

AMAZING JESUS

Sermon, July 4, 2021

Texts: Mark 6:1-6; Luke 7:1-10

Last February 7 we sang the grand hymn, *"I Stand Amazed in the Presence of Jesus the Nazarene"* (had we time for a fourth hymn, I might have selected it again for today!). Amazing Jesus. Throughout the Gospels we read of many who stood amazed in the presence of Jesus. Even from the day of His birth, He sparked amazement. Shortly after the shepherds in the hills of Bethlehem came telling the story of all they saw and heard, we read (Luke 2:18), *"And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."* When as a young boy of twelve years of age Jesus was speaking with the elders in the temple, we read in Luke 2:47, *"Everyone who heard him was amazed at His understanding and answers."* In Luke 4, as an adult, Jesus makes His first public speaking engagement in His home town synagogue of Nazareth, and we're told in verse 22, *"... and they were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips, asking 'Isn't this Joseph's son?'"* And in Matthew's account of this scene, 13:54, we read, *"They were amazed and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?'"* In Mark's account of the event, read moments ago, *"Many who heard Him were amazed"* (but this seems to have been more of a "Harrumph .. who does he think HE is" type of amazement because we're told they took offense at Him). Later, in nearby Capernaum, Luke 4:32 tells us, *"They were amazed at His teaching."* For verses later, Luke 4:36, *"The people were amazed and said to each other, 'What is this teaching? With authority and power He drives out evil spirits.'" In Luke 5:26, Jesus heals a paralytic, and, "Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God."* Matthew 7:28, after Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, we read, *"After Jesus finished saying all these things, the crowd was amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority."*

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the account of Jesus calming the stormy sea; we looked at Mark's account of it two weeks ago. After Jesus stood up in the boat, said to the waves and wind, *"QUIET! BE STILL!"* which was followed by instantaneous calm, Matthew 8 says the disciples were *"completely amazed,"* Luke 8 tells us *"they were filled with fear and amazement,"* and Mark 4 says *"they were terrified!"* Matthew 14, Mark 6 and John 6 record another somewhat windy night on the sea; this time Jesus is not on the boat with the disciples ... but later in the evening Jesus walks out on the water to come join them! Mark 6:51 reads, *"Then He climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed."* After another stupendous miracle, in Matthew 9:33 we read, *"... the crowd was amazed and said 'Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel!'"* Matthew 15:31, *"The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel."* In Matthew 21:20, after Jesus cursed a poor little fig tree which then withered on the spot: *"When the disciples saw this they were amazed, 'How did the fig tree wither so quickly?'"* Also in Matthew, when Jesus gave the profound reply to the Pharisees about taxation, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's,"* we read in Matthew 22: 22, *"When they heard this they were amazed."* Finally, Mark used this adjective pretty frequently when speaking of this amazing man, just a few select ones in addition to those already cited: Mark 1:22, *"The people were amazed at His teaching."* Mark 5:20 (after the healing of the Gerasene demoniac and the subsequent "deviled ham" miracle), *"And all the people were amazed."* In Mark 7:37, after the healing of a deaf and mute man, *"... they were overwhelmed with amazement."* Mark 10:24, *"The disciples were amazed at His words."* Mark 11:18, *"... the whole crowd was amazed at His teaching."* Mark 12:17. *"And they were amazed at Him."* And I could go on and on and on and on; many were those throughout the Gospels who stood amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene. Amazing Jesus.

Interestingly, only twice in the Gospels do we read that this amazing Jesus was Himself amazed! What does it take to amaze the amazing Jesus? In Mark 6:6 we are told He was **amazed** at the lack of faith in the people of His hometown ... the people who supposedly knew Him well! And in Luke 7 we are told He was **amazed** by the quality of faith displayed by a Roman centurion, who had said to Jesus, *"Only say the word and let my servant be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one 'Come' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."* We then read, *"When Jesus heard this, He was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd He said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.'*

