

Astonished

John 4:3–32

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 19) 2021

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Just then his disciples came. They were astonished . . .

- John 4:27

*Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love.*

*Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

- Rev. John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

When was the last time you were astonished?

Astonished comes from an old Latin root loosely translated as “thunderstruck.” Synonyms are stunned – stupefied – shocked – dumbfounded – and the related word astounded.

So, when was the last time?

A century ago, the German theologian Rudolf Otto coined a term that perhaps helps us get at this: the numinous. The numinous is a kind of mystery that makes us tremble with awe, yet ever lures us forward with fascination. For Otto, there are moments when we are in the presence of something or someone outside of ourselves and our only response is like the old hymn, “Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.”

John Buchanan, former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, used to begin every sermon with the prayer, “Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your wondrous love.” He said that on some occasions parishioners would tell him that they had been startled quite enough all week long, thank you very much, and the last thing they needed on Sunday morning was to be startled again.

These days we likely agree with some of Buchanan’s parishioners. We are startled enough during the week, and not in a good way. Between the various crises of climate change with hurricanes coming or drought or floods or fires, with the pandemic and a governor more interested in political grandstanding than helping our schoolchildren and teachers be safe, along with injustice, racism, gun-violence, on top of news of cancer or death or job loss or divorce or... Well, you get the idea. Sometimes we’d like a calm, peaceful Sunday morning worship service followed by a nice meal and a cup of tea – or glass of iced tea. After constant startlement, boring sounds good.

Feeling like we are constantly shocked, it is tempting to turn toward certitude. Instead of startlement or astonishment, we opt for the certainty of written-in-stone doctrine, inerrant teaching, unalterable thinking with clear-cut,

right/wrong, black/white, good/bad ways of seeing. Which also means we need enemies for this way of thinking to thrive. We become hardened and focused on preserving the old status-quo. We work at recovering a past that we remember or were told was stable and reliable.

John Buchanan said the ability to be astonished dies, so he continued to pray his prayer every Sunday, “Because it is my experience that the capacity to be startled, surprised, astonished, can and does become diminished in us...” Overwhelmed with everything else, “we shut down whatever capacity we have for wonder and astonishment because it is a distraction from what we think is important.”

At the same time, the opposite is also true. We can cultivate the ability to be astonished. We can practice learning to be open so when something comes along, we can be astonished and to lean into it. And if there is anything that can overcome our fear of constantly being startled by bad news, it is to be overcome by astonishing good news that comes as gifts of God.

To be astonished is to be shaken, and humbled. Shakespeare said, “Under it my genius is rebuked” (*Macbeth*, III. 1, 54). Jacob in Genesis 28 encounters God in a dream. When he wakes, he says, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it... How awesome is this place” (Gen. 28:16). To be open to God is to be ready to be astonished, to be startled, to be shaken.

I’ve mused over the years that perhaps God had burning bushes all over the mountainside in Midian during the forty years that Moses spent tending sheep and Moses never noticed. It was only after forty years of detoxing from Egyptian

imperial ways of thinking and seeing, that Moses “woke” to the burning bush in Exodus 3 and God’s call.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, great teacher, civil rights activist, and theologian a generation ago, used to say, “To be spiritual is to be amazed.” Toward the end of his life, one of his dear friends, Rabbi Samuel Dresner, came to see him. Dresner wrote, “Heschel spoke slowly and with effort... ‘I did not ask for success. I asked for wonder. And You [Yahweh] gave it to me.’”

For Heschel, faith is what we do with that wonder. It is learning to live in wonderment and sharpening our openness to astonishment. The God we worship is wonderful – full of wonder. John Updike once wrote, “Whatever else God may be, God should not be uninteresting; God should not be pat” (*Roger’s Version*, p. 24).

“They were astonished,” John’s Gospel says about Jesus’ friends one day. It is in a brilliantly crafted short story in John 4. And like any good short story, it is packed with rich detail. But in a kind of throw-away line, John says that the disciples returned to Jesus and “they were astonished” (4:27).

John tells us that Jesus and his disciples were walking from Judea to home in Galilee. John says that “he had to go back through Samaria,” (4:4) which is interesting language, because even though the most direct route between Judea and Galilee was straight through Samaria, for centuries Jews had gone around Samaria. Jesus did not “have” to go through Samaria. He could have gone around. Unless – unless Jesus was compelled by God to go through Samaria. And with John, that is always a strong possibility.

No Jew would go through Samaria by choice. It was a despicable place. For seven centuries Jews and Samaritans hated each other, distrusted one another, and had absolutely nothing to do with one another. There was no visible wall between Samaria and Judea on the south and Galilee to the north, but there didn't have to be, there was 700 years of animosity and hostility instead.

No doubt the disciples are not happy about being across the border. They've heard stories of what happened to Jews on the wrong side, but it is high noon, blazing hot, and they are hungry and thirsty, so they go looking for food and leave Jesus alone, sitting by a well.

A lone woman approaches with a bucket. A Samaritan woman. Jesus asks her for a drink. It is important to know several things here. First, a lone woman drawing water at high noon is unusual. Normally, women would come in the cool of the morning and the evening to get water, while also talking and visiting with one another. Never midday. And not in the heat. This woman is alone, as if avoiding others. Second, Jews don't ask Samaritans for a drink, or for anything else. A Jew would rather die of thirst than drink from a Samaritan cup. It recalls segregated drinking fountains a generation ago. Third, a Jewish male, particularly a rabbi, does not speak with a single woman, publicly, who is not his wife, ever.

