



The Jesus wall in Highland Park was created sometime in the 1990s. An amateur muralist painted it with a simple message: “Jesus set me free.” (Cheryl Guerrero, Los Angeles Times)

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WORSHIP GUIDE

Before you begin your time of worship, find a comfortable place to be and gather whatever you might need: your Bible, candles, something to write on and with, your computer/connected device (if you intend to listen to music online), etc. Feel free to adapt this worship guide in any way that makes best sense to you and those you might be gathered with. (Consider inviting someone – a friend, a family member – to worship with you.) Commit to spending the next hour with God.

PRELUDE - Listen and sing along to a song or hymn that blesses and centers your spirit!

WELCOME –

God is awe-inspiring, more wondrous than the depths of space,

God is the Creator of the Universe, beyond our understanding.

God is Almighty, powerful and amazing,

Yet God is also in the stillness, the Spirit moving in the breeze.

God is far beyond our comprehension,

Yet God knows each of us, and God is made known to us.

We worship God, though we do not fully understand now,

We know that God is still being revealed to us, through us, and in us.

God is here, among us now, wherever we are gathered.

We will listen to the movement of the Spirit, and follow Christ our Lord.

CENTERING HYMN – “O God Beyond All Praising”, TFWS 2009

Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7e6qYAk2Lo>

1. O God beyond all praising,
we worship you today
and sing the love amazing
that songs cannot repay;
for we can only wonder
at every gift you send,
at blessings without number
and mercies without end:
We lift our hearts before you
and wait upon your Word,
we honor and adore you,
our great and mighty Lord.
2. Then hear, O gracious Savior,
accept the love we bring,
that we who know your favor
may serve you as our king;
and whether our tomorrows
be filled with good or ill,
we'll triumph through our sorrows
and rise to bless you still:
To marvel at your beauty
and glory in your ways,
and make a joyful duty
our sacrifice of praise.

CENTERING PRAYER –

Speak with authority
in our lives, Christ.

Speak to us,
and to what is in us,
so that we might be whole.

Speak to us,
with love,
with hope,
and with strength,
so that we might hear you,
and know, deep inside,
that we are your people,
and that you are our God.

Let it be so. Amen.

SCRIPTURE - Mark 1:21-28 / NRSV

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, “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.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching— with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This is the Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God!**

LISTEN - In 2018, the Pew Research Center polled Americans about why they go to church (or more accurately, why they attend weekly worship). (Why do you do so?) Here are the top 10 that Pew discovered:

1. To become closer to God. (81%)
2. So their children will have a moral foundation. (69%)

3. To become a better person. (68%)
4. For comfort in times of trouble or sorrow. (66%)
5. They find the sermons valuable. (59%)
6. To be part of a faith community. (57%)
7. To continue their family's religious traditions. (37%)
8. They feel obligated to go. (31%)
9. To meet new people or socialize. (19%)
10. To please their family, spouse or partner. (16%)

As I sat with this list, I noted that no one named their motivation as “to be astounded, amazed, surprised, or struck with awe”. Maybe those are just not emotions or experiences we associate with church or our faith. Maybe with a special evening out at the Cirque du Soleil, but church, worship? Nah. But why not? Why might it be strange or out of the norm for us to come to worship with the hope or expectation that we will encounter something - a teaching, an interaction, God's presence, a miracle even - that will widen our eyes, take our breath away, or just give us pause. I've been thinking about that this past week, especially as we witness the scene at the synagogue in Capernaum.

According to Mark, the congregation there is first astounded then amazed by Jesus, by his teaching and by his authority. Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus says, only that his teaching was in contrast with their regular preachers or teachers, the scribes. And then there was the healing, the casting out of the unclean spirit, with just a few words. A man was set free before their very eyes. The whole community was clearly left abuzz since Mark tells us “[a]t once [Jesus'] fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”

Friends, no matter what has brought you to worship this morning, no matter what your motivation for gathering in community this day, it is my prayer that you might leave worship holding wonder in your heart if not amazed, excited if not astounded, and just a little shaken. Why? Because as Mark wastes no time to make clear (we are, after all, still in the first chapter of his gospel account), the one we follow, the one we call Lord, the one we still to be like, came to change things up, came so that we might have Life - not quiet, comfortable, pleasant lives - but lives of freedom, lives of wholeness, lives of transformation. May we open to that possibility once again. Let's pray.

Unlike the other gospel accounts, Mark jumps past any birth narrative of Jesus, and introduces him to us, as an adult, as he is being baptized by his cousin John. It would seem that Mark is in a hurry, or perhaps eager, to introduce us to Jesus at work, touching people's lives, healing, teaching, revealing the kingdom of God. Between his baptism and this moment, in the space of

just 9 odd verses, Jesus has already spent 40 days in the wilderness where he faced temptations, and called his first 4 disciples: Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John. And now we meet him in the synagogue.

