

## Awesome and Amazing

1/31/21

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Gospel lesson where we hear these words once again from St. Mark: "And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes... and then regarding the unclean spirit... Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all... amazed... " (Mark 1:21-28) This is the Word of the Lord.

Astonishing!... Awesome!... Amazing!

Have you ever experienced these emotions? In my professional career I traveled extensively and to numerous places around the world... some breathtaking locations: atop the snow-capped Sierra Nevada's overlooking Lake Tahoe... standing on the Sydney Harbor bridge with a bird's eye view of this picturesque harbor... climbing the stairs of the Great Wall in China... floating on a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee... and many more. Incredible places that were either beautiful sights or places of historical significance... places that evoked those feelings of Astonishing.. Awesome... and Amazing!

So when was the last time you were completely awestruck at something? I mean, really.. honestly .. sincerely - eyes wide open, mouth agape, dumbfounded, speechless, jaw dropped... amazed?

Perhaps things don't seem so extraordinary today because we are surrounded by all sorts of technology that we take for granted... but that people a century ago might have thought came straight out of science fiction::: cars that can cruise at 75 mph – no problem... satellites that we shoot into space and orbit the earth... and in many of our pockets a cell phone that's way smarter than its owner.

At one time... all of that stuff that would have been downright amazing or even seemingly impossible... it's all now commonplace. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate cell phones and remote controls as much as the next guy... but what I question is: have we lost our capacity... for amazement? What once was awesome... has now become common.. ordinary.. even boring.

So what happens when the awesome and amazing become... common, ordinary, or boring in our spiritual lives? Maybe those old familiar Bible stories and promises become just that – old and familiar. Maybe that once cherished hymn we loved to sing with exuberance... has come to sound more like a funeral dirge...and since when does that hymn have seven stanzas?

Beloved... we handle the once cherished treasures of God's revelation... like they were another chore to complete... or some inconvenience in our day. And that is a real danger for every Christian – to let the Word and work of your Savior God... become so ordinary...that it really doesn't hold much importance in life.

Perhaps ... it has happened to you, friends... it's happened to me. When we no longer marvel at the grace and love of our God... when worship is a job.. rather than a privilege... a joy? And so it happens that the unbounded God of the universe... becomes neatly compartmentalized... to fit into our lives when we think we need him. Mighty God... forgive us! When the amazing becomes common for you, brothers and sisters... remember just how awesome your Savior is. He speaks with authority. He works with power... and.. he does it all... for you.

Mark tells us in his Gospel that they went to Capernaum – an amazing place by the way! - and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. Nothing out of the ordinary here. Jesus and his disciples go to the place where the Jews gathered for worship. It was just another Sabbath Saturday... just another hum-drum service of lessons, a psalm or two, some prayers. Another Sabbath, another song.. another visiting rabbi to offer a commentary on Scripture – telling us all about which laws were more important to follow than the others... how many steps we could take on our Sabbath walk... how much mint, dill, and cumin to tithe this month.

Just another Sabbath Saturday... but then... Jesus showed up. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the teachers of the law. As soon as Jesus sat down and began to teach... the people in that synagogue realized there was something different about this teacher, but... more so... the teaching he brought. Every other rabbi who sat in the teacher's chair appealed to other respected rabbis of old to back up his interpretation. Everyone cited their sources, appealed to human authority, and perpetuated the teaching about a god who demands that we climb the ladder to attain his righteousness... rather than the God who comes to us... to save us.

So what was so amazing about Jesus' teaching? It was something they had never heard before... but something they'd been asking for since the time of Moses. In the Old Testament lesson, the people of Israel had pleaded with Moses for God to communicate with his people in some other way than making the mountains shake and the earth tremble... complete with consuming fire and billowing smoke.

“Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.”

In the synagogue in Capernaum, God answered the peoples' plea with a preacher who would not send them to death... but win them to life. In flesh and blood right before their eyes, was God's answer to humanity's greatest need. The very authority of God drew near to them... not to destroy... but to save. Jesus Christ comes to proclaim release to the prisoners... forgiveness to the sinners... and light and life to those in the shadow of death. This is good news! The Son of God takes on our humanity so that he can take on our sin and reconcile us to a holy God. This is good news!

But then... not everyone was so happy about it. True to form, wherever the Word is proclaimed... there is the devil who just loves to rear his ugly head. Just then – we hear - a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One of God.” So, who was this demon possessed man... and why does he cry out... now? Unfortunately Mark's gospel doesn't tell us. But it does make some sense for the devil to cry out and try to disrupt and destroy at that moment.

