

ON THE MOVE WITH JESUS

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

One requirement for being a good scientist is that you not jump to easy conclusions. During a recent cold snap, when temperatures went for days without going above freezing, one fellow in a church I served, a climate change skeptic, stuck his head in my office and said, “Ha, ha, how do you like this global warming?” And then there was the woman, a committed environmental activist, who was fretting on one blistering hot July day, “You see, what more proof do you need of global warming?” Meanwhile, climate scientists keep telling us that you can’t draw conclusions about climate change from what the weather is like on any given day or based on one or two weather patterns. You have to step back and see the big picture in all its complexity.

It’s normal to let our minds connect the dots that are obvious to us and then draw conclusions. That’s what those people in Capernaum were doing when they saw Jesus heal the sick and cast out demons. They started to connect the dots. They saw just enough that they thought they had Jesus figured out.

But they didn’t have him figured out. That’s why Jesus did some things that seem puzzling when you first read them. For instance, Jesus cast out demons, but he didn’t permit the demons to speak. That seems strange. Why shouldn’t Jesus’ power to heal be shouted from the rooftops and told to everyone who will listen? He did another thing that is puzzling. When Peter and the disciples hunted Jesus down early in the morning and told him people were clamoring for him down in the town, Jesus didn’t go back and heal more. He didn’t return to build on his success of the day before. He left town and went to other places.

People thought they had Jesus all figured out, but they had just scratched the surface of understanding Jesus. They thought he was a miracle worker, someone who could meet their most pressing needs and improve the quality of their lives. Well... yes. He worked miracles. He improved lives. But if that’s all you know about Jesus, you’re missing the most important part.

The Bible continually warns against being so sure we have God figured out that we confine God to the limits of our human understanding. Sometimes we take God’s power for

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granted. We forget how small we are compared to God and how different God is from us until something happens to remind us.

Something like that happened to me one day when I was out for my morning run. One of the things that gets me out of bed into the cold and the dark on those winter mornings is the possibility of seeing some old friends up in the sky. When it's bright and clear you can see the moon and the stars and often a planet or two. On one of those crisp mornings I looked up in the sky and felt a warm connection with the heavens. There was the moon, reliably working through its phases, casting a gentle light on the street beneath my feet. There was Venus, the bright morning star, symbol of hope and promise. But then I remembered a movie I'd seen recently, *The Martian*. It's about an astronaut who gets left behind on Mars, that warm red friend whom I sometimes see in the predawn sky. The Matt Damon character has to use all his wits to survive in the searing heat and waterless landscape where he is the only living thing, dependent on the artificial environment he and his fellow astronauts had constructed. I looked at the moon and thought how harsh and barren its surface is, and how unwelcoming it is to human life. I looked at Venus and thought of its dense atmosphere that is poison to human beings. Then I saw a shooting star, which is really a piece of space debris disintegrating as it enters the atmosphere. Why, even the air I was breathing, the atmosphere that we live in and don't even give a thought, this very atmosphere is constantly incinerating our most intricately designed spacecraft as they lose energy and fall back to earth.

Isaiah reminds us:

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? ...

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,

and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;

who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, ...

who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of

the earth as nothing....

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,

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scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows on them, and they wither....

Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created
these?" (Isaiah 40:21-26)

God created these, and God is not to be taken lightly. Yet we also know that behind that awesome power of the universe is love. That same power that made the moon and the planets in all their beauty and their fearsome harshness, when we begin to comprehend that power that should make our knees tremble and our breath short, that same power cares for us and works for our welfare. Isaiah also says,

Have you not known? Have you not heard?...

[The Lord] gives power to the faint, and strengthens
the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary,

And the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their
strength,

they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary,

they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31)

In Jesus the One who created the awesome power of the galaxies is using that same power to show God's deep love. Jesus, the one who was with the Father when the universe was made, cured Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. He cured many who were sick with various diseases. He cleansed lepers and fed the hungry and gave sight to the blind.

It's that same power that motivates this church. Through us, that awesome God channels the power that created the heavens to show the depth of God's love. When IPC stands with the Shan people in Myanmar, you're making a statement about how God provides for the

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downtrodden and oppressed. When a home group supports one of its members through prayer and compassion, you're doing the work of the Great Physician who heals us.

