

The Mountain and the Sea

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Scriptures: II Kings 2:1–15; Psalm 114; Ephesians 3 or 3:8–21; Mark 6:45–52

I don't think it is fair to say that I am scared of the water. Though I have been told in not so uncertain terms that it would be best if I dropped the swimming class in which I was enrolled, a story for another time, I have spent a good bit of my life near lakes, oceans, and rivers. Most of these times came in the summers, whether on vacations to the beach, youth group or Boy Scout whitewater rafting trips down the Ocoee and Nantahala rivers, or awkwardly getting on and being thrown off a tube gliding along the lake.

But there was one week where I was definitely scared of the water. August 2002. Hilton Head Island. It began like any other family trip to the beach, bobbing up and down in the waves, past the breakers, riding the waves when we could catch them, making castles in the sand. But there was a sinister force that was not content with our summer fun. A particularly large movement of jellyfish was apparently moving up the Atlantic coast. This was evident from the unlucky specimens scattered on the beach, but became more abundantly clear when I felt a sharp sting on my knee as I swam in the chest high water midway through our week of vacation. And as if I was seated on the cold paper rolled out for me in my doctors office, having been struck by the rubber hammer that checks your reflexes, my leg kicked out instinctively. Unfortunately, my flailing foot found my attacker, and was completely surrounded in the creature's tentacled body. I got back on shore as soon as I could, only to see that my feet no longer resembled one another. The one normally pale and boney, the other red, swollen, and hurting. There didn't seem to be a

square inch of my foot that the jellyfish had not hit. Suffice it to say that was the end of my time in the water that week.

One of the reasons the water can be frightening is the way it can conceal what it contains, say a school of jellyfish for example. There is also the vastness, the unpredictability, the raw power of what water can do that makes it, if you think about it enough, a terrifying thing. Water, in literature and in reality, has come to represent the chaos of what can't be controlled, the givenness and danger of nature. I hope I haven't ruined anyone's upcoming trip to the beach.

When I think about the shock that nature can put on us modern humans, I think back to the Pacific tsunami of 2012 and the horrific devastation that came with it, or perhaps back further to Hurricane Katrina in the US, and all the suffering it caused. Despite living in an advanced, modern society, all that progress seems to fade away when the ocean wants to have its way. And if we realize this in our modern age, where so much of our technology has developed over the centuries to protect us from and give us control over nature, how much more so would a pre-modern, pre-scientific revolution person consider the terrible power of nature. This is the mindset we have to enter when we come to reading about the elements in Scripture. Our Psalm for today, Psalm 114, is a very brief one, and it is almost exclusively based in images from nature. If the sea, if a mountain can be a terrifying thing for me, and I know about helicopter rescues and satellite phones, how much more so would those feelings be amplified in the Psalmist?

And so Psalm 114 pits these powers, those of nature, against the power and presence of God. The waters and the mountains are the most inevitable, unavoidable forces imaginable in the ancient mind, and only supernatural power could truly contend with them.

And yet we immediately see the Psalmist's perspective is a Psalm of praise, because the Psalm has a perspective on how that conflict is going to shake out, namely because God has already acted over and against these forces in the story of the people of Israel.

The Psalm begins with the Exodus, and is about as brief a retelling of those events as you can imagine. No mention of Moses, the plagues, or the Passover, just that the people of Israel were in the land of Egypt, among a people of "a strange tongue" and that God went with them as they went out. This psalm of praise begins with the acknowledgement of the presence of God. "God, you were with your people." That is about as good a start to a prayer as you are going to get.

In verse 3 we get to the water, two bodies of water to be specific. "The sea looked and fled." This of course recalls the crossing of the Red Sea, with the armies of Pharaoh close behind. Having decided the free labor of the Israelites was something he couldn't give up without a fight, Pharaoh pursues the 12 tribes led by Moses, and they became trapped. A death-dealing army on one side and a chaotic and death-filled sea on the other. In a fight with Pharaoh, perhaps a few would survive as prisoners, but no one was going to get through the sea. And so God showed up. The sea was turned back long enough for the people to cross and returned onto the Egyptians the very death they were seeking to deal out.

Then comes the river, the Jordan, the boundary that lies on the other side of Israel's forty years in the wilderness - a time bookended by signs at the water (there's a baptism sermon in there for another day). But once again, at the very edges of the Promised Land, the people are once again held back by water, fresh water this time. You can find the story in Joshua chapter 3. The Ark of the Covenant goes before the people and the waters hold back for them to cross. The same water that was not a barrier at the beginning of the journey would not hinder them here at the end.