What had been taught in that synagogue on the other Sabbath days? Rules and regulations;... traditions and tithes;... how you can distinguish yourself with a life of obedience to Almighty God... and hold up your crowning achievements to God - thanking him that you're not like your unworthy neighbor. If that is the content of what was being taught... then it makes perfect sense for the devil to keep his mouth shut. The devil is pretty content to remain quiet in a place where falsehood reigns... and self-righteousness marches the soul away from God.

But when confronted with the truth of the gospel - about a God who justifies the ungodly... about a Savior who carried our every sin to the cross, and rose from the dead to guarantee our eternity - when the devil hears that... then you'd better believe he's working overtime... working to divide and destroy... working hard to raise up strife so that people walk away from the truth.

Hopefully you will have noticed a distinct difference in the two main voices you heard in our gospel lesson today: Jesus has authority with his teaching. The devil simply makes noise.... And making noise is no substitute for having authority. Isn't it interesting though, how often people are confused by the two? The truth of God is twisted or just plain ignored in order to accommodate people looking to justify their ungodly lifestyles. People turn their backs on the pure gospel message... and trade it for whatever their sinful nature desires. The devil promises fulfillment.. acceptance... joy... but he ultimately only delivers emptiness, rejection, and despair.

At any given moment in this assembly... there are two sermons being preached simultaneously – one by the guy you're looking at... and the other by the devil... just making noise. It's really sad to say that sometimes we do indeed lend our ear to the wrong one.... "Almighty God is in this place? Doesn't look like much - not like that upbeat, entertaining church. You can see that's just another human being standing up there... not Jesus. If he knew what kind of person you really are... and all the things you've done... there's no way he'd be talking about forgiveness. You do realize that those are just words on a page - written who knows how long ago - for people so far removed from your present existence, right? You do realize this don't you?"

Dearly beloved.... when the devil comes calling... it is time again to stand in awe of your Savior. He speaks with authority... he works with power... and he does it all for you!

In answer to the devil's taunts, Jesus said, "Be silent.. and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice... came out of him." The powerful and authoritative word of Jesus...commands the devil to flee... and he must listen. When those people from the synagogue went home that Sabbath day... what do you think they remembered from their time in worship? There were some prayers and lessons. The visiting rabbi began to teach... and then a guy with a demon stood up and started shouting.... Kind of hard to remember the sermon when there's an exorcism in the middle of it, right?

Well... that wasn't the case with those people. What struck them most about that Sabbath day? The people were all so amazed... that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." The powerful and authoritative word of Jesus always wins... when it's pitted against the noise of the devil – always. Jesus speaks with authority... and he works with power.

So, if you're thinking it might be more accurate to say Jesus spoke with authority back then... and worked with power once upon a time... then I'd ask you to look again. Jesus came into the world to destroy the devil's work... and Jesus still does it today. That same powerful and authoritative word of Jesus always wins when it's pitted against the noise of the devil... the lies of your sinful nature... or the guilt of your conscience.

What was your expectation in coming to church today? Another Sunday... another church service... another few hymns... some readings, prayers and a sermon. It all looks so common.. so ordinary, so... boring. But then... Jesus shows up - just don't wait for a public exorcism to take place. Instead... look where Jesus has promised to be.

He shows up in feeble words... spoken by the cracked clay pot standing before you – I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... and you know what? That word of promise... it carries with it the authoritative word of Jesus Christ himself.

It all looks so common.. so ordinary... so boring.. but then Jesus shows up - in water and the word over a sinful creature... to claim him as his own and adopt him. In the waters of your baptism, friends... God has forgiven you and made you his child. Jesus has died the death of your sin... broken the devil's grip, and rescued you from his demonic dominion forever.

It all looks so common.. so ordinary, so boring... but then Jesus shows up. The Son of God places his body and blood into your hands and on your lips, as you hear the words, "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." The devil's accusations against you cannot stick... because you're mine.

Do you believe me now, brothers and sisters? That the reason the Son of God appeared... was to destroy the devil's work. He speaks with authority. He works with power... and he does it all for you.

Awesome and amazing.... where do you find yourself on the spectrum of awesome and amazing today? Words like "awesome" and "amazing" have kind of lost their power and punch in our modern culture of rapidly advancing technology and agendas. But may God help us always to stand in awe of our Savior Jesus, and to see what's really going on here.

Every time we gather around his Word and Sacraments... such a celebration points us ahead to the day when the veil of humility will be pulled away... and we will see - with our very own eyes - the glorious power of our God... as he destroys the work of the devil... forever... and brings us to himself ... in heaven.

But until that day comes, beloved... stand... stand with your eyes of faith wide open... for your awesome Savior... speaks with amazing authority... working with power... all.... for you. This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen