

“Maybe I’m Amazed”

I have a question that I wish I could ask of you and get responses from lots of you. The question is what do you expect to experience or hope to experience when you come to church? I imagine you might say quiet, peace, comfort, good music, friends, communion, community, a sermon, or a lesson to help me in my life to name a few. Looking back at the Gospel reading I think a synagogue goer in Jesus’ time might have had similar expectations. Yet the adjectives used in Mark’s Gospel to describe their experience are anything but what we have named.

In this passage from Mark the words used to describe their experience that morning are astounded and amazed. They “were astounded at his teaching,” and “They were all amazed.” They were astounded and amazed at their regular old synagogue worship.

Of course, it was not just a regular old synagogue service when Jesus showed up. They were astounded because he taught with authority unlike the scribes. Apparently a moderate-sized town like Capernaum did not get good Torah scholars. He also amazed them by curing a man with an unclean spirit. While there were a number of miracle workers who traveled the country in Jesus’ day, this healing was amazing.

Imagine coming to church on Sunday or any day and being astounded and amazed. I do not mean that we have operatic singers, a new organ, more stained glass, or even vintage Boudreaux as our communion wine. Rather you are astounded and amazed at what Jesus is doing in our midst. While it is true from an historical perspective, that Jesus was present in the synagogue. It is also true, from a spiritual and theological perspective, Jesus is present among us right now.

I can imagine a cynic or two who would object to this characterization of the contemporary church. After all the church is flawed, but it has always been flawed for the simple reason that it is made up of people. We are flawed and broken because of our life experiences. When we come to church the flaws and brokenness come with us. When we are at our worst we take out the flaws and brokenness out on others, even in church.

In my previous parish I preached and celebrated in a service for families with young children. There were no cynics among those youngsters. They knew that Jesus was present with them in that space. They knew that Jesus was present in their hearts. They came expecting to be astounded and amazed. I think many times they left having experienced just that. My teaching may not have been amazing, and I certainly did not exorcise an unclean spirit or heal a disabled person. Those are the kinds of miracles a grown up would require to be amazed. For the children their amazement was something that their unclouded eyes could behold.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”¹ Jesus is not saying only children get to heaven, but rather those whose simplicity of faith, unconfused by worldliness and cynicism, are the ones who find the kingdom of heaven. Our serious grownup-ness can be a barrier that prevents us from coming close to God. Let it down. Set it aside.

¹ Matthew 19:14 NRSV

Come to worship expecting something astounding and amazing. If we come seeking compassion and healing for our hurts it will be here. If we come expecting the music to speak to our wounds it will. If we come seeking a sermon that offers us comfort we will hear it. If we expect Communion, whether it be at that altar or spiritually, will provide healing for the pain we bear we will taste it. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah 6:10 from the Septuagint saying, "For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them."² Let us not be dull, deaf and blind, but ready for healing.

The synagogue goes on that Sabbath in Capernaum came expecting the same old synagogue service. What they were experienced was astounding and amazing. You know that the next time they came to synagogue their expectations were different. With their eyes and hearts opened what they experienced had the chance to be amazing and astonishing.

We know in our hearts that Jesus is here in worship with us every time we meet regardless if it is Celtic Morning Prayer, midweek Evening Prayer, or the Holy Eucharist. If we set our sights on being astounded and amazed I can assure you it will be here. We can be amazed if we open our hearts to the wonder and healing power of the love of God, his son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit that surrounds us and imbues us with the grace of God.

We have that option if only we have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts bright with expectation that Jesus has come. Jesus is here. Jesus is ready to astound us with his teaching and amaze us with his miracles. Just listen for the still small voice of the Lord, and be ready to be amazed.

² Matthew 13:15 NRSV