

Renewing Faithful Bearings

2 Samuel 6: 1-15 Mark 6: 45-56

We might think we've got this thing nailed down. We're good with it. We can handle it. We've been there, done that. Apart from some occasional, minor, unusual stuff, there is no real problem to speak of.

That's what our society thought about racism, particularly with the election of a *black* man to the *White* House. It seemed like the logical conclusion to what some people had been saying and thinking for awhile.

A few years before Obama's election, then-FL Gov. Jeb Bush declared his *One Florida* initiative, ending most all affirmative action programs in the state because the problem had essentially been solved, and affirmative action simply wasn't necessary to correct any minority imbalances. Basically, racial issues were over and done; the state was no longer plagued by minority bias. If any vestiges remained in hiring, contracting, education, admissions, and the like, the marketplace was how to fix it, not by imposing requirements. The need for legislative or judicial action on this issue was past.

The Supreme Court said the same thing when it legislated from the bench and declared part of the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional, declaring that southern states were being unjustly singled out in this post-racial society. The result was an immediate torrent of restrictions on voting by those same states that would never be permitted under the previous terms of the Voting Rights Act.

What really got folks attention was not the racist attacks on the President, his family, and his children that circulate freely in email forwards to everyone's Inboxes. That really didn't seem to bother anyone but liberals. It wasn't really racist; it was humor, or rhetorical, or opinion.

What finally got everyone's attention was the shooting of an unarmed black teenager in Sanford. That shooting death alone could have been the issue, but it wasn't. The shooter wasn't even arrested, and law enforcement had no plans of doing anything whatsoever.

It took a couple of weeks before anyone would even notice the injustice, and as it became a worldwide media story, *still* no one was acting.

In the black community, it seemed that it was open season on black folks, and the Stand Your Ground law was a license to kill. If it had been a white teenager shot and killed, black folks were sure that the outcome would be entirely different.

Well, white folks didn't see it that way. White folks were sure the kid deserved it. White folks could second guess that teenager's every action every which way to justify that unarmed kid's killing. They hardly thought that their own teenaged son would be

walking home from the store through the neighborhood on a dark rainy night, and could end up dead, and the killer given a free pass. That didn't happen in *their* world.

White folks were too busy propping up their utterly failed belief that racism in America had ended years ago. We were too busy with our fantasy of living in a post-racial society to realize that racism had only ended *for us*, not for black folks and other minorities. We ended racism for *ourselves and our world*, but racism never ended. And we're still trying to figure that one out, and not liking it one bit. Most cannot admit what the facts make clear.

Our deeply held, dearly cherished beliefs can run smack into the hard wall of what's true and real. The resulting wreck is a mess, but we need that calamity to awaken us to the better way, the way of justice and righteousness and peace. Nothing short of calamity could awaken us from sweet dreams of fraudulent achievement and fake success. And even with a calamity, we'll fight like mad to keep our fantasy world.

In our scriptures today, there is a reckoning, too, as the servants of the Lord come to terms with the discrepancy between their assumptions about faithfulness, and God's sovereign will. They will run smack into walls that seek to awaken them and get them on track.

In the reading from Samuel, King David has united the tribes, defeated the Philistines, and recovered the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark is believed to bear the presence of God, and David decides to have a big parade to bring the Ark into Jerusalem. With 30,000 elite soldiers, statesmen and leaders in procession, a wild celebratory party of loud music and song erupts. What an amazing day!

Then the oxen bearing the cart with the Ark stumble. The Ark of God seems in danger, and poor Uzzah reaches out to steady it; in effect, to save God. When you say it that way, believing that God could be saved by any human, you see how it's a colossal mistake. Uzzah's action reflects the notion that God is *in* an object, as if God had become contained and was indeed a possession, needing help from human hands. Do you see what a theological mess this is?

For Uzzah's well-intended but ultimately "irreverent" action, God zaps him dead on the spot. Poor Uzzah.

Now David gets angry at God. Poor Uzzah didn't mean any harm, and what does God do? – summarily kills him? The big party has just gone bust, and no one likes a party pooper, particularly when God is the pooper. Now what?

David's initial anger at this poor conduct by God now turns to fear. "How can the Ark of the Lord ever come to me?" David asks. And that's a very revealing comment. David is realizing that he can't *control* God. (Aha! An awakening!) That certainly messes up the notion of taking care of God-in-the-box, and God would take care of him. That scheme was rather too cozy for God.

Rather than bringing the Ark into Jerusalem, David leaves the Ark with a guy named Obed-edom. Who is he? Obed-edom is a Gittite. A Gittite is what you call someone from Gad. Goliath was from Gad. Goliath was a Philistine, the hated enemy. Philistines live in Gad. Do you see what's happened? The Ark of the Lord is back with a Philistine; *handed over* to a Philistine ... for what, safe-keeping? Okay, so we end up with the Ark of God *given* to a **Philistine**, rather than being brought into the city with the covenant people of God. It's the height of irony.

