

Surprise!

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher

January 31, 2021

Mark 1: 21–28

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They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he 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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once, his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

I would like to think that there is not much that gets past me. (My kids may say differently!) I have been truly surprised very few times in my life. And on those occasions when I am surprised, it is not always the most pleasant of feelings. I would image you all feel somewhat the same. People don't like to be caught unawares. It makes them feel vulnerable or foolish. Take worship for example, you come to expect what happens in our time together. Even during this pandemic time, you have developed a habit of

getting your coffee, watching in the comfort of your homes with your slippers on. Even some dogs and cats among you have settled into the routine! Disruptions are not what you want; the familiar is appreciated.

So, what would it have been like going to the synagogue that morning when Jesus stepped up to speak? What would it have been like for the faithful who came every Sabbath to hear the readings from the Torah? Were they glad they came or did they wish they had stayed away?

The first surprise comes on this ordinary Sabbath in Capernaum as they begin reading the scriptures. It is not the typical Rabbi but it is Jesus who reads. Mark says “They were astounded! They were astounded at his authority.” Now the Gospel of Mark is not known for his embellishments in his writing, so to say “astounded” is remarkable. Now Mark could have written “interested” or “impressed” but instead wrote, “astounded.” Surprise! The carpenter’s son is speaking with such authority and confidence! This is in contrast to the scribes who read by rote from the prophets and the law. Jesus spoke with his heart and the words of the prophets jumped off the scrolls and became alive. Speaking with authority, with the power that makes the words real and relevant, Jesus astounds them.

While they are pondering this new teacher the second surprise hits them- it is an unwelcome disruption.

One of the most difficult Sundays in my ministry came when a pastor chose to interrupt a worship service in order to tell his congregation how badly he had been treated by the Elders. I was the preacher for that Sunday and one of the hardest things I had to do was to interrupt this pastor’s rant so that we could continue with

worship. You could literally feel the Spirit leave the room. One congregant said “We came to worship.” Another said, “Let him speak.” I remember wondering how do we get the Spirit back? I did the only thing I knew I prayed for God to return to us as we worshipped.

Because of that day, I realize that for worship to occur, you, the listeners, we, the worship leaders and God enter into a joint agreement when we gather and we need all three for it to happen. That pastor broke that trust by making it about him. So egregious was act of breaking into worship for his own needs that that was the last time he was ever in front of his congregation. I would imagine that anyone who was in worship that day remembers that disruption far more vividly than anything that I said in the sermon that day!

Having the man with an unclean spirit interrupting a gathering of people at the synagogue while the scripture was being read, would be memorable and very unsettling.

A person in possession of a demon was not to be trifled with, who knows what that demon will do! The Jewish laws spends an inordinate amount of time stating what is clean and unclean. And unclean things are to be avoided at all costs. So, to have a man defiling Jewish law by entering the synagogue and disrupting it would have the capacity to break down a gathering of the faithful.

The man points at Jesus and cries, “What do you have to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” In three short sentences, the possessed man names Jesus, and Jesus’ authority. In the meantime everyone else is trying to figure out what will happen next.

But the surprise that day is not over. Jesus does not try to smooth things over or have the disruption removed. He directly addresses the demon in the man and orders demon to leave. For the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' very first miracle is casting out the demon that is naming him inside the house of worship.

As things settled down, the leaders along with the newly called disciples and those who happened to be in the synagogue that day left in wonderment. Again, Mark in his economy of words says that they were amazed! This guy can even control the greatly feared and much to be avoided demons in our midst. They must have left with more questions than answers that week.

Can't you imagine that there was a lot of talk at the local well and around the afternoon meal that day? The weekly gathering at the synagogue suddenly became the news of the day.

When is the last time you were surprised by Jesus? When in the midst of your routine, did Jesus, the Son of God astound or amaze you? I think we all may be hard pressed to answer those questions because we have the desire to tame Jesus the Son of God. We let him in our lives in moments that is right for us. We make him familiar, easy to listen to and easy to follow. And we in the church have been complicit with this desire to make Jesus predictable and somewhat filtered. Because as long as Jesus and the Gospel message goes along with our sensibilities and we work to avoid not being caught off guard or to be made looking unsettled or out of control, we will accept Jesus in our lives.

If only it worked that way. Do you notice that the most undesirable person in this scripture lesson, the one to be avoided, the unclean, is the only one who knows who Jesus is? That tells us how

powerful the Holy Spirit is that can use the least likely and the least willing, a demon possessed man, to proclaim God's Son.

No wonder the people are astounded, no wonder the faithful grasp that something amazing is afoot. Of what happens in that town by the sea on that Sabbath shows the power of the Holy Spirit overcoming the power of the demon.

If the power of the Holy Spirit can turn the ranting of an undesirable into the truth, then the Spirit has the power to astound us and catch us when it is least likely.

If the power of Jesus' words can cast out the demons in the man and stir up and local synagogue who does the same thing each week for centuries and leave them amazed and astounded, then certainly the power of the Holy Spirit can surprise us.

That our church in the past year has moved beyond these walls and is reaching people near and far is amazing. Early on our leaders worried about not only keeping up with the giving when we can't meet face to face but we are missing the visitors that come in our door the gifts that people give. But you know what? We have received gifts from people across the country who have been part of our worship online. People who want to be part of our mission and ministry. This is not something desired. We would rather have this room filled with worshippers, but instead because of circumstance beyond our imagination, God's word is being sent out each week is... amazing, astounding... surprising!

Jesus speaks with authority and teaches a message that God is close at hand. That the one who we would dismiss as a disruption can clearly name him. Such unexpected news.

As we journey through the Gospel of Mark and as we look forward to the journey of Oak Grove, I pray that we can not only be surprised, but astounded and amazed at what God is doing here and now.

The Gospel of Mark has a way of setting the extraordinary moments in the midst of the very ordinary, along the lakeshore, in the local synagogue, around the dinner table. It is my hope and prayer that there will be moments in our rather predictable lives and in our familiar worship that will startle and astound us with the power of God's presence and the message of God's love. When it does, our ordinary is transformed into extraordinary.

God's great gift of God's son, Jesus uses such ordinary things to connect us with our God. Bread, wine, water in baptism, these tangible common signs that have the capacity to leave us reeling and amazed! The hymn, *I was there to hear your Bournig Cry* Never fails bring tears to my eyes it goes through the periods of life from birth to youth to middle age to death. It ends with:

When evening gently closes in and your shut your weary eyes, I'll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise! What is that surprise? Through it all, God loves you! Thanks be to God!

AMEN.