We heard an echo of this story today in our Old Testament reading of the taking up of Elijah into heaven and the passing of the prophetic torch to Elisha. It is the same Jordan that both the prophets strike with Elijah's cloak. It is the same outcome, a dried up river for them to cross. The same God who was present with Joshua was there with Elijah, and the water responds. Think about the significance of that moment for Elijah, crossing the Jordan once again as he goes to be taken up into God's presence. He was going to cross something much more significant than any body of water that day, he was bordering the very end of his earthly life. I can see the inward smile he must have had as he touched the Jordan with his cloak, knowing that God would be faithful to let him cross once again, that the unknown to which he had been called was no match for the God who loved him.

Note the tone of the Psalm, and how it changes in verse 5. This is a taunt directed towards the mighty waters and the mountains which are their land counterparts, both symbols of immense power. I hear the voice of Elijah here as well, in mocking the priests of Ba'al. "What's wrong, Sea? What's ailing you, River? Having some trouble, Mountains? You're recoiling back in fear and acting like little harmless lambs!"

The Psalmist knows, not least from the shared experience of his people's heritage, that even those inevitable forces of strength on land and sea are no match for the presence of God. And so he laughs at them! Slinking back is indeed what they should be doing! Their creator is the one who is here now.

What sea are you being called to cross? What mountain are you being called to climb? When you look at your situation, it can be easy to see only the things that are insurmountable. The bill that has to be paid. The family that needs your time and effort. The relationship that is at an impasse. The boredom or loneliness of daily existence. The diagnosis that doesn't offer any hope. To wade out too far into those waters would mean certain death. You probably don't feel too much like laughing at those circumstances. But don't forget the One whose presence goes with you. You may not see a pillar of fire or cloud, but he is just as much here as he was for the people at the Red Sea, at Sinai, or at the Jordan.

I want us also to hear God's gentleness towards us this morning in this Psalm. Hear the conclusion of the matter, the final show of God's power (v. 7-8):

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.

The finale, the pinnacle of God's power in the Psalm isn't at the Red Sea, it is in another episode from Israel's time in the wilderness: providing for the people when they needed water to drink, drawing out water from the rock. That same power that can stop incalculable volumes of water altogether can fill a cup in the middle of the desert. God cares about the 8 oz that his beloved child needs. When you're up against the Sea, remember the small spring in. It was there because your Father knew you needed it. The same God is in charge of both. And his action is no less miraculous at the small scale than at the large. He can move oceans, but he cares that I have enough in my cup.

This psalm of mountains and seas brings to mind our Gospel reading: Jesus up on the mountain, there to pray with his disciples crossing the sea below. The disciples had just witnessed the grand miracle of five loaves and two fish being enough to feed a crowd of thousands, and they were probably kicking themselves that they hadn't insisted on Jesus coming with them, because the water was starting to get rough.

The story brings to mind the Israelites in the wilderness at Mount Sinai. With Moses, their leader and advocate before God, separated from them to go speak with God up on the mountain, they started to get into trouble. Jewelry was surrendered, calves were made. The disciples aren't culpable for their distress but they certainly are there!

And don't miss this next part: Jesus sees them. Mark 6:48: "And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them." He's not too busy praying to see that his people need him. And so he comes. Not in anger like Moses coming down to a disobedient people, but as God himself, coming to be close to his followers who are doing their best to keep alive.

If there were a soundtrack playing at this moment, Psalm 114 would be an excellent choice. Imagine just as Jesus' first foot touches the water and does not go beneath it, the words come in melody: "What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?" The waters have nothing on Jesus.

What do you think is inevitable? For an ancient person it would have been things like the sea and the mountains. And so Jesus told his followers they could tell the latter to cast themselves into the former, and it would be so. We struggle not only with physical obstacles, but mental and spiritual ones. We are in harm's way not only from natural events, but things that affect our souls, our minds. Addiction. Strife. Political instability. Hatred both directed at us and coming out of our own mouths. Who will rescue us? He's the one who holds back the Red Sea and makes a small pool to form in the low place on a rock.

So it is a holy thing to laugh this morning at those things which for us are impossible to move, not in deceived arrogance at our own ability to overcome them, but in the simple and prolonged assurance that the one who calls us sees us, and his presence is enough to make what seems inevitable to fade away.

Wherever you find yourself this morning, God sees you. Whatever threatens to overwhelm you is no match for his saving presence. Look for the sea to be held back and the water trickling from the rock. Look and give thanks.

