

January 28, 2024

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Mark 1:21-28



At the start of every semester, I ask my students to call out the first thing that comes to mind when they hear certain religious words or phrases like “Christianity,” “the Bible,” or “Jesus.” *What comes to mind when you hear the name Jesus?* For this one, “Jesus,” students will predictably respond by shouting out things like “really nice guy,” or “famous teacher,” or “died on the cross.” Then over the course of the semester we compare these initial reactions with what the Bible itself suggests about who Jesus was and how people in his own day reacted to him. Take, for example, the audience described by Mark in today’s Gospel reading. Mark gives us two different descriptions of the crowd around Jesus in the synagogue, and both descriptions suggest that the crowd regarded Jesus as not just amazing but even confusing, bewildering, utterly unfamiliar.

Where do we see these reactions? What happens in this short scene? Jesus shows up one day in the synagogue in a city named Capernaum, and he starts teaching. The synagogue crowd had never heard such authoritative instruction before from the standard religious teachers, and so Mark describes the audience as “astounded” by Jesus’ compelling words. Now “astounded” is a rather tame way of translating Mark’s terminology; literally, the word he uses to depict the audience means something like “jolted out of one’s mind,” “driven out of your senses by a sudden shock,” or “thrown into panic by amazement.” The crowd is not just surprised or impressed by Jesus; his teaching is so otherworldly in its power and authority and conviction that it induces an almost crazed, panic-stricken, astonished bewilderment at who this figure is and what his words might mean. Dare I suggest that so far none of the synagogue members would describe Jesus as a “really nice guy”: we are so far beyond the pale of niceness here; this Jesus is a figure whose teaching is so far off our conceptual maps that it nearly induces panic.

And then, what does Jesus do next? How does he follow-up this paradigm bursting instruction? By calming everyone down and making sure everyone’s bewilderment is carefully contained, everyone feeling safe, reassured, and content? Not at all, he follows his astonishing teaching with nothing less than a no-holds-barred battle against a demon. And this really gets the people going as they hear the demon and Jesus speaking—probably shouting—back and forth and then finally the demon shrieking as Jesus forcibly expels it out of the body of the man it was possessing. And so if Jesus’ teaching wasn’t off-putting

enough, now the crowd just heard a screaming demon and saw Jesus cast it out of another human. And again for a second time in this short passage, Mark describes the crowd's reaction in terms of amazement. But again "amazement" is a little weak; that's a watery-soup version of the crowd's actual reaction, which is something more like astonishment tinged with alarm. "This Jesus is certainly something, but we're not just impressed or even amazed by him. There's something uncanny, even unsettling, about this guy. Normal humans don't speak or act like this. Normal humans don't channel this kind of power. This Jesus is a little dangerous; maybe even a little unpredictable. We're certainly astounded, but maybe also rather alarmed." Again, no one in this synagogue—especially after the shrieking demon—is describing Jesus as a "nice guy."

And I think there's something really important about this depiction of Jesus as an otherworldly figure of unsettling power, this Jesus who provokes amazement tinged with alarm, astonishment laced with even a bit of panic. This depiction is important, I believe, because it challenges our tendency to domesticate Jesus, to think that "yeah, we know Jesus; we understand what he was about, what he stood for, what he was trying to do. We get that he was about love and being a good guy and doing nice stuff for other people. We know that perennial niceness is basically the way of Jesus, the smiling message of Christianity." Such a view of Jesus and Christianity, though widespread and popular, is challenged when Mark comes along and describes a Jesus who incites confusion, bewilderment, alarm, even panic: "What is this?," the people ask after witnessing Jesus' teaching and exorcistic power. "Who is this guy?" In other words, "we have no framework for making sense of what we just heard and saw." As Bible commentator Mary McGlone writes, "Mark wastes no time as he throws us into the middle of a world turning inside out. He shows us that bewilderment is good for faith; it can startle us into suspecting that there's more afoot than we would ever dream of."

"Bewilderment is good for faith": I think I would tweak that slightly to "bewilderment"—like the kind experienced by the synagogue crowd—"can be good for faith," depending on what we do with our confusion and alarm. If we run from it, if we distance ourselves from this suddenly unfamiliar Jesus, then we squander the opportunity given by our bewilderment for our faith in Christ to grow deeper, to move into areas we never even

knew existed.

But this kind of avoidance surely is not Mark's goal. Remember Mark is writing a gospel, literally "good news" about this unusual figure, Jesus, so how can this astounding, bewildering Jesus bring us more deeply into his "good news"? It's crucial to note that while this unusual Jesus is utterly unlike any normal human being, he's not so different as to be utterly unpredictable. No, in fact, Mark consistently gives us coordinates to help us make sense of who Jesus is, despite his bewildering aspects. We see Jesus, for instance, reliably using his otherworldly power to bless and not to curse, to help and heal, not to afflict or harm. While his power and authority are galaxies beyond what we as humans can comprehend, Mark depicts this Jesus never abusing his power but binding it to the rudder of divine love, such that this divinely powerful Jesus need not make us afraid—in fact, he is very often described saying those very words, "Do not fear. Come to me. Trust me. Yes, I have a power that is unfamiliar and maybe even scary, but the greatness of my power is matched by the limitlessness of my love. So come, be with me, learn from me, join me in my mission of changing the world, my mission of advancing God's kingdom on Earth."

Where do you need this otherworldly and loving power of Jesus in your life today? How do you respond when he invites you to partner with him in living out God's kingdom on Earth? Do you say like some in Jesus' own day, "oh, this Jesus is too different, too unfamiliar, not at all the 'nice-guy-Jesus' I expected him to be; no, I don't want to get involved. I don't really want this power in my own life. I'll pass on this strange Jesus."? Or in his deeds of healing power, in his words of divine love, can you catch a glimmer of something enticing, something enchanting even—a flash, a glimpse into another world, a kingdom of God that your heart has always longed for, a deeper reality that is neither "safe" nor "nice" but is where you sense you will truly come alive. Let the bewildering, otherworldly Jesus take you there. Invite him, even now, to show you the way. Grant him the permission to have more access, more control in your life, leading you into a depth and richness of life with him—and in community with others—that is so far beyond anything we could ever ask or even imagine. Amen.