

Amazed by Unbelief

A Sermon for Worship on the 3rd Sunday of Advent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 12, 2021
Text: Mark 6:1-6a

Joy is the designated mood for the 3rd Sunday of Advent, and this is the one universal standard regardless of which format or words one uses for the Advent Wreath candles. This is because Mary is most associated with the 3rd Sunday of Advent as we recall the “Annunciation,” the conversation between Mary and the Angel Gabriel when he tells her what God has in mind for her.

Traditionally on this third Sunday in Advent we focus on Mary and her role in the Christmas story. We usually read the text from Luke which includes both the “Annunciation” (when Gabriel tells her she is to give birth to God’s Son) followed shortly thereafter by the “Magnificat” (Mary’s song of joy to her cousin Elizabeth). You know that one. She says, among other things, “Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me.” In these beautiful words we are invited to believe that this very young girl living in a backwater town where women were considered property and routinely stoned for things like having sex out of wedlock was excited and joyful about the baby she was carrying. This part of Mary’s story is indeed an act of extraordinary faith. And that’s the point of this whole story in Luke, that Mary was in fact the first person to fully know and understand who Jesus was, and what he had been born to be – the long awaited savior.

But there is more to Mary than that, more than her simple faith and willingness to do whatever God asked of her without question. Mary is truly one of the most enigmatic figures of the

Gospels. She is mentioned only a few times after she gives birth to Jesus, a story which only appears in two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke. This morning I want us to reflect on a story including Mary from Mark's Gospel. The story we read this morning about Jesus returning to his hometown is the first time Mary is mentioned by Mark. And Jesus doesn't mention her. Neither does the narrator, the person telling the story. No, it's the townspeople of Jesus' hometown who bring her up when they are "astounded" by Jesus' teaching in the synagogue and his "deeds of power." Mary here is a reference point given as proof that this Jesus guy was way out of line with what he was teaching and doing. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" We know his whole family! Who does Jesus think he is, his hometown folks are asking? Where is he coming up with this stuff he is saying? Why does he think he can heal people? He's Mary's boy for goodness sake! He could not possibly be anyone special!! The text makes clear the people were actually offended by him, by what he was saying and doing.

Not surprising, really. They knew him when – when he played in the dirt with the other kids. When he teased his sisters and taunted his brothers. When his mother had him doing chores and his father taught him the skills he needed to become a carpenter. This was Jesus! The boy they've known all his life. Granted, he's always been a little different – like that time he stayed behind in Jerusalem to talk with the priests at the temple instead of staying with his parents and the rest of his family for the long journey home. He was always devoted in his prayers and studies at the synagogue. But still, who does he think he is! We

know him! He's nothing special! He's just another one of Mary's kids!

Every time I hear this story, or read this story, or teach this story, I always wonder if Jesus' feelings were hurt by this reaction. I mean, did he come back home expecting to be greeted with excitement and enthusiasm over what he had already been doing elsewhere? Did he think his old friends would be excited to hear what he had to say first-hand? Was he looking forward to having Mary make him his favorite dinner and then the blow-up at the synagogue ruined the whole visit? From the text we get the sense that he *was* upset by all this. He says back to these people he thought he knew, "prophets are not without honor, except in their own hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." Oh my. Does that comment about kin and home mean he'd already been having a rough time with his brothers and sisters before he even went to the synagogue? That he felt out of place in the home he grew up in because his life was so different, because he was so different now? Seems so.

And then I've always been curious about how this story ends too. "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid hands on a few sick people and cured them." Hmmm. He could do no deed of power there. Does that mean he wasn't able to do them for some strange reason? That he tried and it just didn't work? Or, that he didn't even try because he felt they didn't deserve his help if they refused to accept who he had become? That to me is a very curious point, a very human response on the part of Jesus. They hurt him so he refused to help them. But ... that doesn't seem like Jesus, does it. This is Jesus, the same Jesus who said on another day, do unto others as you would have them

do unto you. And on still another day, turn the other cheek. So, what's going on here?