For the next three months, David considers what to do with the Ark. As David tried to get a grip, God was busy **blessing** the house of Obed-edom, *the Philistine*. What a deal for Obed-edom!

Word of the blessings to Obed-edom, the Philistine, gets back to David. It seems the Ark of God is doing good things instead of zapping people. David reconsiders and apparently re-appraises his view. When David decides to try again, we don't simply have the resumption of the old parade. His basic assumptions have changed considerably from the first outing; he's operating with new bearings.

After the Uzzah incident, this new occasion makes it clear that **God** is the subject of this celebration. David's role is to celebrate what God had done for him and his people. The shift in emphasis is profound as David realized how distorted and confused he had gotten his beliefs, and this is not the last time that David would forget his place.

The servant of God needs to be focused on faithfulness to the God whom they serve. But we may make convenient assumptions about what acting and thinking faithfully means. However, these convenient assumptions are typically wrong, corrupt, and quite unfaithful to the ways and will of our God.

The story of Jesus walking on water in the gospel of Mark is, contrary to popular belief, **not** about the supernatural feat of walking on water. Think about it. A guy who has God make a visit at his baptism, multiplies loaves and fishes to feed thousands, heals the sick and demon-possessed, raises the dead, and commands a storm's winds is someone who can walk on water, fly through the air, and do anything else he wants. As I've said often, miracles alone don't **teach** us anything and the gospels are all about **teaching** us, provided we don't get mushy-headed and distracted by the miracles. The miracle is never the message, just a vehicle serving the message.

This story is simple. Jesus sends the disciples across the water; winds halt their progress; Jesus walks on water to them; fear, shock and awe; Jesus gets in the boat and the wind dies down; disciples (as always) are totally confused. The lesson? We need a closer look to learn something here. Let's check the context of the story, where it's situated in the flow of this narrative section.

This story follows the disciples' inability to cope with the crowds at the feeding of the five thousand. The disciples are dumbfounded when Jesus says, *You give them something to eat*. They do their hamana-hamana response and then Jesus takes what they have, multiplies the loaves and fishes, and saves the day.

Watch the text carefully because this feeding issue gets mentioned in the story of the boat in the storm. After Jesus gets in the boat and the winds die down, vs. 52 says, the disciples were completely amazed, *for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened*. In other words, there was a lesson to be learned back there in the feeding of the five thousand, but they didn't learn it.

We learn something else by checking the locations mentioned, on details that would be obvious to the people in the region, not to us. They start in a remote place, where the feeding of the five thousand occurred, likely on the western shore of Lake Galilee. Their stated destination is Bethsaida on the eastern shore. Verse 53 says they land at Gennasaret, a town on the western shore. It's like sailing from Tampa and heading toward Biloxi, run into a storm and end up landing in Crystal River. It was a total failure.

There are two instances in Mark of the disciples being in a boat and getting in trouble. Both instances act as **report cards** on the disciples' faithfulness in Mark's scheme. Both times, the disciples fail miserably. Their faith is weak; they become fearful, doubting, and passive. At the time of testing, when their faith meets a powerful challenge, they're useless.

And in this instance, their failure is compounded by the hardening of their hearts. This hardening of their hearts indicates that in their weakness (and failure and humiliation), they are feeling insecure and threatened. No one likes to fail, but if you simply get angry about it and don't try to learn from failure, you're a jerk, doomed to repeat it time and again. The disciples are being jerks.

Unlike David, the disciples are **not** learning, or adjusting, or reappraising the assumptions that underlie their faith. Their bearings aren't getting straightened out. Rather than moving toward the promise that is **meant** to be discovered in the process, they remain unchanged. They cling to the promise that they accept, believe, and defend passionately, but it isn't what's God's will and way.

Importantly, the disciples are in the boat *without* Jesus, a not-so-subtle test for how they would do *without* Jesus leading them around. When they face the stormy winds of resistance without Jesus, they better know what to do. Instead, they flail about and get nowhere, never reaching the goal (or the promise) set before them.

We need to know that as our journey of faith continues, we are called to grow, deepen our faithfulness, and anticipate storms of resistance when we call for peace, when we demand justice, when we reach for mutuality, and when we defy the powers of the world. We always need to renew and get straight our bearings, aiming for the higher path of faith, proceeding forward toward the promise, and giving witness to the Kingdom of God. Spiritually prepared and disciplined, our hearts and minds focused on the Lord and his Kingdom, we will find the strength of God working with us. Then it will be for us that **we** can walk on water.