A peculiar conversation ensues about water: "May I have a drink?" "Jews don't drink with Samaritans," she responds. "I can give you living water," Jesus says. "How can you do that? You don't even have a bucket," she answers. "If you drink living water, you will never be thirsty again," Jesus says. "Then I'll have some," she responds.

They talk some more about religion; it's almost bantering, give and take. They talk about her marital status, which she lies about, but he somehow knows about. As it turns out, she has been married five times, and she's currently living with a man who is not her husband. And now we discover why she is at the well at noon, in the searing heat of midday, and not in the evening with the other women.

This woman is a disgrace. Others will have nothing to do with her. Everywhere she goes people stare, make snide comments; men aim obscenities or sexually suggestive barbs. It's better to go to the well alone, even if it is hot. The fact that she is living, unmarried, with man number six also tells us that she has pretty much given up on organized religion. She no longer even pretends to be part of the faith community, because she is not welcome. She is an outcast. Religion wants nothing to do with her.

Just then the disciples return with lunch. They are astonished. Startled. What they are seeing challenges some of their most precious assumptions. Here he is, a Jew, sharing a drinking cup with a Samaritan, a man conversing with a woman in broad daylight, a Rabbi bantering with an immoral woman.

The woman, in the meantime, is also astonished, so taken with all this she drops her water bucket and runs to town to tell anyone who will listen about this amazing man with whom she shared a cup of water and who talked with her and even knew about her marital status and did not condemn her.

The whole town is astonished by what they hear, so they all rush out to see him, and then the most astonishing thing of all happens. The Samaritans invite the Jews to stay with them for a while and, remarkably, they do, for two days. They have a party, I suppose. A kind of re-union. After 700 years of brokenness, they

have a reunion. What a picture—Jews and Samaritans, men and women, walking back to town together, Jews eating Samaritan food, trading stories, getting to know each other as real people and not hateful stereotypes.

There is an old Jewish saying that says thousands of angels go before every human being, crying, “Make way, make way, for the image of God.” Well, if these disciples knew this old saying, they had to swallow hard to believe it. But with Jesus, they were learning it in new ways.

And John tells us this was astonishing.

Most of the time in the Gospels, astonishment is a word used to describe reactions to Jesus’ teaching. A few times it refers to Jesus’ healing, and once Luke uses the word to describe the reaction to the empty tomb in chapter 24 (v.22). But here, here it used to describe the reaction to Jesus having a conversation about water with a Samaritan woman. Jesus simply refuses to be constrained by cultural and religious difference. And in a world where cultural and religious differences divide and turn toxic and violent, nothing is more critical.

No wonder the woman drops her bucket and runs back to town, a town that has excluded her, to tell her astonishing news!

I think it is interesting that the disciples react to Jesus talking to this Samaritan woman with astonishment and not with anger or hostility or fear. Rather than becoming defensive, they are open to the new creation in Christ. It may be hard, and it is certainly beyond their comfort zone and beyond their expectation, but it is not something they are ready to fight over. There are other places in the Gospels where Jesus teaches about this same kind of thing. In his hometown synagogue sermon in Luke 4, for example, Jesus preaches about God’s openness to

Gentiles, and the people respond with wrath and rage. But not here. Much of the time the disciples are reluctant or dimwitted or small of faith or full of fear. But here they are astonished.

Rather than building an emotional or mental wall, they lean into the new work they see in Christ. Their breath is taken away. Here, in Samaria, at least for two days, something new is happening. Call it the kingdom of God breaking in, call it the Beloved Community, call it the new creation. John calls it astonishing.

And notice all of this happens around water. Since we are a Baptist church, we should all perk up when we hear about water in the Bible. In the heat of the day, in a very dry climate, the conversation is about getting a drink of water, which turns into a conversation about Living Water, which turns into an astonishing experience with the Living God that lasts two days. Former enemies: Jews and Samaritans, walking arm in arm back to town to sit down to eat and drink together.

This is a great example of water as a sacrament, something mundane that is used by Christ, to bring about something of God we never saw coming. All we are to do is offer it in Christ's name. We are to share water with the prayer and hope that it becomes Living Water. We offer bread and pray it becomes the Bread of Life. Who knows how God might be at work bringing healing and hope and transformation? It's astonishing!

Heidi Neumark, a Lutheran pastor in New York, writes of visiting the southwest border down near Tijuana. She learned about the work of Humane Borders, an organization that places barrels of water in the desert to help prevent deaths in that harsh environment. After Trump took office, border agents would shoot the barrels full of holes so that the life-saving water would leak out into the

sand. Nevertheless, Humane Borders persisted in placing more and more barrels of water in the desert.

Neumark said she saw that Humane Borders marked their water barrels with blue flags on top of thirty-foot poles, easily visible for miles around in that flat, desert terrain.

Now, I know Austin Heights does not have a tall steeple but what if? What if our steeple was a clear sign saying: Here is water. Here is Life-giving water. And you are welcome. No matter who you are, you are welcome. What if all our churches had that kind of sign? (Heidi Neumark, *Sanctuary: Being Christian in the Wake of Trump*, p. 212-214).

It would be astonishing!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.