

St Mark Sermon:
Jan 30-31, 2021
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
“Authority, Dominion, Power & Strength”
Rev. Stephen P. Greggo, PsyD

Lectionary Readings

First Reading Deut 18:15-20

“I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name.” (Deut 18:19)

Psalm Psalm 111

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.” (Ps. 111:10)

New Testament I Corinthians 8:1-13

“For knowledge puffs up while love builds up.” (I Corinthians 8:1b).

Gospel Mark 1:21-28

“The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.” (Mark 1:27)

Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

“The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.” (Mark 1: 22)

Sermon in a Soundbite

Jesus Christ speaks into our lives with authority. An attitude of ‘awe’ opens us to an infusion of wisdom. Entering a state of ‘awe’ cinques our will with the authority of Jesus Christ in all his majesty, power, and dominion. ‘Awe’ places God’s wisdom at the center of our language, lives and relationships. There is nothing more awesome than that!

Pray

- I. One Ordinary Synagogue; One Extraordinary Rabbi

These days ‘that’s awesome’ is a super descriptor. What’s not to like about a word with synonyms such as breathtaking, amazing, stunning, astounding, astonishing, stupendous, staggering, extraordinary, incredible, unbelievable, magnificent, wonderful, spectacular, remarkable, phenomenal, prodigious, miraculous, and sublime. That’s the bewildering synonym list for ‘awesome.’ Of course, this reflects the term in all of its colloquial grandeur, that is, in its common usage. Awesome is the ‘go-to’ word to signify great, super, or outstanding. (It might even be considered the new ‘Amen’?) Our task today is to consider the link between ‘awesome’ and the authority of faithful teaching.

One synonym for the term ‘awe’ is hidden in our contemporary language: *reverence*. The original meaning of *awesome* dates back to around 1600: to be in awe is to be profoundly reverential.” By the end of that century it came to mean “awe-inspiring” and included a sensible dose of apprehension, caution, and fear. To be in awe is to be impressed and *humbled*. It is an adrenalin rush that quickens and softens the human heart. This older meaning is closer to the way that awe is rooted in Scripture and that explains its connection to the wisdom acquisition process. It is tough to strip a term down after three hundred years of linguistic evolution. Let’s seek to hear and apply its biblical meaning to our faith today.

At first read, this Gospel passage from Mark may not get your heart pumping. The passage takes us for a close-up view of the ordinary and extraordinary. This scene unfolds in the synagogue in Capernaum. Excavations at that site give us a specific image of what this simple structure may have looked like as Jesus enters. The synagogue had stone columns and floor, seating around the perimeter, a table to lay out the ‘Torah’ scrolls, and a storage cabinet to keep copies of the scrolls when not in use.

No place was more central to Jewish life in Jesus’ day than the synagogue. Historically, this was not the case. In the Old Testament, there is only 1 (one) reference to the term ‘synagogue.’ In the NT it occurs more than 50 times. This is because when the Temple was at its prime in the city of Jerusalem, it functioned as the national center and the premiere religious site. It was a place of redemption (sacrifice), the destination site for pilgrimage, the training ground for the Jewish leadership, and the resting place for great artifacts of the faith (i.e. ark).

The Babylonians destroyed the first temple in 586 BC. The Jewish nation itself was abolished and its people dispersed throughout the ancient world. Without central leadership or a place to focus their loyalty, the Jewish people were at risk to

become like ‘no people.’ Then, to hold on to their ethnic and faith identity small clusters of this remnant gathered to learn the Torah. The synagogue rose up as the place to cultivate and transmit a Jewish heritage. The Sabbath was an automatic time to head out to your local synagogue to refresh what it meant to be a Jew and to renew ways to live authentically before the one true God. The custom was firmly established in Jesus’ day even though the second temple was restored and operating as a sacrificial worship center. Synagogues remained alive as places to hear, learn and work out with one’s neighbors on how to honor God. The synagogue served as religious school, community center, and local religious court. (Picture the synagogue like our fellowship hall and the temple like our sanctuary.) People would come two or more times a week for instruction. The whole community held a gathering on the Sabbath. Rabbis were not employees but rotated from synagogue to synagogue to teach the faithful. More popular Rabbis might attract a large crowd of local devout followers.

