

Homily Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 31, 2021

(Mark 1:21-28)

Astonishment. Amazement. If I tried to whittle this morning's Gospel reading down to just a few words, it would be those two: *astonishment* and *amazement*.

In the opening scene those listening to Jesus in the synagogue were astonished by his teaching, and before that emotion had completely faded they immediately found themselves amazed witnesses to the confrontation between this teacher and an unclean spirit. As we read twice in the text, they saw him as someone teaching with an authority not seen before – and their response to what they witnessed seems to grow more intense throughout the passage. At the beginning it is simply a statement in the text – “he taught them as one having authority”¹ – but by the end it has become an exclamatory moment for those looking on: “A new teaching – with authority!”²

I invite you to reflect this morning on the last time you found yourselves astonished or amazed. The past year certainly has provided us with many astonishing moments, but as time passed astonishment has turned to weariness. Amazement over all that we as a world have collectively experienced has for many turned to utter frustration. Despite that, though, I invite you to consider the last time you may have been astonished or amazed by something that provided a moment of sheer joy ... or an unexpected boost to your spirit ... or a sign of hope in the midst of hopelessness.

This passage from Mark's Gospel contains within itself the prompt needed to serve as a reminder to everyone ... to serve as a touchstone ... to be the hope to which we can cling... that moments of astonishment and amazement are still possible: possible through God's power from above; possible through the example of Jesus' life here on earth; and possible through the Spirit's work from *within each one of us*. It's equally important to remember too that we can see examples of God's power at work in those around us.

But we must first be willing to *stop ... and look ... and listen*.

On this morning we continue our journey through the season of Epiphany, a season of revelation. If you think about our Gospel readings from the past several weeks, each has brought about a new revelation. Three weeks ago it was the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus immediately after his baptism. Two weeks ago it was Nathanael recognizing Jesus as the Son of God. Last week it was the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James and John recognizing the power and pull of Jesus' call to them to be fishers of people. Then we have today's reading, the recognition of Jesus' power in speech and action.

Astonishment and amazement in moments of revelation.

Soon – and certainly much sooner than I am expecting, in just over two weeks – we enter a new season of reflection, the season of Lent. Of course any day of the week or any date on

¹ Mark 1:22 (NRSV).

² Mark 1:27 (NRSV).

the calendar can be a time of reflection, but there's added power and impact if we view them not as individual seasons but – as indeed we should – as *parts of a greater whole*. Now, we are in a season of learning; soon, a season of contemplation.

Collectively, these seasons can be times for us to experience anew both astonishment and amazement. But we must allow ourselves to be open to those moments ... to break the bondage of the cares and concerns occupying our minds and hearts ... and allow Jesus to step in to the space we create. We must be willing to look with new eyes and listen with new ears in the way those in the synagogue did that day so many years ago. We must try to break free from the authority we allow our concerns to have over us and turn them over instead to the one with *true authority* and *true power*.

Am I saying to forget our cares? Absolutely not. Am I saying that those things in our life which cause us concern or anxiety should be blotted out of our minds? Absolutely not. What I am saying is that we must allow the one who speaks with power and great authority to join us in battling them. Sickness and anxiety, anger and frustration, exhaustion and resignation: these we recognize as unclean spirits filling us. But we also recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God, the one who can strengthen our spirits, fill our hearts, and drive away the demons within us.

Be open to the one who has come to us ... the one who has come *for us*. Stop listening to the voices that drive these demons ... these fears and self-doubts ... and let silence enter in. Let Jesus go to work ... and *be astonished and amazed*.

Amen.