

28 January 2018
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Surprised by Such Love”

Text: Mark 1:21-28

Note: The idea for this sermon, some of the words, and many of the thoughts, from Rev. James Bushur in Concordia Pulpit Resources, Vol. 22, Part 1 (2011-12), p. 34-36, 39.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some people like surprises; some people don't. Some people like everything orderly and planned out and thought through; some like to just go out and see what happens. Some people don't like when the unexpected happens; for others, it brings spice and excitement to life.

St. Matthew and his Gospel, we could say, are like those people who don't like surprises; who like things orderly and thought through. For when you hear Matthew, you hear how everything is going according to plan. How Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament. How Jesus' life has already been mapped out by Moses and Israel and how what had been prophesied is coming to pass.

St. Mark and his Gospel, however, are the opposite. Mark likes surprises. He delights in the unexpected turn of events and the unforeseen bend in the road. Mark wants you to be amazed; that in Jesus there is something unprecedented, unexpected, and utterly new. He doesn't contradict Matthew and his orderliness; Mark just gives us a different perspective - the Jesus who surprises, astonishes, and even confuses.

So it was that day in the synagogue in Capernaum. The people went to church that day expecting the expected, the usual order, the normal teaching and kind of teaching. But what they got was astonished and amazed. Not only because Jesus taught with an authority never before heard, but they got a front row seat to the clash between heaven and hell. The contest between Christ and Satan. The normally calm teaching and peaceful atmosphere suddenly turned into a shouting match. And then just as quickly was over. And after a few moments, after the shock wore off and the people began to shuffle out of the synagogue, the questions began. *What had they just seen? What had they just heard? What in the world was going on, and here, in little old Capernaum? Amazing!*

But as shocked and surprised as the people were, there is perhaps no one more astonished and amazed at Jesus than the devil and his demons.

How long did this man have this unclean spirit? How often had he come to the synagogue? Had he been causing trouble for some time? But this day, when he walks into the synagogue, he walks into a surprise. This is no mere scribe, teacher, or rabbi! That the unclean spirit could handle. That he could disrupt. Of them he had no fear. But this one was different. And so the demon cries out: *Ack! What are you doing here? 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.*

Why are the demons surprised? Are they surprised at the power and authority of the Son of God? No, that they knew. Are they confused at having to submit to the Creator of heaven and earth? No, that they expect. But they *are* amazed to hear *that* voice - the voice that created all things, the voice that cursed them in the Garden, the voice that spoke to Moses from the burning bush, the voice that sounded forth at Mt. Sinai - they *were* utterly astounded that *that* voice was now coming from *this* man! Jesus . . . of Nazareth. The “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” Nazareth. You can almost hear the scorn in their voice . . .

So it wasn't just because of who Jesus was or where He was from, it was that the voice of God was sounding forth from a flesh and blood man! A weak, frail, man. This was new. This was . . . *crazy*! For human beings, according to the demonic playbook, are merely play things, something to be possessed and controlled, dominated and consumed. They do not expect the authority of God to sound forth from a human tongue. They do not expect life and healing to proceed from the touch of human flesh. They do not expect the Son of God to submit Himself to the diseases, sicknesses, and weakness of man. So that the Son of God would be here and do this, *like* this . . . and show such dignity and love to mankind . . . this was not just new, it was repulsive. It made them hate God even more.

But really, this is how God has been all along - even though we might not see it or want to believe it. For we want to be loved because we're loveable, right? Because there's something that makes us worthy and good. But it is not so with God. And that's what's so amazing . . .

Think of Job and his so-called friends. Job's friends surely believe in God, but they are utterly surprised and slow to admit that this God could love the poor, diseased beggar in front of them.

Or how about Jacob's sons - they certainly believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and their father Jacob, but they bristle at the idea and cannot comprehend the fact that this God favors their spoiled little brother named Joseph.