The Sabbath routine described in Mark 1:21 is plain and ordinary. Jesus went to a nearby synagogue on the Sabbath. He did not head out to the restored temple, the centerpiece of the Jewish faith to reveal himself. Instead, he did what locals would do; head down the street to one’s local place of religious learning. It is in the neighborhood that Jesus reveals himself as an emerging teacher. His new disciples were along for the ride. Jesus is given freedom to step up to the table and start teaching. Jesus is a newcomer to the rabbinic circuit but his teaching style immediately stands out: it has power, vitality and stimulated ‘awe’ in his listeners. His impact set itself apart from the teaching too often heard in this space. The regular Rabbis & Scribes were more concerned about external rituals. They enjoyed quibbling about religious actions that had no impact on the heart. In a perfectly natural way, Jesus, an ordinary human being, show signs that he is the Christ with an extraordinary legacy and Kingly future.

The synagogue was a place to deal with practical matters of judgment and justice. If neighbor had a gripe against a neighbor, the disagreement could be adjudicated smoothly in the court of the faithful. Teaching sessions in the local synagogue could spontaneously shift to courtroom drama with binding judgements pronounced. “Teacher, his donkey kicked my donkey and it will be out of service for the foreseeable future? What are we to do?” The rebuking of an errant community member or the settling of accounts would be a common. The teaching of the day might apply to life in the moment. This encounter took religious justice to a whole new level.

The extraordinary broke through in the demon encounter. It was obvious to all that these demons outed themselves... “what will you do with us Jesus of Nazareth—the Holy One of God?” That’s not ordinary. This was not the Jerry Springer show of Capernaum. The atmosphere explodes with a clash of forces, good vs evil, supernatural warfare breaks into the ordinary. Jesus Christ teaches with such authority that the powers of darkness are disturbed for they recognize that their defeat is at hand. Jesus handles this as if it were entirely ordinary. He displays his dominion over the darkness- he orders the demons to move out at his will. This human Rabbi shatters all images of ordinary. He teaches with awesome authority and works wonders of awe over the kingdom of darkness.

II. A Distinguished Teacher

[optional: Back in Deuteronomy, the Lord acknowledges that it is too much for broken and sinful people to hear directly from a Holy God. The Divine-human encounter is too overwhelming to survive. God promises to speak through a mediator. God raises up prophets to speak his message and his words. His people are to obey. A problem did arise with this system. Human beings like the prestige and honor of being heard by others. Those not appointed to speak for the Lord ‘pretended’ to do so. The Lord warns his people to watch out: the words of a prophet must come to pass. A prophet consistently speaks for the Lord, not for personal gain. A prophet’s authority is derived from the source of the message.

Ps 111 calls God’s people to listen to what the Lord says and see what he does. “The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.” Prophets are to be heard and honored because “His name is holy and awesome!” The Psalm closes with these words “The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.” It is right for us to listen to the Word with reverence- fear and awe- because this is how we give God Lordship over our hearts and lives.

Paul demonstrates how to apply wisdom to real life problems. What are we to do about meat sacrificed to idols? To eat or not to eat? Paul teaches through to a solution. How can one place honoring God at the center of the decision? When it comes to deciding “what’s for dinner?” the Lord has a perspective on what comes to the table. Paul explains that our actions are to be weighed by how these impact others. We are not independent players; but an interdependent team. This is a wisdom for ordinary life. Further, Paul shows us how to take an extraordinary teaching from the Lord and bring it down to guide us in everyday decisions. There is to be a back and forth verification process. We have freedoms and rights; still,

we have obligations to bring glory to the one who has dominion, power, authority, and strength. This means checking our action plan against his recommendations. Awe is the inner experience that moves us to allow God to shape our doing.]

III. The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

Let's consider that unassuming yet exceptional scene in that early synagogue. Jesus Christ does not break down social norms or start a radical revolt. He enters in humility. He does not demand his right to teach as the Son of God. Instead, he takes the role offered to him as a new comer to teaching as was the custom of the day. Speaking as an average local rabbi, he wins the hearts of his listeners. When the evil spirits (demons) break out of hiding and make themselves known, the Lord exercises his authority. He orders silence and departure. His dominion and authority are revealed. In this action, Jesus passes the 'genuine prophet test' from Deut. His words impact the immediate spiritual climate.