The answer to that question becomes clearer when we look at the last sentence of this story when it says that Jesus “was amazed by their unbelief.” Jesus was amazed by their unbelief. Jesus was shocked by the reaction of these people he thought he knew, these people he grew up with, these people he cared about because he'd known them all his life. They could not comprehend who he was, who God had called him to become. They could not bring themselves to believe that God could so totally transform someone they thought they knew – Mary's boy. And because they could not see past who they thought Jesus was, he could do nothing to help them. He could not teach them using the wisdom and insight God had given him about a new way of understanding the law and the prophets they had all studied together in the synagogue. He could not get them to move past their own pre-conceived notions and hard-held convictions to share this great gift he had to give them. He could not help them because they wouldn't let him.

And that, dear friends, is the entire point of this story. Jesus couldn't help the people in his hometown because they could not overcome their own prejudices and preconceived ideas about him. He could not show them the way to a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God he had been sent to proclaim. He couldn't even heal them of their illnesses and injuries, except for the few who were able to let their guard down long enough to accept who he was and what he could do. This is why Jesus was upset as this story comes to an end. More than that, he was amazed. He was amazed that these people literally could not get out of their own

way in order to see what new way might lay before them. Surely, this is a cautionary tale for us all.

Amazed by unbelief. Jesus was literally amazed by the unbelief of these people he thought he knew. So, doesn't that make you a little nervous about what Jesus might think of us, if he actually showed up here one day? We think we know him. We think we'd recognize him if he walked in our doors, but would we? What would we be expecting anyway? A long haired guy wearing robes and sandals? Well, that would be pretty obvious, which is exactly why I doubt very much this is what Jesus would look like if he showed up at the Bazaar any of the last five Saturdays. But what would he look like do you think? Well dressed or looking like he needed a shower and some fresh clothes? Would he even be a man? Hey, if we're imaging Jesus showing up, let's be creative! He could be a man, young or old. He could be a woman, attractive or slovenly. He could be poor or maybe not. Now that would be confusing! And that's the point! Jesus coming back and walking in our doors – would he be confused and upset by what he finds here? Would he be amazed by our unbelief?

Now that, dear friends, is one thing I don't worry about. I worry about a lot of things, but what Jesus would find here if he walked through our doors is not one of them. I don't worry about it because I'm pretty sure I know what he'd find here. He'd find a group of incredibly caring people, willing to help anyone they might be able to help, to the limits of their resources and ability. He'd find a gathering of people who know and trust in the power of prayer, the reality of coming together for the purposes of knowing more about God and how God needs us to be acting in the world. He'd find a family of believers longing to expand the

circle of this incredible church family. He'd find hard workers who get tired from all they do and yet keep on keeping on. Yes, dear ones, if Jesus came back and walked right through those doors I do not think for one minute he would be amazed at our unbelief. No, I am quite sure he would be amazed by the strength of our faith, the willingness of our spirits and the love we have for each other.

Jesus would be amazed at us, I'm sure. Why? Because I am, all the time. This is the little church who keeps telling itself, "I think I can, I think I can" just like the little train chugging over the mountain in the children's story. We're not a big church but we're thriving in ways that churches twice our size envy. We're not without our problems and challenges, but we face them with faith, and determination. Dear ones, we are an amazing church. What a gift that is to us all.

So on this 3rd Sunday in Advent when joy is our watchword, I urge us all to be joy filled because we are amazing! Are we perfect? No! Do we have growing edges and things we need to work on? You bet! Are we up to the challenges whatever they are? Of course. That's why in this Advent season of waiting for whatever God has in mind for us in the year ahead we can look to the future with hope and confidence. We can and should be amazed not by unbelief as Jesus found in his own hometown. Rather, we should be amazed by the abundance of possibilities God has in mind for us. And in this season of hopeful waiting for Jesus to be reborn in our hearts and lives on Christmas, we can know beyond any doubt that Mary's boy will be with us, every step of the way and that's all we really need to know. Amen.