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“Astonished”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

*Startle us, O God, with your truth
Open our hearts and minds to your presence among us.
Silence all those voices internal and external, clamoring for our
attentions so that we hear your Word written and made flesh.
Turn our attentions to you in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

For many years, my friend, John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago has begun his sermon with the words I just prayed: “Startle us, O God.”

As you might expect this prayer has received mixed reviews. Some of his parishioners like it and tell him they miss it when it is absent. Others complained they have been “startled” enough all week long, thank you very much, and the last thing they need is to be startled again. Mixed reviews on a prayer is very Presbyterian.

What about you? When you come to worship do you seek to be startled or comforted? Maybe inspired or challenged, certainly not bored.

The late John Updike, who died this week after a magnificent career as a writer, once wrote: “Whatever else God may be God should not be uninteresting.” (Roger’s Version, p24). He was right. If you listen to the Bible, God is not boring. God in the Bible acts in ways that startle people, from the creation to the resurrection, to the building of the church at Pentecost, through the spread of the Gospel, turning the world upside down.

I like the prayer, “Startle us, O God,” because if the truth be told, the capacity to be startled, surprised, astonished has become diminished in us. We are so preoccupied with our goals, our list of things to accomplish,

people so see and places to go, calls to make, that we shut out the capacity to be startled, astonished. Our practice of faith can become predictable and routine and yes, even boring.

Annie Dillard, the writer says, “When you come to church you should expect to be startled, they should issue seat belts when you walk in. You should also receive crash helmets if you are really listening and paying attention to the Gospel.”

The story in Mark’s Gospel today, at the beginning of Jesus ministry, said that when the people heard Jesus teach in the synagogue they were astonished. Astonishment means to be overwhelmed with wonder and amazement.

I think that is partly what is behind all those who say that the worship of the church, what we are doing now, is at the heart of the life of the church, at the heart of the Christian life. Because it is in worship that we come closest to the astonishment on which our faith is based, the astonishment that comes with confrontation with Jesus as the Christ, God in the flesh as this Jew from Nazareth. They had never encountered a teacher like this. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God in word and deed. He talked about loving all your neighbors, the Samaritans, Muslims, gay and straight, prodigal and elder brothers, he talked about it and then he did it. The charge they brought against him was eating with sinners and tax collectors. He reached out to a Samaritan woman of all people. What he said he believed and what he did where transparent. What he said he was, was how he lived his life.

That is what we long for today, this is why there is so much unrest. The millions of dollars given in bonuses on Wall Street, redecorating an office for 1.2 million and saying we are all living in hard times as 100,000 people loose their jobs.

We want transparency in our public and private life. Some leaders encourage people to follow the way of Christ and then go off in another direction. When Jesus calls us to sacrifice, to take up a cross, he is on the way to the cross. When you encounter such transparency it is astonishing.

The demon got it – He called out: “Jesus of Nazareth, The Holy One of God.”

That is what set Jesus aside as a teacher. He did not just give us more information, he taught us to live the life of the Kingdom of God. He was the “good teacher” that is one of Mark’s favorite terms for Jesus. But he is more than that, or at least, he is a very special sort of teacher. He is “the Holy One of God.” He is God among us. He spoke himself. He was not just a set of interesting thoughts about God. He took up space. He carved out room for himself. He was nothing less than God among us. And those who encountered him were “astonished.”

Does it happen to you? Does it happen here? Does it happen in other places? Sometimes it happens when we least expect it. Everyone once in awhile we are encountered by the risen Christ – in a story, an encounter, a visit. We are moved because we are in the presence of the Holy One whose love is steadfast and transforming, whose love has the power to mend our brokenness, who calls us to follow where he leads. Christ calls us to live our lives as transparently as we can practicing the values in the Kingdom of God.

I read recently about a high school classroom where English was being taught. The subject was modern drama. The exercise was a class reading of the script of Frank Gilroy’s *The Subject Was Roses*. The reading was moving toward the final scene, one in which a young man named Timmy is leaving home and he is attempting to say farewell to his father, a man named John. His father was stubborn and unfeeling.

The student reader was dutiful and lifeless. Students were glancing at their watches, “How much longer until the bell rings and we’ll be liberated from this?” A boy and girl in the back room were exchanging notes. Another boy, bored, looked out the window at the assistant principal making his way toward the building from the parking lot.

Timmy’s lines call for him to say to his father that he had a dream the night before, a dream that he had dreamed many times. In the dream he is told that his father is dead, and, when he hears the news, he runs into the street crying. Someone stops him and asks why he is crying he says, “I am crying because my father is dead and my father never said that he loved me.” The boy reading Timmy’s part faltered on these lines. The boy lifted his eyes from his script and looked directly at the teacher and said, “My father has never said that to me either.”

Suddenly the class was attentive. An electric silence filled the room. All eyes were on the teacher who motioned for the reading to continue. The boy looked again at the page and very softly he began to read:

Timmy says, "It's true you never said you loved me. But it's also true that I've never said those words to you." His father responds, "I don't know what you're talking about." Timmy says, "I say them now I love you Pop...I love you."

The teacher was now standing by the boy, her hand gently on his shoulder. As the teacher held the boy close to her, first one member of the class, then another, spoke quietly and thoughtfully of the difficulty of expressing love and of the healing power of loving another person even when that love cannot be returned. Now when those students left that class that day, they left neither bored and not merely having received more information. They had been astonished by a power greater than anything else they knew, the power of a love that will not let us go.

"What is this? A new teaching?"

You come here, my friends, not so much to receive information or instruction. You come here to be astonished, and it happens on occasion because Jesus Christ the Holy One is astonishing as a revelation of God's love among us.

"Startle us, O God, please startle us."

Amen