Listeners are awe struck by Jesus' words. His actions ratify his teaching and stir the hearts of listeners. Awe awakes a buzz of curiosity, wonder, and amazement.

Mark shows us Jesus not by recalling what he said but by showing how his hearers were impacted. When were you last amazed at the words or acts of the Lord? What comes to mind when you imagine God breaking into the ordinary in extraordinary ways. Bring those memories with you into worship so that your heart becomes tender with reverence (respectful humility) and awe.

IV. Bringing it home, the awe of the Lord

A month ago, I received a book in the mail. This is an ordinary occurrence in academia and I admit that I did not open it right away. When I did take a look, the first thing I noticed was name of the author and it took me back 40 years. My mental picture was that of a tall, scrawny kid of 15 named Daniel. Dan was a loyal member of our youth group when I was a mere youth pastor. Our youth group 'synagogue' was rough converted attic space. We would meet week after week for ordinary conversations about Scripture, faith and walking with the Lord. Dan was one of 16 students who ventured with us on a mission's trip into Honduras. Taking ordinary adolescents from a small town, with only one blinking traffic light, to Latin America to share their faith is a memory that raises a sense of awe in my heart. My thoughts of Daniel go back to a conversation he had with a local boy on a wooden bench outside a cluster of worn wooden buildings. Dan shared his faith with a local kid, Burt, who accepted Christ. Dan shared his experience with me

with enthusiasm but he went on to share a burden that burned in his heart: who is going to help Burt grow in his faith? In those moments God did an extraordinary thing in Dan's life. God called him to ministry. An ordinary conversation with a local kid about Jesus Christ convinced Dan to become a pastor for life.

Dan was never an author. The book in my hands was not a grand work of theology or a counseling text. It is a personal story of how his journey continues through the intense struggle with stage IV colon cancer. It shares words of testimony. It is an awe-inspiring account of daily entries about how God sustained him in ministry and through four rounds of chemo-therapy.

That could be the end of the story. My heart is filled with awe. Jesus' teaching found its mark. Perhaps one more awe chilling detail is worth sharing. As Daniel and I reconnected via a couple of quick emails, Dan shared that he has been back to Honduras numerous times. He has partnered with others to secure clean water for communities and give religious education to kids like Burt. In fact, during this Covid crisis, the impoverished people there were hurt financially when tourism ceased. Pastor Dan teamed with others to send \$80,000 of relief to local ministries. Now that's worth evoking the term awesome! God touches a heart, the fear and wonder of the Lord finds a home, and from that moment forward, the extraordinary happens through an ordinary disciple.

Think back to when you were amazed at the Word of God or knew you were in the presence of the Lord. Awe and amazement can be defined as a response to things that perceived as vast that alter the way you understand the world. This sense of being overwhelmed can be physical (e.g., a panoramic view from a mountaintop) or psychological (e.g., a brilliant idea). People may experience awe when they stand before a beautiful natural landscape or work of art, when they hear a moving speech or musical performance, when they witness an act of great altruism, or when they have a religious experience.

Awe comes when the extraordinary emerges from the ordinary. An ordinary high school kid takes a mission's trip. His heart opens. He becomes a pastor. Endures cancer. And, returns to the place of his calling. The journey continues. The teaching of Jesus' can touch a life with authority, dominion, power, and strength.

V. Application: Remaining in Awe of what Christ has done

Here are four applications.

- 1) When you read the Word or listen to Christian teaching, invite the Lord to impress his will upon your heart. Ask him to amaze you as you approach with reverence.
- 2) Keep a routine of coming to this ordinary place to learn about your faith and worship with others. Let St. Mark be like the synagogues of old: a meeting place to grow in community.
- 3) When you come to worship or hear the Word, intercede that the Holy Spirit may speak an extraordinary message.
- 4) Pray for those who teach, particularly for Pastor Breum, that he proclaims the Word and shares his pastoral heart as if speaking for the Lord with authority, dominion, power, and strength.