

8 July 2018

Text: Mark 1:1-13

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

What was the last astonishing, amazing thing you've seen or heard about that caused you to marvel? Something jaw-dropping, eye-popping astonishing. Was it video of the erupting volcano in Hawaii? That was amazing. Was it the convoluted reasoning behind how a federal mandate can be considered a "tax"? That strained credulity. Or maybe it was something positive. A double rainbow can be an amazing sight. Well, frankly, at this point, rain—any rain would be astonishing!

But if you want to know something that is truly amazing, there are three astonishing things we see in our Gospel reading for today: "Astonishing Wisdom, Astonishing Works, Astonishing Unbelief."

In the reading from Mark 6, look at what astonishes people. Jesus had been ministering throughout Galilee and then he comes back to his hometown of Nazareth. He's teaching in the synagogue, and, it says, **"Many who heard him were astonished, saying, 'Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?'"** The people are astonished by Jesus' wisdom and his mighty works. But, it says, **"They took offense at him."** And it is that reaction that causes even more astonishment. This time it is Jesus being astonished at them: "And he marveled because of their unbelief."

Astonishing wisdom, astonishing works, on the part of Jesus. Yet astonishing unbelief on the part of the people. And listen, these things are not limited to Nazareth way back when. The same things are going on today. So what? What does all this have to do with us?

"Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him?" "What was the wisdom given to Jesus? It was the wisdom to know the truth about God and man and how to apply it to his hearers. It was the divine authority in Jesus' voice and in his person when he called men to be his disciples, saying, "Follow me." It was his divine authority in correctly and directly expounding the meaning of God's Law: "But I say unto you." It was how his word pierced through to the heart, exposing men's sins and revealing their thoughts. Jesus' wisdom came through when he brought comfort and forgiveness to troubled sinners, giving them just the right word to meet their need. The wisdom Jesus displayed in his ministry went far beyond what people were used to getting from their rabbis and the scribes and the Pharisees. It was simply astonishing.

"Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?" What were the mighty works done by his hands? As we track the opening chapters of Mark's gospel, we see such mighty works as Jesus cleansing a leper and healing a paralytic. Jesus was casting out demons and restoring people's minds and healing their bodies. Who can do such astonishing things? Last week we heard how Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead and healed the woman with the flow of blood. Who can do such things?

Astonishing wisdom, astonishing works. Now what does that say about "where this man got these things"? Well, that was the point. People should have drawn the conclusion that this man Jesus was more than just a man, that he had access to divine, heavenly wisdom and power in a special, unique way. Then, knowing that, they should have listened readily and eagerly to his message of repentance at the coming of the kingdom of God. But they did not. Instead, "they took offense at him." They were stubborn in their impenitence and unbelief.

The people there in Nazareth thought of Jesus as just the kid down the block, the boy who grew up before their eyes, the son of Joseph the carpenter. But there was more to Jesus than met the eye. You see, for Jesus to do the job he came to do, the one and only Son of God had to become a man like one of us. For only as a man, in the flesh, could Jesus keep the law and die for our sins and thus undo the damage man had brought on himself. In God's own wisdom, there was no other way to rescue mankind.

And so even though Jesus was speaking divine wisdom and truth and doing mighty works of healing and blessing—even so, people took offense at him and hardened in their unbelief. Why? Because Jesus was calling them to repentance, to admit their sinfulness, to recognize their own lack of goodness, and to turn to God for forgiveness. But they would not.

"And Jesus marveled because of their unbelief." Now what about now? Are people still like that today? You bet they are. For example, in a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in April of 2012, among Americans under the age of 30, 31% of them say they have doubts about the existence of God. That's almost a third that are not sure that God even exists. Among Americans 65 or older, only 9% say they have doubts about God's existence. So it looks like we're on a downward slide.

Now a couple of cautions here. Simply to say that you know that God exists is not the same thing as faith. Even the devil says that God exists. Nature, reason, and conscience all tell you that there must be a God. But that is not the same as knowing who that God is and how you get right with him and trusting in Christ Jesus as your Savior. That comes only through the gospel, by the Holy Spirit creating faith in Christ in your heart.

But even so, the increasing godlessness and unbelief in our country is astonishing. The federal government, trying to force churches to supply abortion-causing drugs through

their insurance plans. Our elected government leaders, coming out in favor of homosexual "marriage." Shocking, the decline in public morality. Discouraging, the rank unbelief and the decline in religious affiliation. Look at the poor church attendance in our community, even among church members. It is astonishing how callous people's hearts have become toward God.

You would think that people who know about Jesus would be flocking to come and hear from him and receive his gifts. To know who Jesus is and what he is doing here in church and then to stay away—you'd have to be absolutely stupid to do that. Who in their right mind would say no to the Savior of the world, the one and only Savior, the Savior who is calling you to follow him? Say no to divine wisdom for right living? Say no to victory over sin and death? Say no to eternal life? It's amazing that anyone would turn down such great and free gifts. But people do. It boggles the mind.

But I suppose what is most astonishing, what is most amazing to think about today, is the lengths to which God would go to save a pack of rebellious sinners like us. Truly amazing is the great love God has for us, that he would send his own Son into this world to rescue rank rebels. Jesus faced rejection, he encountered unbelief, time and time again. Yet he pressed on. He pursued his course, which was to bring healing and blessing and righteousness into our midst. And that course led him to the cross. The kingdom of God would find its nexus, its gravitational center, at the cross of Calvary. There Jesus endured the ultimate rejection, which would paradoxically bring the ultimate blessing. Christ, the Son of God, died for the sins of the world, all the rejection and rebellion of all the sinners who ever lived. He did this so we would not die forever, but rather live. Christ's resurrection shows us what is in store for us when we trust in him, namely, everlasting life, set right and restored to perfection. These gifts are for you, my dear friends, through faith in Christ.

So how about you? Will you follow Jesus? Or will you fall back into unbelief? Will you repent of your sins and humbly turn to God for forgiveness? Or will you remain secure in your sins and defiantly turn up your nose at God? It is a good thing you are here today, dear one, because the Holy Spirit is working right now to lead you into true repentance, to strengthen your faith, and to keep you steadfast in the true faith through the church's ministry of Word and Sacrament. God is doing a work in you now, a mighty work that is most amazing: He is giving you the gift of repentance and faith in Christ Jesus your Savior.

When the people at the synagogue in Nazareth were marveling at the astonishing wisdom and works of Jesus, they asked themselves, "Where did this man get these things?" In a way, to ask the question is to answer it. For such wisdom and such works can come from only one source: From God. This is divine wisdom, these are divine works that Jesus is doing. From heaven: That's where this man got these things.

But now the question comes to us: Where do we receive these things? Answer: From Jesus. And that means the "Where?" is "Here!" Here where Jesus is giving out his gifts, freely, graciously, for you. Divine wisdom, teaching you the truth, opening up your eyes to see reality from God's perspective, helping you and me to live as God's people in the world. Mighty works, forgiving you your sins and, with that, giving you the sure hope of the resurrection and life with God forever. And that is jaw-dropping, eye-popping astonishing! Amen.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.