

2 Sam 7: 1-14a	Psalm 89 21-38	Eph 2: 11-22	Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56
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Pentecost VIII, 18 July 2021

As you know Sara, Julie and I recently returned from walking sections of the Larapinta Trail in the NT. I want to share just one story from that experience: On the first day during a brief rest and water stop I fell asleep in some shade and woke up alone, left behind.

Fortunately, I could follow the trail markers to catch up and the sweeper guide was still some distance behind me.

I was reminded of that nap experience because resting and journeying are themes of the Gospel today.

If the text seems disjointed that is because it is, so I want to start by situating it roughly in the chronology Chapter 6 of Mark’s Gospel. The chapter started with Jesus’ being rejected in his own hometown, Nazareth:



then sending out the 12 two by two to preach, teach, heal and deliver.

Last week you heard the story of the execution of John the Baptist, which is an insertion, like a cameo in brackets because Mark likes to insert one story into another. In today’s text Mark brings us back to

Galilee to continue the story of the 12 who return from their expedition, keen to tell Jesus what they have been through, perhaps a little high on the experience but probably also very tired. So Jesus tries to take them to a “solitary” place to get away from the crowds, but his effort is thwarted by the crowd with which he then engages.

It seems at first reading that Jesus is trying to take his followers away for some R&R after their busy hectic experience, but that does not turn out well, as we know.

However, if you are looking for a comfortable place to take others to recover, to rest and eat; a solitary place, an uninhabited place, perhaps a desert place, does not fit the bill. So I wonder what is going on here?

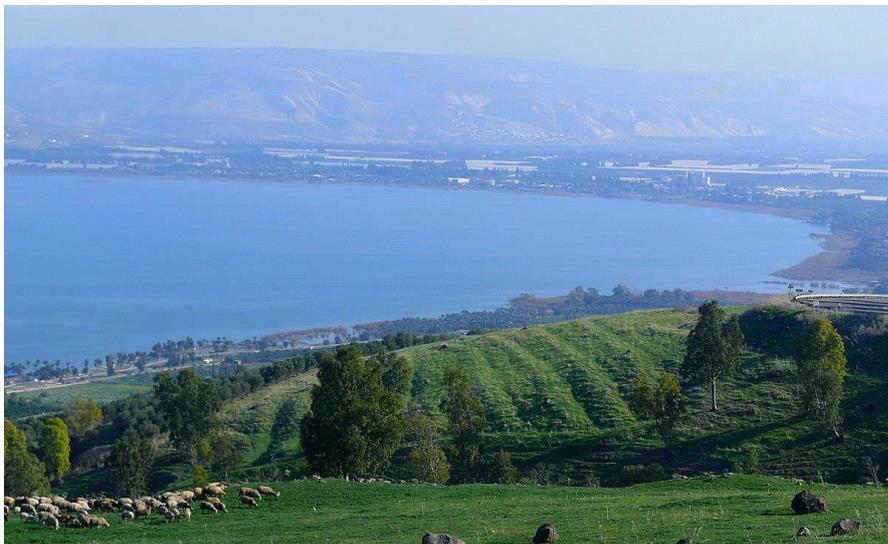
Mark does not say where they head for when they get into the boat, but John says they went to the other side of the lake and Luke says they went to Bethsaida on the north-eastern shore...



And then the lectionary writers engage in a dodge and punt of their own because they jump over verses 35-52 which contain the stories of feeding 5,000 and walking on water. That is next week’s Gospel, though the text will be from John, not Mark!

