who Jesus is for us today.

Here in our own faith tradition are the primary stories and reference point. There is no truer way to encounter Jesus again for the first time than by cycling through the gospels and seeing fresh insights into the remarkable person we find there.

Finding how faith can reconcile with what you sense to be true about what little is revealed to us about the mystery of the cosmos is more about following the road that sometimes leads off the map than it is about finding where the comfortable place is that keeps you safe and spiritually covered.

It is kind of like when I sensed that some mystery was living up there in that attic room. I could dare myself to go up there alone, and stand at the threshold and look inside. But then I could do one of two things. One choice would be to jump into the safe space—the protective square, clearly and visibly defined—the place where my own profession of faith in its saving power would guard me. Or, I could choose the unknown journey as a follower of a different way, and wander across unknown territory into the mystery itself.

Spiritual Insurance Policy, or Follower of a Journey, even if standing at that particular threshold might lead me off the map? I'll take the latter.

Welcome home from vacations and away time, I hope to see you today at the picnic, and I'm looking forward to all the good things that will be coming to us in this new church year together.

Sermon Resources:

1. This is my own re-shaping of an old joke about Barth, Tillich & Niebuhr.
2. "Oaths & Offices," Homiletics Magazine, September-October 2009

Scripture for Sunday, September 13, 2009

Mark 8:27-38

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" **28** And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." **29** He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." **30** And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. **31** Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. **32** He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33** But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." **34** He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35** For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. **36** For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? **37** Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? **38** Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."