Whenever you see the good work of Jesus, or the good work his followers do in his name, be careful not to conclude too quickly that what you see is all that's going on. You look at all the good things done in Jesus' name, and you could make your mind up, "So Jesus is all about being kind and loving and giving. He's all about making us better people who help others." Yes, but there's more you need to know so you don't reach the wrong conclusion. Some people, after seeing Jesus heal the sick and attract huge crowds, began to conclude that no normal person could do what he was doing. Some concluded, "He has gone out of his mind." Others concluded, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." (Mark 3:21-22) Just seeing Jesus' good works didn't show them who Jesus is.

You can understand why Jesus told those he had healed to keep quiet. You can see why he stayed on the move from town to town. It was too early to connect the dots. It wasn't time to come to conclusions. Jesus came to heal, to teach, to help, and to feed the hungry, but you can only understand what it all means from the far side of the cross. Jesus came to do more than alleviate suffering, give us tools to fight evil, and generally make our lives better between now and the time we die. Jesus came to destroy sin on the cross, and to overcome the power of death. Jesus came to bind us to God and give us eternal life. He doesn't want us to settle for anything less than that.

You can look to Jesus as a teacher, a role model, someone whose wise teachings enlighten you and give good guidance for life. There's nothing wrong with that. You can come to worship and find peace, beauty, centeredness in a scattered life. And there's nothing wrong with that. You can join a church because it's a wholesome place for the kids, and it will be good for your family. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. But don't settle there. Jesus asks us to give him our entire lives, to entrust our whole being to him so it makes a difference in the way we do our work, treat our neighbors, even the way we face our death.

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A congregation can be content right where it is. We can say, “We’re doing perfectly fine as we are, why do we need to reach out to others?” “We’ve got plenty of needs right here at home, why should we try to extend ourselves beyond this wonderful community or to the people of another country?” We can be like the disciples who wanted to stay in Capernaum because things seemed to be going well there. But Jesus wouldn’t stay put. He said, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”

Now, I don’t have it in me to keep on the move like that. I would be happy to remain right where I am in my relationship with Jesus, to keep doing the things I’ve learned to do, to stay just as I am and find my comfort level of spiritual growth and maturity. That’s why I need to follow Jesus’ example and spend lots of time in prayer.

I have to tell you, after I agreed to come to Zurich as your interim pastor, I asked myself, “What have I done?” Now, I knew that living in Switzerland is not exactly hardship duty. And I knew that Doug was leaving behind a strong caring community. But I started to think about how I’ll live away from my wife for seven months. My grandchildren just moved from an ocean away to within 80 miles of my home. I was getting more involved in my local community, serving on the board of an organization that I admire and volunteering at a food bank. Why in the world do I want to leave that?

For weeks I lifted it up in prayer. I entrusted the life I was enjoying and the life that awaited me here to God. And once I walked out into the arrivals area of the Zurich airport and was met by Doug and Sam and Jenna and Sheila and Maio and Esther, I knew that my prayer was answered. I’ve only been here a week, but I haven’t looked back. I’ve seen what exciting things God is doing through IPC and I give thanks that I’ll get to be part of that for a short while.

Jesus’ life was grounded in prayer. When things started going so well for him in Capernaum, his disciples reveled in his success and was tempted to enjoy it, he went away to a deserted place to pray. Prayer opens up possibilities. In prayer God can show us ourselves as

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we really are. We are confronted with our presumptions and our prejudices. In prayer we align what we're after in life more closely with what God is doing. Prayer helps us get out of the way so God can claim us for what is best. Dante said that hell is the place where people get what they want and see how inadequate are all the things they loved so much. Prayer gives us God's perspective. With Cardinal Newman we pray, "Lift us by thy cross that we may see beyond the horizon of our death."

Jesus is continually calling us beyond where we are into a life that's richer and deeper. He invites us to give our trust not to what we know, but to him who is the living Lord. He is always moving ahead of us, leaving the places where his work is done and proclaiming the message in places we might prefer not to go.¹ Jesus is on the move. Are you with him?

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, "Learning Jesus," *The Christian Century*, December 2, 1998, pp. 1142-1146.