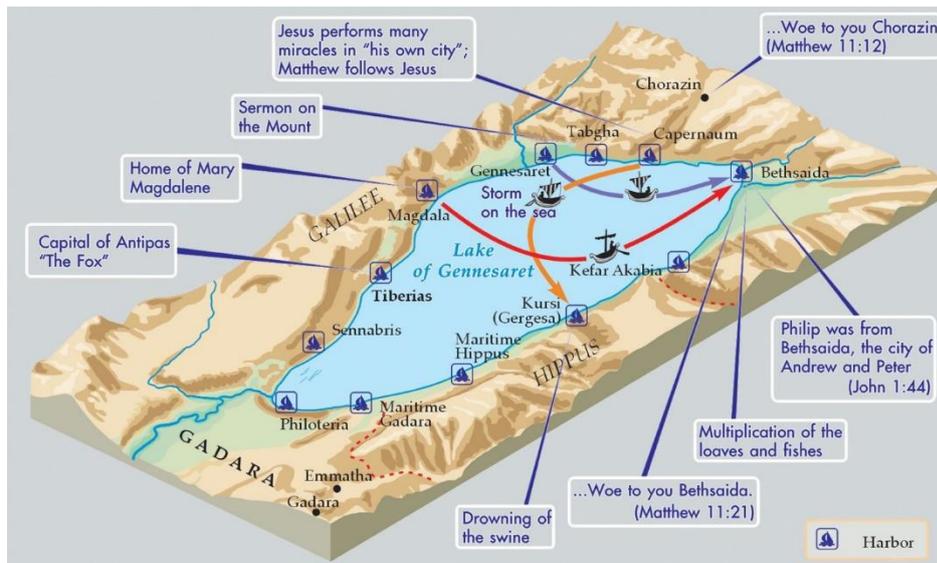
Today's text then picks up at verse 53 after these events when Jesus and his followers land in Gennasaret on the north-western shore of the lake with yet more crowds pressing in on Jesus and his band desperate for the sick to be healed.

Going back to the first paragraph of the text, you may be puzzled by this business of people running along the lakeshore, beating Jesus to the beach. Those of you fortunate enough to have travelled to the Holy Land will know that the Sea of Galilee is not really the sea at all, but a decent-sized lake, surrounded by steep hills, about 21 km long 13 km wide.



There is pretty much no place on the water that cannot be seen from land. No matter where the disciples row, their boat is always visible from the shore, meaning that people on land can see where Jesus is all the time. It would be easy to figure out where the boat is headed, in order to run along the shore to get there before the boat.

I looked up how long it would take to row from one shore of the lake to another, and one writer estimated that it was a journey of about two hours in good weather, as we know, much longer in a storm!



So perhaps what is going on is that the boat ride is not supposed to be a shortcut to the peace and quiet of a wilderness retreat away from the masses. Perhaps the time in the boat *is* the retreat because Jesus knows the people can always see where he is going and their need of him is so great there is no way they will let the Master and his followers have some alone time.

When Jesus says, "*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while (v. 31)*" perhaps he means the middle of the lake as the most deserted place available. It is the only place Jesus can be alone with his disciples without crowds pressing in on them. The time it takes to row to another side of the lake is the time Jesus gives his disciples to rest from their ministry, to be alone with him.

That is why I was reminded of my impromptu nap in the Outback. I have talked about our need to look for God in surprising places, to expect the unexpected; perhaps this extends to the idea of rest, of taking opportunities for quiet time with Jesus when they are presented, perhaps unexpectedly.

What refreshes us, how and when do we recharge our batteries? Perhaps we have opportunities to power down and rest in and with God, but we have not perceived of them like that, times in transit so

to speak, journeying from one place to another, like sitting in a boat going from A to B.

I want to return to the people on the shore who run ahead to *meet* Jesus. They race to get to the spot where they think he will land.

The text says they were like sheep without a shepherd, running ahead of the one they should perhaps have been following; trying to second-guess the Lord to get to where they think he is going before he does.

I wonder how often we try to second-guess Jesus, because we think we know better; we know the answer? Perhaps we are too impatient or anxious to wait for the slow unfolding of God's ideas, so try to force our will on events.

We run ahead to where we think Jesus may be going, instead of staying with him in the boat, sticking with the process of the journey.

Notice that Jesus does not scold the crowds but is moved with compassion for them; as he is equally for us, all of us are his sheep. The text says he shows compassion by teaching them "many things," teaching them about the love of God, inviting them into his life-giving embrace.

Jesus extends the same invitation to us and invests in our lives by inviting us into his life. We, in turn, are called to share God's love with people we know, to invest in their lives by inviting them into our own.

But we cannot be partners in the boat with Jesus if we keep running along the shore, trying to get where we think he is going before he does.

I want to conclude with a Leunig prayer:

God bless this tiny little boat
And me who travels in it;
It stays afloat for years and years
And sinks within a minute.

And so the soul in which we sail
Unknown by years of thinking
Is deeply felt and understood
The minute that it's sinking.



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