

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal, Epiphany 4B, Mark 1:21-28 1/31/2021 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

This morning's Gospel picks up immediately after last Sunday's. Jesus has just called two sets of fisherman brothers to follow him: Simon and Andrew, and James and John. Last Sunday, we talked about calls and about discernment: about the dangers of certainty, cost, and convenience. Today, we're going to look at what happened right after the disciples answered Jesus' call.

They headed to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, to the synagogue. This probably made sense to the new disciples. They had left their nets, and James and John even left their father, and they followed this itinerant teacher to a temple, and he taught. All five were faithful, observant Jewish men, so picking the temple as their first stop made sense. When you follow a holy man, you expect him to go to the temple.

But then Jesus broke with the expected pattern. When he taught in the temple, Jesus didn't sound like the scribes. In order to understand this story today, think of a "scribe" as a trained religious professional. Someone like me. Someone who went to seminary and then got paid to stand up and read holy writ and tell others what it meant. As a modern-day scribe, I might tell you the origins of some of the ancient Hebrew and Greek words. As a modern-day scribe, I might remind everyone that we should be giving money to the diocese.

But Jesus wasn't doing that. He was not footnoting every word that came out of his mouth. He was teaching "as one having authority." He didn't qualify every statement. He was confident.

He sounded like a prophet. Instead of sounding like someone who had read a lot, who had worked with lots of different teachers and spent years steeped in an institution, he sounded like someone to whom God had given direct authority. Like Moses, who appeared in today's Deuteronomy reading. Aaron, Moses' brother, was the one who was more like a scribe. Aaron was the one we would expect to hear teaching in a temple. But Moses was the one God talked to. Moses was one in a long line of prophets.

Then suddenly, in Capernaum, in the time of the Roman occupation, some guy from Nazareth showed up to the temple and started teaching the men gathered there, but without saying, "Well, I learned this from Rabbi so-and-so" or the ancient equivalent of "Well, I went to Harvard, and here's what they taught me."

Then an unclean spirit made itself known in that temple in Capernaum, crying out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

I bet some of those first four disciples were asking themselves that too. Who was this guy who told them he could make them fish for people, now teaching in a temple with authority, being addressed by name by an unclean spirit? Last week I warned you to be careful about certainty when it comes to discerning a call from God. I bet Simon and Andrew and James and John felt uncertain when that spirit spoke up.

Jesus' first act of public ministry in the Gospel of Mark was commanding that unclean spirit out of the man. Once again, Jesus summoned the spirit himself, without asking if there were any

exorcists in attendance in the temple that day or invoking any sort of holy help. He just told the spirit to come out. And it did, dramatically, leading to convulsions and cries.

Everyone was amazed. This was not what they expected when they got up that morning and went to temple.

What did you expect this morning when you tuned into the livestream?

For the four months over the summer that I was trapped at home, I tuned in to our livestream every Sunday, and my expectations were never very high. I wasn't keen on surprises, because surprises usually meant something was being done differently than it would have if I were present.

But while I may not have thought "I wonder how I will be amazed today," I was often surprised or amazed or moved deeply seeing who showed up when I tuned into the livestream. I hadn't seen most of you in months, so any glimpses got me excited. I was surprised and amazed by how well Rick walked up to the front, because months before I had wondered if I would ever see him walk again.

I was sometimes amazed by the way a familiar hymn like "The Church's One Foundation" moved my heart even though no one was singing. I was amazed by how much I enjoyed hearing someone else—that is, Reverend Martha—declare God's forgiveness as I crossed myself after the confession.

Do you leave room for amazement at church on Sundays—even in our livestream? Does amazement ever creep in even if you didn't intentionally leave space for it?

What do you expect when you open your Bible at home? Do you expect to be amazed when you read it? What if you try closing your eyes and praying "Please amaze me" before you pick up and read? Sometimes when I hear scripture read by someone else, like Hanby or Jay, I am amazed by what I hear, what I glossed over when I read it quietly to myself. I try not to follow along in the bulletin when the lector is reading so that something amazing might sneak in.

Amazement isn't all we are seeking, of course. The Good News doesn't end with being amazed. One commentator I consulted this week pointed out that while this first miracle by Jesus that we read about this morning provoked awe and wonder, the witnesses did not show faith.<sup>1</sup> They said, "What is this?" but did not continue with, "He must be the Messiah!" They stop short of drawing any conclusion from their wonder. This happens a lot in the Gospel of Mark, so look for it over the next year as we continue to make our way through his gospel.

What does wonder without faith accomplish? Does wonder lead to faith for you? I think back to my amazement examples over the summer while watching our livestream. Seeing Rick back and church and walking, hearing beloved music, and hearing God's forgiveness did buttress my faith during a time when my faith wavered because of my cancer treatment and the isolation I felt.

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<sup>1</sup> Byron, John, "Commentary 1: Mark 1:21-28," in *Connections: A Theological Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020, p. 226.

During this season of Epiphany, keep discerning what God might be calling you to do, and then continue to explore that call. Are you amazed by what happens next? And does that lead to deeper faith?