

Here the words again: Peace. Be Still.

I wonder what is Jesus saying that to the storms of grief or waves of insecurity or fear that may be swelling in some of your hearts for any number of reasons this week.

Having just seen a riveting PBS Frontline documentary about Dick Cheney and George Tenet, I wonder what Jesus would say to the storm of lies and deceit that are supposedly justification for our war in Iraq. Peace! Be Still! Enough already!

Returning to the Psalm: The waves of the sea were hushed!

I imagine a Katrina survivor letting those words gently roll and repeat in her mind as mantra while she's washing stains off her walls. Don't try to make sense of it. Just give your heart to the wonder.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel has written that wonder is at the beginning of all genuine religion. He says further, "Wonder is the state of being asked?" Imagine for a moment, setting down all your questions and letting these marvelous lessons ask something of you. Maybe our first response upon hearing Jesus shouldn't be "yeah sure...how did he do that?" A more faithful reaction might be to let our hearts say, simply, "Yes!" Yes, I believe that somehow, somewhere that power to still the storms in our lives and in our world does exist! Yes. Despite all the facts, I believe!

The only fact that matters is that wondering about and believing in the possibility can produce real effects in our lives. The turn of the century psychologist of religion, William James, after studying people who endured elements of a gradual or immediate conversion experience, concluded that in the end, whatever the cause, the profoundly real and ultimately saving effects of these experiences was for him the best evidence that God is real. Letting ourselves start with wonder can change our attitudes and our actions. The good Rabbi Heschel would again say that religion is our response to that visceral experience of wonder. Religion is what we do with wonder! Religion offers us an RSVP to God's invitation. When we sing, and pray and worship God, we are responding not with rational intellect but with soulful reverence.

The look at Matt's face when he found the ring. The look on Job's face when God finally, finally appeared in that whirlwind. The moment when Julian first penned the word "dazzle", no doubt with a backwards "d". And now hear the words of Jesus yet again. "Peace. Be Still." These are moments and words that stand alone and hold their own. It is ours to sit back and revere. If Jesus spoke such words to winds and waves, imagine what he might have to say to you, right here and right now. Let God's word speak for itself. Let Jesus speak for himself. And let yourself wonder what is being asked of you as you hear these and other marvelous and wonderful things. Amen.



Peace. Be Still.

*A sermon preached by Rev. Daniel Smith
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The Lesson: Mark 4:35-41

A few years ago, my friend Matt and his very newly wedded wife Liz, found themselves down at Quincy Beach on the South Shore. The sun was just beginning to set. They decided to go for a swim. It was a lovely summer's evening until Matt realized that his brand new wedding ring had somehow slipped off his finger in the water. Talk about a punch in the gut. Having just picked out wedding rings for my own upcoming nuptials, I can't begin to imagine the dread he must have felt.

Matt told me that he spent over an hour diving down through the four of five feet of water, combing the mucky sand with his fingers. No ring. To make matters worse, apparently the salty water was such that he would keep bobbing to the surface before he ran out breath. He asked his wife to stand on his back to hold him down as he the grasped at the sand. Still no ring. They even borrowed a pair of goggles from someone on the shore but they proved useless as it was getting dark and the water was churned up by their dredging. Still no ring. Defeated and heartbroken, they returned the goggles. The man from whom they borrowed the goggles proceeded to tell them that 'what, with water and the tides at Quincy beach' he knew they would never find it. They thanked the man for his goggles and for his encouraging words and headed home in a distraught silence.

Later that evening, Liz remembered the man's words. "What with the water and the tides." She realized there is no water at low tide! They immediately checked a tide chart for Quincy Beach and

decided they would return to the beach at the very next low tide: 5:20 a.m. When they showed up bright and early, the tide was way out. They began their search again, this time atop the wet sand. With black muddy feet they clomped their way out to the place that was their best guess of where they were swimming. Matt, who told me he had visions of being a crafty detective when he was a kid, had the sly idea of spiraling out from a central point to make sure that they would canvass the area. After spinning the spiral for awhile, something shiny caught Matt's eye, and his breath. He looked down and saw a tiny sliver of silver poking through the sand and reflecting the sun. He picked it up, walked over to his wife. Without his saying a word, she could tell by the look on his face that he had found it. Can you imagine how sweet their embrace?

