

## Amazed and Astounded

By: Meagan McLaughlin

January 31, 2021. In Mark, the people are astounded because Jesus seems to carry an authority that they are not used to hearing. What does authority look like for us today? When was the last time you remember being astounded or amazed about something?

Readings: [1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#), [Mark 1:21-28](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

I called a family member recently, and we started our conversation in the way that we have repeatedly nearly every time we've talked recently. "How are you?" "Oh, you know. How are you?" "Oh, you know. What's going on?" "Nothing! Just hanging out here, nothing new!" "Yeah, same here, not going anywhere!" Sound familiar? It seems like all of us are feeling this a little bit. These many months of living in COVID have been wearing to say the least, and have left us all feeling perhaps a bit trapped. Perhaps a lot trapped, or bored, or lonely, eager for anything to do, anywhere to go, anyone to see. Someone recently described it as like living in the movie "Groundhog Day," every day similar to the one before: get up, go to the kitchen, eat breakfast, go to the desk in the den and start work, maybe get kids started in school. Even our clothes may have fallen a bit into a rut — someone recently quipped that they now have a pair of sweatpants for each day of the week.

In the meantime, the last few weeks, we have been watching as Jesus has begun his ministry. He was born, and creation itself revealed just how transformative his life would be. He caused his parents some angst when he disappeared for three days, grew in age and wisdom, and his parents pondered and wondered about what his life among us might mean. He went out and sought disciples, inviting them to come and see for themselves who he was, letting them know that he saw them for who they were, and calling them and us to freedom, transformation, and participation in the realm of God. And today, in our gospel reading from Mark, Jesus' ministry is about to officially begin.

In each gospel, the good news of Jesus' first public ministry, his introduction to the people, is told a bit differently, and tells us something important about who Jesus was. In Matthew, we know early on that Jesus is Jewish, and he starts by preaching and healing, and the crowds quickly grow so big that he gathers with them on the mountains because so many are drawn to him. In Luke, who apparently believes in the call of the preacher to afflict the comfortable as well as comfort the afflicted, Jesus preaches his first sermon in his home synagogue in Nazareth, and people try to push him off the cliff! In John, Jesus turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana, showing that he is the son of God, but also very much a part of human life and celebration.

The Gospel of Mark wastes no time. Jesus has called disciples to join him in his ministry, and today in the last verses of chapter 1, Jesus is in the synagogue teaching, and the people are astounded because he seems to carry an authority that they are not used to hearing. And then, Jesus casts out an unclean spirit, and the people are amazed once more at the authority that he has. Astounded. Amazed. Authority. By the end of chapter 1 of Mark, Jesus has already made quite an impression.

When was the last time you remember being astounded or amazed about something?

And then, there is the idea of authority. Mark tells us in this story of Jesus that people were amazed because of the authority Jesus had, both in his preaching and in the casting out of the unclean spirit.

What does authority look like for us today? How do we know right from wrong, truth from untruth, authentic leaders from imposters? The information, misinformation, and intentional lies that flood our newsfeeds have made it harder than ever to know sometimes what is true and important, and what is not. And as the Corinthians faced their own confusion, Paul offered the Corinthians some guidance as they wrestle with how to live out their faith in Christ. Bringing together people of diverse backgrounds and religious traditions was challenging to say the least.

In particular today, Paul discusses how to handle the confusion among believers in Jesus when some followed particular dietary guidance, some no dietary restrictions, and some feel newly freed from the rules they used to think were important. In the end Paul says, “We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” Rather than being concerned that everyone follow particular dietary law, focus on doing what is best to support and love your neighbor. Don’t be so concerned about what you know or don’t know, Paul says. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

On this Reconciling in Christ Sunday, we among many other ELCA churches celebrate our commitment to welcome LGBTQIA+ people as they are: beloved children of God. And I think of how much debate, division, and damage has happened — and still happens even in Christian community — as people have debated and continue to debate the rightness, beloved-ness, and even the existence of people different from ourselves. Like Mr. Jesse said, welcome can be hard, right?

But carried to an extreme, this desire to be right and pure has led to unspeakable tragedy. This week, we also honor International Holocaust Remembrance Day, when arguments of white, Christian, Eurocentric superiority were used to justify horrors that are almost unimaginable, including the death of over 600,000 Jewish people and many others who didn’t quite fit the mold. The evil behind this violence is still pervasive today, in the sins of racism, anti-LGBTQIA violence, anti-Semitism, and other ideologies that oppress, bind, and kill children of God.

Paul seems to cut through all the confusion over what is right and wrong, who is in and out, and all the evil that can ensnare us, and offer Christ as our guide. Love for neighbor and the love of God, Paul tells us, is our authority.

I had the opportunity this week to listen to a webinar called “Responding to Christian Nationalism,” in which our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Reverend Bishop Michael Curry, participated. What stood out to me from both of their sharing was two points: among all of the possible voices we can listen to, all of the beliefs we can hold, of all the ideologies we can trust, as Christians we are called first and foremost to be followers of Jesus of Nazareth. And in doing so, we are called to love and serve others without distinction, as God does for us.

And back to Jesus of Nazareth in the temple. Approaching the person possessed by the unclean spirit was in itself quite an unusual thing. Most others around him would have been stepping away, distancing themselves from the unclean spirit that had invaded the temple. But Jesus doesn’t do that. Instead he steps toward the unclean spirit and speaks to it, commanding it to leave the possessed person so they could be free again. Rather than aligning himself with the authority and rules of the temple, Jesus embodies the authority of God’s heart in love and service to one in need. And the people took notice. They saw and felt the authority of God in Christ, and they were amazed!

As we live our sometimes “Groundhog-Day-ish” pandemic lives, Christ is still among us. Jesus of

Nazareth is calling us to follow him, and embody the authority not of knowledge but of the love of God in Christ. This is not easy — just when we think we've achieved this goal, we'll stumble again, and we'll need to hear one more time Jesus' call to repentance, and Paul's direction to let go of the knowledge that puffs up and allow love to build up the people of God again. Like Mr. Jesse said, belonging can be hard. Welcome can be hard. But this is what Christ calls us to.

In a few minutes we'll have our Annual Meeting, a time to celebrate what God has been doing among us in the last year, and ask guidance from God for the year to come. So how have you been amazed by the Spirit of God at work among us? As our Council has spent time envisioning where God is calling us, we invite you to join us in pondering: how is God calling us in this next year to welcome and to serve?

Jesus of Nazareth is calling us, inviting us to bring God's love to our communities and the world. That amazing call is the only authority that we need.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

2021, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, YouTube, video, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28, COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, RIC, Jesse Helton