

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28
Year B

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St. Peter's Glenside
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Amazed, Astounded

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Good morning, and welcome, and a special welcome to those of you joining us from our extended virtual community. Last week Emily mentioned a note she'd received from someone who discovered us from Erie, Pennsylvania, so hello, Erie, and I know we have a new friend worshipping with us from Libertyville, Illinois, because he's my brother's friend, Dean, so hello Dean. Although we all yearn to worship together, we can rejoice in welcoming those who are new among us through the blessing of technology.

Now think for a moment if you will of the words "Amazed" and "Astounded." Can you remember a recent time in your life when they applied? Or, if they've ever applied to church?

For me, hearing Amanda Gorman read her inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb" left me amazed, astounded, as well as speechless, and awestruck, in a place beyond words. A self-described "skinny black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother" threw open the gates of heaven, just as Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" does for me every single time.

"Amazed" and "Astounded" are the words used in Mark's gospel this morning to describe the reaction to Jesus' preaching in the synagogue. We don't know what he preached, the lesson he was trying to convey, which is a bit maddening, we only know the feelings he evoked.

As Debi Thomas, a thoughtful and powerful thinker who writes regularly for a terrific and free weekly webzine, "Journey with Jesus" which I highly recommend, ask us to consider this:

"When was the last time Jesus astounded and amazed you? Can you recall a time in the recent past when the presence of God in your life caught your attention and held it? When a sacred moment, encounter, word, image, or experience brought you to your knees?"

I ask," Thomas continues, "because (let's face it), these are rough, unlikely days for astonishment. Almost one year into the Covid-19 pandemic, many of us are battling a deep and persistent malaise. We are weary, anxious, dejected, bored. We're too worried about the future to live attentively in the present. Time drags on in soggy shapelessness, or flies at breakneck speed as we struggle to multitask under face masks, death tolls, mutations, and quarantines. For many of us, church is still online, so our access to spiritual community, space, ritual, and sacrament is limited."

Where, in the midst of all of this, might we experience awe? Wonder? Astonishment? Surprise? Where is the voice of authority, power, grace, and healing that can snap us back into full and vibrant living, *now*?

It hardly seemed to lurk in this story from Mark until Thomas pierced its familiarity for me and taught me something new. She made me ponder why the unclean spirit went into the synagogue and noted rightly, that this demonic presence was the first to recognize Jesus. Striking, isn't it?

But it makes sense to Thomas, who writes:

“Sometimes our demons — our fears, our addictions, our sins, and our compulsions — recognize Jesus first because they know that an encounter with him will change everything. So they make us recoil as soon as he shows up in the guise of a loving friend, or a provocative sermon, or a pricked conscience. Sometimes our lives actually get *harder* when we move towards faith and healing, because unclean spirits always fight the hardest when their time is up.”

All of us harbor demons, in ways large and small—and for Thomas, a demon is defined as anything that distorts our humanity. We don't know much about what possessed the man in this story, but we do know he had been consumed and possessed—not unlike the hatred that ignited in the mob at the Capitol, stripping them of their humanity and their decency.

As Thomas continues: Jesus stepped *directly* into the pain, rage, ugliness, and horror at the heart of this story. He wasn't squeamish. He didn't flinch. His brand of holiness didn't require him to keep his hands clean. He was *in* the fear, in the sickness, in the nightmare, ready to engage anything that diminished the lives of those he loved. Yes, he preached with great effectiveness to the faithful, but he also spoke the unclean spirit's language, listened to its cries, and rebuked it for the sake of a broken man's health and sanity... Wherever pain is, darkness is, torment is, *God is*. God has everything to do with us, even and maybe especially when we're at our worst. When the shadows overwhelm us, when the demons shriek the loudest, when the hope of liberation feels like nothing more than fantasy -- that is when Jesus's authority brings the walls down.”

And when the walls came down, there was Amanda Gorman, a 22 year-old self-described skinny black girl, descended from slaves and raised by a single mother – I can't say that enough—who's also struggled with a speech impediment. Like Mary, she got the tap on the shoulder, an invitation to step outside her comfort zone and do something light years away from what she had ever done before. She had written about half her poem and then was stuck—a familiar experience for those of us who've ever written.

Two weeks before the biggest moment in her life that she wasn't sure how to end her inaugural poem. Imagine the anxiety!

But then the insurrection happened on January 6th and words came again to Amanda Gorman and on January 20th, a cynical, exhausted, and terrified nation was brought to its knees by a poem. A poem!

When have we ever been more in need of a God who has everything to do with us, especially in our darkest hours? Dawn is breaking, we all hope, as vaccines are rolled out and a new administration's highest priority is obliterating the pandemic that is killing one of us every 26 seconds.

Jesus took their breath away that day in the synagogue, which is exactly what miracles do.

Every miracle, writes Barbara Brown Taylor, is "like a hole poked in the opaque fabric of time and space. The kingdom breaks through and for a moment in time we see how things will be or how they are in the mind of God and then it is over."

But is it really over if we nurture our astonishment and amazement and then not only thrill us but lead us? AMEN

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor; *Bread of Angels*, p. 136-137)

Debi Thomas, Journey with Jesus, January 24, 2021