

**Sermon for Pentecost V—Year B 2018**  
*Listening to the Questions*

A very wise and well-known theologian, Frederick Buechner, offers this advice about scripture:

*Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives.  
Start by listening for the questions it asks.<sup>1</sup>*

Here are some of the questions the bible asks—  
questions which speak powerfully to the wisdom of  
Buechner's advice:

As you listen, see if you can recall who is asking the question  
and to whom they are asking.

*Where are you?* (Genesis 3:9)

*Am I my brother's keeper?* (Genesis 4:9)

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Psalm 22:1)

*Who is my neighbor?* (Luke 10:29)

*What did you go out into the desert to see?* (Matthew 11:8)

*How many loaves do you have?* (Matthew 15:34)

*What are you looking for?* (John 1:38)

*Do you want to get well?* (John 5:6)

*What is truth?* (John 18:38)

Buechner goes on to say this:

*When you hear the question that is your question,  
then you have already begun to hear much.*

*Whether you can accept the bible's answer or not,  
you have reached the point  
where at least you can begin to hear it, too.*

Buechner's advice is part of the inspiration  
for our new series of weekly reflections this summer—  
pondering the questions of Mark.

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Fredrick. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 1993.

And his advice is good for digging into the gospel today because it is chock full of questions—  
questions that resonate powerfully in my mind and heart lately.

This week's story is often described as the miracle of Jesus calming the sea—one of the most dramatic and even beloved stories in the New Testament.

The setting is the Sea of Galilee,  
a body of water 680 feet below sea level,  
surrounded by hills, and prone to sudden, violent windstorms.

The time is evening.

After a long day spent preaching to the multitudes,  
Jesus is curled up in the stern of a boat — his head on a cushion —  
and sleeping soundly  
as his disciples steer the vessel to the other side.

All at once, the winds pick up,  
the waves grow huge,  
and the boat threatens to capsize.

Though many of the disciples are seasoned fishermen,  
they realize quickly that their efforts to bail water from the boat  
and save their wind-whipped sails are futile;  
the storm is far too powerful.

In desperation, they rouse the still-sleeping Jesus.

Not with a gentle plea for help,  
but with a question so full of bewilderment,  
accusation, and panic, I feel its bite across the centuries:  
*"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"*

Boom. Question one: *"Do you not care that we are perishing?"*

I know this question; I know it far too intimately to judge the  
disciples for asking it.

Some faithful people would never dream of asking such a question.

Some faithful people do ask questions like this especially if you've suffered forms of abuse— emotional, physical, even spiritual abuse— that make it a bit hard to trust in anyone's goodness, even God's. Other faithful people have cried out for help in the midst of life's catastrophic storms, and feel as if Jesus was sleeping.

Intellectually I know the answer to the question is always yes. Yes, our Teacher knows that we are perishing— that we are drowning.

But as the saying goes, the greatest distance on earth is the distance between our minds and our hearts.

For me, the question is a dynamic one—

I have to keep living it, asking it, facing it.

I can't just grab hold of the answer and then put it away;

I have to hold it before my eyes day after day.

For me, the "yes" of God is a promise we are always growing into.

The next two questions in the story come from Jesus.

(Which is now surprise since in the gospel of Mark,

Jesus asks more questions than anyone else!)

He asks them after he wakes, rebukes the wind and stills the sea.

In the deep calm after the storm, he turns to face his even more bewildered disciples and asks:

*Why are you afraid?*

If we extend the meaning of "perishing" or "drowning" to include all the ways in which we human beings find our selves in over our heads—overwhelmed, overpowered, and terrified— then Jesus' question sounds heartless.

Why are we afraid in the midst of earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, droughts, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, mass graves, large-scale starvation and catastrophic disease?

Why are we afraid when we face broken marriages and friendships, witness the mistreatment of children, unfriendly neighbors, grinding poverty, uninspiring work, or financial insecurity?

Why are we afraid?

Because fear is a reasonable response to a sometimes frightening world.

Because God created us with the capacity to feel fear, so that we'll know to pay attention and take reasonable measures to protect ourselves.

You could say that fear itself is the storm that this story confronts. It is not confronted by a sudden burst of courage or resolve on the part of the disciples.

They never manage on their own to “pull themselves together.” On their own, they do not discover inner resources they did not know they had.

Rather it is Jesus who calms them and the storm with his presence and words, “Peace! Be still!”

*Why are you afraid?*

Please notice that Jesus did not say, as we often do to a frightened child in the middle of the night, “there is nothing to be afraid of.” Saying “there’s nothing to be afraid of” is a very different thing from saying “do not be afraid.”

As you and I know, the hard truth is that fearsome things are real. Which leads us right into the next question Jesus asks:

*Have you still no faith?*

Well, sometimes I do and sometimes it seems I don’t.

One of the odd things about this story in Mark’s gospel is that it surrounded by a perplexing set of contrasts.

Just before Jesus calms the sea,  
he has been describing the kingdom of God—  
as small, growing in secret and quiet.  
The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed,  
so tiny it can hardly been seen—  
The kingdom of God is like a farmer whose seeds  
defy manipulation—they grow when they please.

Right after Jesus calms the storm, Jesus manifests  
the kingdom of God with dramatic supernatural power.  
He casts out demons, raises a little girl from death,  
heals a hemorrhaging woman,  
feeds five thousand people with handfuls of bread and fish . . .  
and walks on water.

It seems to have faith we need  
to hold these images of the kingdom in tension.  
To allow God to reveal God-self in both.  
Yes, sometimes Jesus demonstrates his power  
in miraculous, Technicolor ways—  
we're not wrong to hope for such demonstrations.  
At other times, though, he wants us to trust  
that his incarnation—  
his quiet, abiding presence in our lives—is enough—  
and will have the last word.

Jesus' power is paradoxical:  
it comes to us in seeming weakness,  
in quiet whispers and tiny gestures.  
The hiddenness of God, in other words,  
is simply that—hiddenness, but not absence.

So the hard truth is fearsome things are real.  
Yet—even our mustard-seed sized faith—can grow  
to understand that even though fearsome things are real,  
they do not have the last word.

Instead of saying, “There’s nothing to be afraid of,”  
the whole truth would be for someone comforting a frightened  
child to say, “Don’t be afraid, because you are not alone.”  
This is the deeper truth that only faith  
in the God who raised Jesus from the grave can teach  
in the midst of fearsome realities.  
The overwhelming things of life need not own us,  
because we are not alone in the boat in the dark nights of our soul.

The last question of our story is asked by the disciples.  
After Jesus calms the storm,  
Mark writes, the disciples “were filled with great awe”  
(literally, in Greek “feared a great fear”)—  
It’s no longer the elements that terrify them—it’s Jesus.  
*Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*

This is the question I hope I will always have the courage to ask.  
That is, to allow Jesus to fill me with awe.  
To do this, I have to let Jesus become strange to me—  
that is, strange as in new, unnerving,  
so much greater than I can ever imagine.  
So many times, the disciples think they knew Jesus,  
knew who he was and what he was about,  
but they didn’t.  
He was wilder, more powerful, less predictable,  
and more mysterious than they have yet imagined.

If we think we know all there is to know about Jesus,  
then we’re in serious trouble.

If he's familiar enough to let us be complacent, indifferent,  
or even contemptuous,  
then it's more than time  
to start listening to the questions the bible asks.

*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*

*Why are you afraid?*

*Have you still no faith?*

*Who is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?*

When you hear the question that is your question,  
you have begun to hear much.

When you hear the question that is your question,  
press in close and listen—God is near.