I doubt those gathered at the synagogue that day were expecting anything life-changing or earth-shattering. Perhaps they were like you and I, there to hear a good word, draw close to God for a moment, sense a tad of comfort and quiet, and then be on their way. Perhaps like you and I, gathering at the synagogue was a mixture of meeting up with friends and long-held habits and routines. But instead of their usual preacher or teacher, in walks Jesus.

As I mentioned, Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus said, but he doesn't have to. We can get a pretty good sense of what it might be by reading the rest of Mark's account. Mark's Jesus is brash, bold, and clear. When he overhears people asking his disciples about why he eats with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but the sinners." (Mark 2:17). Just a moment later, when the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of doing what's unlawful on the sabbath, Jesus makes clear his familiarity with scripture and tradition by pointing to a similar action taken by king David and then says, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." (Mark 3:27-28). These were provocative statements that fundamentally resisted and refused the way things were. Like these instances, I am certain whatever Jesus said that morning astounded the gathered - "struck them with force" - not only for its wisdom and insight, but because it stretched the boundary of what everyone had been taught was right, or appropriate, or even good. I am certain that whatever Jesus said that morning prompted people to take a second look at the scriptures, at their faith, and at their lives.

What about for us? When was the last time you were taken aback by something Jesus said, or surprised by something he did, maybe even bewildered by a truth he revealed? If you can't remember, it might be time to go back and re-read the gospels again because Jesus was - as Ysrael reminded us not so long ago - a rebel and a radical. His teaching and witness jabbed at the scribes, poked at the Pharisees, and challenged the Sadducees. By chapter 3, these religious leaders were already conspiring with the Herodians against Jesus, plotting for a way to "destroy" him. That doesn't happen to people who speak nicely and make us feel good. It happens to prophets who stretch boundaries, question the status quo, and cast a vision of God's love that insists on including everyone. Even those possessed by unclean spirits.

I think one of the reasons the community was amazed by the dramatic departure of the unclean spirits is not just because of the dramatic departure of the unclean spirit, but because Jesus' word - his teaching - was combined with his actions. "What is this? A new teaching - with authority!"

The Message translates the crowd's words as, "What's going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? There is indeed power and authority when our words and our actions are aligned, consistent, one and the same, isn't there? I think of all the ways we are hurt by and distrustful of people, of leaders whose words and actions are mismatched and incompatible. That wasn't Jesus. He didn't teach about bringing good news to the poor and then shun them or throw a few coins at them, or about releasing the captives then refuse to do so. His teaching and actions were one and the same, that must be at least one reason his authority was noted. What might that mean to us this morning?"

Friends, Jesus didn't come to astound and amaze us but the truth is that we can't help but be astounded and amazed when we encounter him. Today's scripture reminds us that Jesus' words and witness grate against so much of what we are taught and told is right and good. His teaching and his actions push us beyond so much of what we know and are comfortable with. His invitation and challenge to our lives can feel so disorienting and risky. But sometimes we have to take a step back in order to be surprised by Jesus again. We have to let go of our familiarity, our assumption that we know or understand and be confounded by his teachings, his teachings that come back again and again and again to love...loving our neighbor, loving our enemy, loving ourselves, loving God. We have to be open to the fact that the one with the unclean spirit, the one who needs healing, the one who wants to know, "what have you to do with us, Jesus?" might just be us. May we go into this new week, yearning to meet Jesus anew and surprised by how he shows up.

CLOSING HYMN - "Sois la Semilla / You are the Seed", UMH 583

Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW643ajYO8w>

You are the seed
that will grow a new sprout;
you're a star that will shine in the night;
you are the yeast and a small grain of salt,
a beacon to glow in the dark.
You are the dawn
that will bring a new day;
you're the wheat
that will bear the golden grain;
you are a sting and a soft gentle touch, my
witnesses where'er you go.

Refrain:
Go, my friends, go to the world,
proclaiming love to all, messengers of my
forgiving peace, eternal love.
Be, my friends, a loyal witness,
from the dead I arose;
"Lo, I'll be with you forever,
till the end of the world."
2. You are the flame
that will lighten the dark,
sending sparkles of hope, faith and love;
you are the shepherds

to lead the whole world
through valleys and pastures of peace.
You are the friends
that I chose for myself,
the word that I want to proclaim.

You are the new kingdom built on a rock
where justice and truth always reign.

BENEDICTION -

Go forth...

...replenished by the grace and mercy of God,
...blessed by the healing love of Jesus,
...energized by the limitless power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

NOW GO AND PASS CHRIST'S PEACE!

NEXT WEEK'S SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:29-39