

Remember What You Don't Know

That sounds like a strange thought at first glance, we usually think of remembering being about memory, memories about what we have experienced. This statement is about the realization that we don't know it all, even though we tend to like to think that we do. When God speaks to Job from the whirlwind in response to his questioning of God, what Job doesn't know seems to be the dominant theme of the text. When Job questions God about what he has experienced, God's response is to question Job about his knowledge of how all of creation works. God asks Job if he knows what keeps the seas separate from the land, what provides for rain, what creates snow, the list goes on and on for several chapters---and finally Job concludes that he really doesn't know all that much about the power that keeps the universe going---about the power that God can wield---and even more to the point---that knowledge would be just too much for him. Human beings---especially as our curiosity has kept us asking questions about the world we live in, has gotten to the point that we think we know it all---or at least we believe we can Google it or ask Alexia because the answer is out there. When reading Scripture we often encounter the word "awe" to describe people's response to God and God's actions. But we personally experience the feeling rarely if ever in the world we live in. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a noted Biblical scholar describes "awe" as being the emotion which floods humans when we suddenly find ourselves in the midst of something so much greater than ourselves that it is beyond our comprehension---That is the feeling that Job expressed. --- That is the feeling that the disciples felt at the end of the gospel passage. Heschel says that "the awareness of grandeur and the sublime is all but gone from the modern mind." We allow ourselves to experience far too little mystery and awe in our lives these days. Mystery is the genesis of awe. When we are in the presence of something we cannot fully comprehend we have the opportunity to be transformed, to be overwhelmed by a sense of wonder. The mass accumulation of facts we have at our fingertips these days is in many ways a remarkable gift---we don't even have to expend much effort to find an answer by searching through the encyclopedia or going to a library. But this immediate availability of easy to find "facts" can obscure deeper truths about our world and ourselves. For example, knowing all the elements found in the human body does not mean that you understand how the human body is formed or how it works. The brain is an identifiable organ, but the mind is not identical to it. By have some knowledge---even a great deal of knowledge---of the world we can be seduced into believing we have full understanding of the world. Although there are many ways that our gospel passage this morning has been used to offer comfort---the understanding that Jesus is in the boat with us; the passage actually begins with another thought. If we look at the context of the passage, Jesus has been busy healing and teaching the great multitudes who have gathered after hearing of what he is doing. At the close of a day where he has been teaching from a boat along the shore of the Sea of

Galilee, he says to his disciples: “Let us go across to the other side.” In Mark’s typical pattern of action we are told that this happens “on that day.” The invitation is given and the action is taken...”And leaving the crowd behind, they took him in the boat just as he was.” Jesus does a lot of this going from side to side during the Galilean ministry. And the two sides of the sea are very different—there is the Jewish side with its synagogue and traditions and the “other side” which is Gentile and not a place where those of Jewish faith are comfortable—the traditions are very different. Yet Jesus goes from side to side—issuing the invitation to his disciples but not really giving them time to consider what the other side will be like. And not really giving them time to contemplate crossing a body of water that as many of them were Galilean fishermen knew was subject to sudden fierce storms. If the disciples had said to Jesus, “Well, what if there is a storm?” they would have never gotten into the boat because there are always storms on the Sea of Galilee and usually without warning when you least expect them. Or what if the disciples had first said to Jesus, “Well, first tell us what’s on the other side?” because they would have never gotten into the boat because the destination was the land of the Gerasenes. The hardest thing which Jesus often asks of us is to get into the boat. Getting into the boat with Jesus often means leaving our comfort zones to go to the “other side” where there is work which God wants done. It often means that we are asked to change our preconceptions and/or prejudices. The act of faith begins is getting into the boat with Jesus believing that what needs doing on the other side is not only possible, but it is essential. Now the disciples have already been with Jesus for awhile. They have seen him heal. They have heard him teach. They feel like they know who he is. So they don’t question Jesus’ invitation to go to the other side—they get in the boat. And then they found themselves on that boat at night and a storm blew up. In the darkness, in the midst of the storm, when the chaos of the sea comes crashing over the side, the disciples are frightened. The disciples were confused because Jesus, instead of sharing their fear, was asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. So the disciples, in what must have been a moment of panic, wake Jesus up, saying: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” This comment does not tell us what the disciples expected would happen when they woke Jesus, but despite their knowing Jesus, what happened was not expected. Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And with these words—the wind ceased and the sea was dead calm. With this stillness of the wind and sea, the disciples discover a whole new level of fear. The disciples are opened and they realized they were in the presence of someone, something beyond their comprehension. They were stunned by the sublime power and grandeur in their midst. The text tells us “they were filled with great awe.” Their only response to all that had occurred was a question, “Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?” They have been witness to power so immense that they cannot comprehend it, power wielded by their teacher whom they thought they knew so well. Presbyterians are known for their emphasis on learning—from the earliest influences of

John Calvin those of the Reformed tradition have seen intellectual understanding and study of scripture as significant and important in the life of faith. Reformed tradition calls for careful analysis of the biblical text using documents as close to the original languages as possible. And from these texts, Reformed thought emphasizes well-reasoned theological arguments about their meaning. There is a risk in this approach. In the face of our remarkable tradition of bible study and quest for knowledge of God we may make God too small by limiting who God is to merely what we believe we know about God. If we fall into this trap of believing we have completely figured out who God is and what it means to be faithful we are very far from the truth. The One who can still the wind and calm the seas with a word is beyond our ability to truly know and as Job said after encountering God speaking from a whirlwind, that knowledge is too wonderful for us. A modern theologian speaking about faith and spirituality put it this way: "Tamelessness is not an option. Take surprise out of faith and all that is left is dry and dead religion. Take mystery from the Gospel and all that is left is frozen and petrified dogma. Lose you awe of God and you are left with an impotent Deity. Abandon astonishment and you are left with meaningless piety." A tame God whose power and presence does not astonish you leaves you with a faith that is static and sleepy that will be useless in those times of life when it is dark and it feels as if chaos is threatening to overtake you. No matter how smart and well prepared we think we are, life will bring us times when none of the answers we have solve the challenges we face. The journey of faith requires that we not lose sight of the mystery inherent in relationship with God. The fullness of who God is will ever be beyond our comprehension. And if we minimize God so we can claim to understand the divine we are not in relationship with God at all, but with our own human concepts. If we allow ourselves to lift our vision to the horizon beyond all that we have learned we can appreciate the great mystery before us; we can discover awe; we can recognize God's immense saving power; we can be overwhelmed by greatness. We have the opportunity to see all of this that we do in our daily living and our life together happens under a tremendous eternal canopy, and beside a God whose depths are unfathomable by mortal minds. We also have the opportunity to accept the invitation to get into the boat and go to the other side. Notice that Jesus did not say "You go over to the other side," but "Let us go over to the other side." The promise and the opportunity of this invitation which can also be a challenge is that Jesus knows that there is something on the other side that Jesus knows about—something that Jesus needs to get us to—to see—to participate in the bringing of God's way to that place or situation. The reality for the disciples, and for us, is that the other side is not all that rosy. Like the journey, it has its own set of challenges. On this trip disciples have to see Jesus differently, themselves differently. It means living into a new reality. For us, it means taking seriously Jesus' invitation for us to participate in the coming near of God's reign on earth—to taking stands against injustice—to overcoming prejudices long held—it also means remembering what we don't and can't know—the full power of God, but

also remembering that when we get into the boat or reach the other side—Jesus is with us all the time. Thanks be to God.