

“WHEN TO BE AMAZED”

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 4, 2018

Text: Mark 1:29-39

What amazes us . . . says a lot about us. The feeling of amazement connects to ideas we have about what is important and normal and desirable. Amazement can move us . . . inspire us . . . even give us a vision. But what sort of vision depends on what amazes us, and what we choose to do with our amazement. . . .

Today we heard the sequel to last week’s gospel, in which Jesus astounded and amazed people with his sabbath teaching in the synagogue. He even commanded an evil spirit to leave a possessed man. People said: “What is this! A new teaching, with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!”

Then there is a sudden transition to another location:

And immediately after they had come out of the synagogue they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.

“Immediately.” “At once.” We listeners should not have let seven days go by. All manner of things have happened in our lives since January 28, but let’s forget all that and pretend we have JUST HEARD and seen that Jesus speaks with authority, not as the scribes. He speaks with a dramatic healing and redemptive word which matches God’s creative word in its power and effectiveness. Jesus does not mince words; or actions.

The question for his “handlers,” then, is whether Jesus’ “amazingness” can be harnessed. What do you do with a person who is such a “presence”?

Well, here is what happened. James and John and Simon and Andrew took Jesus to supper. At Simon’s house. Then they hit a snag. No supper. Immediately the explain to Jesus: Simon’s mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. (And they hold their breath.)

Now, several chapters later we will find Jesus on the shore of Galilee with a lot of hungry people and not enough food. But today it is just the five of them. But it is the same difficulty: How shall everyone be fed, when there is a breakdown in the routine of life. The hostess is out of action.

SIDEBAR 1: Fevers did not come out of nowhere, in the mindset of those days. Disease came from God. Listen to this passage from Deuteronomy: The LORD will smite you with consumption and with fever and with inflammation and with fiery heat and with the sword and with blight and with mildew, and they shall pursue you until you perish. (Deuteronomy 28:22)

SIDEBAR 2: Influenza used to be called “grippe,” because it feels like you are “in the grip” of some malevolent force. Influenza refers to an outside influence on your body. We talk about some other kinds of illness as seizures. In several ways, then, the words we use even today betray a feeling that something beyond or outside of us is taking over. It’s not much of a reach to see how ancient people felt as though God was angry with them and was making them hurt physically. Simon’s mother had a fever and was in bed, and this felt to her and to all of them like they were being wounded by God.

So they told Jesus.

And wouldn’t you know it, Jesus addressed the problem. With authority. Without a word. “He came

and took her by the hand and lifted her up.” “Then the fever left her.” Peace and order were restored, and she started putting supper on the table.

Come Maundy Thursday, we shall talk about the last supper. Here in Mark 1 is “The First Supper.” On this occasion Jesus only gets credit for an assist. It was Simon’s mother-in-law who served. And this story about when there almost wasn’t supper, but then there was, will be told forever in remembrance of mothers-in-law.

The lesson I want to draw from this two-part story, which goes from the synagogue to the infirmary to the kitchen, is that the disciples made the right inference from what they saw in the synagogue. They were amazed, yes, they sensed God was at work, yes, but they did not draw the wrong conclusion. They saw the character of God in the direction Jesus went: from displaying his authority to serving someone in need. That is what our psalm this morning proclaims:

God is not impressed by the might of a horse and has no pleasure in the speed of a runner, but finds pleasure in those who fear the Lord, in those who await God’s steadfast love.

Let me paraphrase:

You want to know what God really appreciates? It is not the sort of things we typically amaze each other with—our prowess, strength, skill, savvy, whatever. What God really digs is when people fear, love, and trust God. Period.

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There is a lot of comfort to be found in that verse. “God is not impressed,” also translated “God takes no pleasure,” “God does not delight in” “the might of a horse” or the speed of a runner. You and I, on the other hand, are impressed by the strong, the brave, the speedy, the smart, the accurate. The best. We delight in #1. We strive to be the best, to be at the top.

What if God was impressed in the same way? That would mean that our religion would be a striving for excellence—in behavior, appearance, worship. We would want God to know what clean hands we have, what pure hearts we have. It would be necessary to hide from God whatever was wrong with us. Worship would be a show.

If God thought like people and was impressed by impressive stuff, we might as well say what the possessed man said last week: “What have you to do with little old us? Have you come to destroy us?” We might hide our sick mother-in-law in the back bedroom, because with Jesus in the house you would sure want to put your best foot forward.

But God is not impressed by the might of a horse. Or the perfection of our praise. God finds pleasure in those who fear the Lord, which is to say those who await God’s steadfast love.

Which Simon’s mother-in-law did. I am guessing that even in Mark’s time she was a well-known disciple. Evidence points to her son-in-law as the authority behind the Gospel of Mark. I bet she would sometimes stand up in front and tell a congregation how on that long-ago Sabbath the Lord came into her room and stood by her sickbed and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and she was well. She would have told the story as a paradigm of salvation. She did not “win” salvation by anything she did. She only awaited God’s steadfast love. And receiving God’s love, she was set free to serve God by serving God’s people.

People are amazed by strength, by speed, by whatever is “most.” We compete. We want to stand out. But the processes by which the world sorts out the brightest and best are the processes by which the world also discards the poor and lowly.

Not God’s way. This is our Christian faith: that Jesus surprises us, pointing down and not up. Jesus assures us that affiliation with God is not based on

our various little triumphs, but on his own love and mercy.

We do well to watch Jesus, be amazed by Jesus, and then see what gets his attention—not our strengths, but our weaknesses, and our faith in God.

Amen.