And what about Pharaoh? Pharaoh is compelled to acknowledge the power of Moses' God after all those plagues. But it is not God's power that amazes and confounds him - of

course gods are powerful! It is that he is utterly astonished that this almighty God is on the side of *Israel*, that He loves *slaves*!

The demons, too. God's power they know. But this love of sinful, despised, lowly, foul, weak men and women . . . they cannot handle it.

But there's even more! It wasn't just who Jesus was and where He was from, it wasn't just the Son of God in human flesh, it was this too - the demons expect Jesus to gain the victory by means of violence, power, and domination. The demons expect Jesus to act towards them in the same way as they treat humanity. ***Have you come to destroy us?*** They expect it to be so. It is all they know. This is what you do.

So they are triply surprised! For Jesus' mission is not to destroy demons, it is not to exercise His almighty power - but to save and cleanse humanity by the weakness of the cross. Destruction is all the demons know. But the Son of God has come to give, not take. To give life, to cleanse, to forgive, to raise, to save.

And so He saves this man. ***Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.*** And this man has a new life.

Mark begins his Gospel this way, with these words: *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God* (Mark 1:1). What we hear from Mark, stories like we heard today, **are only the beginning**. The three years of Jesus' ministry are only the beginning. These are the first steps of a long journey. A journey Jesus makes throughout Galilee, Judea, and Samaria, and a journey through death and the grave to life, but a journey that continues. For Jesus' work continues. For Jesus is still giving life, cleansing, forgiving, raising, and saving. Just now *through His church*.

This surprises many people today, just as much as the people and the demons of Jesus' day! For look at the church - divided as she is, filled with sinners and hypocrites, often small and weak and wracked with scandal. Who can believe that the voice of the living God sounds forth from such a church? Who can believe that God would love such people as this? And lower Himself in such a way, to such depths? Surely, this is not so. *Can you hear how such thoughts echo the demonic attitude and astonishment?*

But it is so. As surely as the voice of God sounded forth from Jesus, so does His voice sound forth today, proclaiming the forgiveness of sins, speaking the cleansing of Holy Baptism, preaching the Gospel of God's love for such lowly, weak, and foul human beings as you and I, and asserting the utterly amazing reality that this bread and wine are - at the power of the Word of God - the Body and Blood of Jesus of Nazareth. And though many may scorn these truths, Mark wants you to revel in this surprise! That you, yes you, are disgusting Job, you are spoiled Joseph, you are enslaved Israel, and you are

the one with the unclean spirit - and the perfect, holy, God of all creation, loves you, comes for you, serves you, and saves you. Maybe the world thinks nothing of you and even rejects you as one not worthy of love or life, but not God. Instead He comes to give His life for yours, to give you dignity, value, and life. *How utterly amazing is that?*

And this too - in a world filled with the violence, power, and domination of the demonic and unclean, we do not treat others the way that we are treated. This is no longer all we know. For we know the love of Christ, and this love is given to us, that we may give it to others. Like Paul wrote about today in the reading from First Corinthians that we heard. That we not push down, but lift up. Not dominate, but serve. Not take, but give. A new life, a new way of life, given to us *How utterly amazing is that?*

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The battle ground between heaven and hell, between Christ and satan, running still through every Christian, every church, all around the world. The struggle to repent and to confess an astonishing God who is unlike anything in this world, and so utterly unlike us. Who surprises us with His love - His forgiveness, His discipline, His ways, His choosing. And who amazes us at the end - that the road to God leads through a cross and tomb.

That's not the God some want, and so they will mock and scorn Him, or deny Him in favor of a more glorious, successful, popular god.

But Mark wants you to know, as the people of Capernaum learned and as the demons found out that day - your God is a pretty surprising, amazing, astonishing God. The road of your journey will surely twist and turn and have many unexpected bends. But at the end will be something unprecedented and completely new - the *ending* of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The resurrection, the new heavens, new earth, and new you. The God who came to be with you taking you to be with Him. No longer unclean, but clean. No longer enslaved, but free. Won not by His power, but by the power of His love.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.