

I came upon a story about what amazes foreigners about America. They include how big the United States is. One woman shared how “Italian relatives come here thinking they can visit me in Seattle, plus also see New York City, Miami, the Grand Canyon and Hollywood all in a week--by car.” Another was how many obese people there are. “Some people are so obese that they require a special electric scooter to carry them around. This sighting can be seen easily in Walmart where obese people use scooters to shop more ... food.” Other things included how large food portions are, how much choice there is in supermarkets, how much food we waste, the liberal return policies at stores, how everyone pays by credit card, rather than cash.

In our gospel reading this morning, the people are amazed by Jesus. We are not talking about the amazing things the prosperity preachers proclaim God will do for you. Joel Osteen wrote about some of the amazing dreams that God has blessed upon him. His blessings? Osteen's net worth has been reported between \$40-60 million, living in a mansion worth an estimated \$10.5 million. Nor are we talking about this kind of amazing. When the University of Oklahoma football team beat archrival Texas in overtime, the Oklahoma coach declared on ABC-TV that, "This was Jesus Christ working through my players." What we are talking about is how amazing it is that Jesus has overcome evil.

The first act of Jesus that Mark records is an amazing act. Jesus was baptized, tempted by the evil for forty days in the wilderness, then calls his disciples. He begins his ministry. Jesus is now ready, now prepared, for his ministry. He went to the synagogue and taught.

We know who this Jesus is: the Messiah, the Son of God. We know his authority is divine. We know he is Lord of all. We know he is the risen and victorious One who sits on the right hand of God judging the quick and the dead. Notice who also knows. the unclean spirit. Immediately this unclean spirit in our reading sensed what Jesus was about to do and recognized Jesus, "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." He recognized Jesus, and realized that Jesus was going to destroy him. This evil one knew why Jesus was here. The evil forces know who Jesus is and what Jesus will do!

However, the people who came to synagogue that Sabbath knew none of this, at least not yet. The people were astounded by Jesus' teaching. He taught "as one having authority, and not as the scribes." After Jesus exorcised the unclean spirit, the people were amazed: "They kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'" They now begin to understand what the evil spirits already knew. The people are amazed by his power over evil.

Could it be significant that this was the first act recorded by Mark, for Mark's Gospel presents Jesus as coming to confront and vanquish evil? All things demonic are on their way out. When the man with the unclean spirit bursts on the scene asking, "Have you come to destroy us?" the answer is a resounding, "Yes!" Notice the passage begins with Jesus teaching. Then we read "just then." That marks an important transition where Jesus' teaching is put into transformative action. Jesus does not talk about the saving work of God, he enacts it. Jesus' new, authoritative teaching crushes

the powers of darkness and sets people free to be their God-created selves. Jesus has come to destroy evil, and save the ones and the world possessed by it.

In today's world, in our modern world, not too many people take demons seriously. When I was in college, we had a speaker who came to share his experience about how he had exorcised demons. Demons were made popular with movies like the 1973 movie *The Exorcist*. I have never seen the movie, and don't plan on seeing it. Start talking about demons at a dinner party and people will avoid you like the plague! However, I don't think any of us would deny the reality of evil in the world. Read your morning paper, watch the evening news, listen to the news while walking on your treadmill or driving to work, you know there is evil in the world. Suicide bombings, mass shootings, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, murder, embezzlement, bribery, greed, it is all in the news. What we are talking about here is evil. Jesus came to confront and vanquish evil.

Are we like these people in the synagogue? Have we seen Jesus' amazing work? Have we seen Jesus' amazing transformation? If we aren't astounded and amazed by what Jesus is doing in the world, then we aren't paying attention. We need to keep our eyes open to see the stories. We need to hear the stories. I have been amazed to hear the stories by Veda, the Executive Director of the Presbyterian Education Board in Pakistan. She shared a story about a Muslim girl who attended one of their schools. She was listening in on a conversation of a group of Muslim men, including her father. When something negative about Christians was said, she had the nerve to tell them they should not do that. Her father was impressed by what his daughter said. Muslim families are seeing Christians with a more positive perspective

because of the educational ministry of the Presbyterians in Pakistan. Dr. John Fletcher, a medical doctor, and his wife, Gwenda Fletcher, an educational consultant, work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I was amazed at the stories I heard of what they are doing there, in a nation that is one of the poorest, and where there have been times these two have had to escape because of uprisings. I encourage you to take advantage of when mission workers are in our community, and to hear their stories. Jesus is doing amazing things.

Our passage ends, "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." Those who witnessed Jesus' astounding teaching and power showed up to worship and then talked about what they experienced. They asked one another what it might mean and then they told others about this extraordinary teacher. They shared the amazing things they had witnessed Jesus do. They spoke the truth about what had transpired, proclaiming that even the unclean spirits obey him. Surely, they were not the same after such an encounter with the Holy One of God, even if they could not fully understand or explain what happened.

Look for the amazing things Jesus is doing. Hear the stories. See the transformations. Like these people in the synagogue, we need to witness the transformations and to go out and proclaim. I hope that you too will have these "What is this?" moments and to spread the fame of Jesus' transformation over evil

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us,
and blesses us with peace,
be all glory and honor forever. Amen.