Normally, I wouldn't dare start off a sermon by telling such a miraculous story. Professors of preaching would raise a red flag that such a story would overshadow the scripture for the day. Thankfully, for today at least, our texts easily hold their own.

First, Job: After 38 chapters of poor Job, feeling like Job – beat down, alone, weary of so many unanswered prayers, God finally, finally in chapter 38, pipes up from the whirlwind. Where were you when I dredged the entire sea? Who do you think you are to enter into its springs and walk in the recesses of the deep? You think you can find a tiny band of silver on the ocean floor? Let me see you try!

Next, from the Psalmist: We hear about God's wondrous works in the deep, God raising winds and crashing breakers, then stilling the storms and hushing the waves. Imagine it. The divine "Shhh!"

And finally, our Gospel lesson: "Let us go across to the other side!" Jesus says. They went in a boat. A great windstorm arose. The waves beat into the boat. Oddly enough, Jesus was sleeping right through it, on a cushion no less. Don't you love Mark's penchant for detail! But his disciples woke him. Do something! He did. He said to the sea, "Peace. Be Still." And there was a dead calm.

Rarely do the appointed lessons for a given Sunday line up so thematically. The most salient theme of these scriptures is of course, the deep, the sea. I have to add just one more story to this growing list of salty stories. Its another one about my soon to be stepson, Julian, who was recently a winner in a Cambridge Poetry contest. Julian is six. In case you're like one of the two people here today who hasn't heard me tell it yet, his poem was this. *The Sea: The seas waves wash upon the shore and fish dazzle in the light.* Nice, huh?

Poems and psalms, even stories and hymns that invoke the sea and water often have a way of speaking for themselves. They contain an inherent kind of power, splendor and majesty, maybe

because they can't help but point to something vast and elemental, something that can be at once awesome and awful. Such musings have a way of holding their own and standing alone, do they not? Of course, these particular examples may raise their share of meaty questions in our minds: Did Jesus really have authority over the forces of nature, enough to command storms to subside? Does God have this authority and if so where has God been lately? Was the story of the wedding band somehow more than dumb luck? Can we call that kind of happy ending a gift, a gift from the sea or for from God? And my personal favorite: just how does a six year old come up with the word "dazzle" all by himself? All of these are good and reasonable questions. Our minds naturally go to these places but if this is the best and only line of inquiry we can come up with after hearing such gems, I fear we risk losing something big.

These stories and poems that conjure the depths invite us to paddle out beyond the realm of rationale inquiry and explanation. They invite us to experience and even enjoy something more light, more pure and even more mystical. Each of the admittedly disparate examples I've named share an essence that points to the miraculous, to the serendipitous, and to a sense of possibility that is beyond all human being, doing, and knowing. The importance of what is real and factual fades in the dazzling light of what is possible.

Truth be told, I don't want or need to explain how or why Matt found his ring that day, or if God is really responsible for the weather, or if Jesus really brought the sea to a dead calm that day after his snooze in the boat. Marvels like these are better left beyond the reach of reason. We do better to approach them with what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur has called a 'second naivete', a believing and even acting *as if* it were all true, *as if* God does somehow control the vast oceans and Jesus could command the winds to cease! Ultimately, such stories and poems remind us of our God given capacity to wonder.

Our kids are with us this morning. I know that they know something about wonder. In the Godly Play classes they've been in all year, their teachers will recite a given biblical story after which there's a time where students are invited to bring their imaginations to the stories and to make "I Wonder" statements. I wonder...how tall were the waves that Jesus stopped? I wonder...what does a whirlwind sound like and why did God wait so long to talk to Job? The best part is that no one needs to answer these questions which are technically statements. The kids are left to the wondrous act of wonder itself. After asking what the kids are wondering, the teacher then asks them what the stories are saying about their lives. The kids respond with a time of prayerful arts and crafts. Each child is left to his or her own devices with a range of colors and textures and papers.

Let's return to the text, setting our rationale questions aside, and let ourselves wonder about a deeper way they may engage us.