Apparently, this centurion amazed Jesus because he genuinely **acknowledged** and **honored** and **respected** Jesus' authority! Now, this was an officer who lived his life as a link in the chain of command. In the Roman system all "authority" belonged to the emperor and was delegated. Therefore, by delegation the centurion was under the emperor's authority; when the centurion spoke, he spoke with the

emperor's authority, and so his command was obeyed. A foot soldier who disobeyed or disrespected a centurion would be defying or disrespecting not just the centurion but the emperor; for that matter, the foot soldier would be defying the entire empire with all its imperial majesty and might, as the emperor was the embodiment of the empire's authority, and punishment would be swift and severe. By inference, the centurion is acknowledging, affirming and deferring to Jesus' **divine** authority! He is acknowledging that what Jesus says, goes! He is also acknowledging Jesus speaks and commands and directs with all the authority, majesty and might of heaven and the God of heaven. Maybe I'm reading between the lines a bit, but that's something even those hometown folks, who thought they knew Jesus well, did NOT do.

Now, as a bit of an aside, does this passage tell us if only we have enough faith in Jesus' authority that the people we love will be healed? No, I don't think that's what this story is teaching. I've lost count of how many times someone has said to me, "*Pastor, I have prayed and prayed about this thing/situation/person, and nothing is changing ... I must not have enough faith. That's it, isn't it?*" No, I don't think that's it. I do not believe the Bible teaches God makes healing contingent upon the quantity or quality of our faith, or the sincerity of our prayers, or the number of our prayers, or the number of people we get to pray for us, or the supposed spiritual status of those who are praying. Sometimes God *does* choose to heal in response to our prayers, but miraculous healing comes only as an occasional gift from the Creator. It's a gift, not a right we can somehow earn and expect and manipulate out of Him by saying the right words. So, why do we pray when people we love are in distress? We do so for the same reason this centurion came to Jesus. We come before Jesus to place our loved ones in His hands, *trusting in His authority*, trusting in His sovereign will, believing that in life and in death we belong to God and that nothing will separate us from His love ... and may His will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

Again, this centurion recognized Jesus' authority. I believe what Jesus found so amazing in the centurion was that his faith was not in what he wanted to have happen; his faith was in Jesus, no matter what happened. That's pretty much my message this morning, so let me say it again: *Our faith is not in what we want to have happen; our faith is in Jesus, no matter what happens.* That's the kind of faith that amazes the amazing Jesus. And we display that faith by putting ourselves and our lives under His authority.

To follow Jesus means to come under His authority and the authority of His words, even when those words are difficult. There are some hard things said in the Bible. Bible reading doesn't always endorse my way of thinking, nor does it always make me feel good. Jesus gives us some hard words, like words about how we should use our money, how we should live our lives, how we should satisfy our appetites, how we should treat each other. The words of Jesus make clear some things are wrong ... not wrong because they are inexpedient, or inconvenient, but wrong because they are declared wrong by Jesus with all the loving *authority* of heaven. Once we understand just Who Jesus is AND once we understand His immense love for us ... in other words, once we trust in His loving authority ... then we start to discover that His authority can be a wonderful thing to live under. Freedom comes *not* from throwing off authority. Freedom comes from living under the authority of a Savior Who loves us even more than we love ourselves, Who wants nothing but the best for us, and Who speaks with all the loving authority of the God Who created us and loved us so much that He sent His only Son into this world to save us and give us life full, abundant and eternal! Sometimes we may not understand what He says or does, but we nevertheless trust and honor His authority come what may, and live accordingly. He is Lord; we are not.

Today we celebrate our nation's birth, that Fourth of July in 1776 when our forbearers declared their independence ... their freedom *from* British rule. We were freed from subjugation, freed from taxation without representation, freed from unlawful search and seizure, freed from the constraints and whims of tyranny. But we were not just freed FROM; we were also freed FOR. We were freed FOR life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, freed to pursue all the good and right and true things that lead to genuine happiness. True freedom has its limits, and the Declaration places our beloved freedoms within the context of certain limits ... as we sang earlier, "*Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law*"... because unlimited freedom can become as much a tyrant as any monarch or dictator (*but that's almost another sermon*).

As we celebrate our independence, let us also solemnly acknowledge our dependence ... our dependence on, and respect for, the authority of our Lord and Savior Who loves us, Who gave His body and His blood that we might be freed from the tyranny of sin, and Who calls us to love one another just as He has loved us. Our Creator has certainly endowed us with unalienable rights; may we responsibly exercise those rights by seeking to amaze the amazing Jesus.