

“Expecting Unexpected Power”

4th Sunday After Epiphany;

Mark 1:21-28

“What is this? A new teaching with authority!” Mark 1:27

Sometimes it is fun to be blown away and taken aback by unexpected power. Talitha and I like to occasionally be blown away and taken aback by the unexpected power by watching video clips of amateur singers on the website YouTube. A lot of these video clips are of singers on popular televised talent shows like *American Idol*, *America’s Got Talent*, or its counterpart, *Britain’s Got Talent*.

In one of these video clips, dating back to 2007, a British mobile-phone salesman by the name of Paul Potts stepped onto the stage of *Britain’s Got Talent* and blew everyone’s expectations away when he sang “Nessun dorma,” from the opera *Turandot*. Everyone’s expectations of opera and who could sing it apparently excluded an average British citizen who sold mobile phones for a living.

Similarly, in 2009 the Scottish singer, Susan Boyle stepped onto that same *Britain’s Got Talent* stage and wowed the audience with the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Misérables*. Apparently, no one expected Susan Boyle to be a very good singer. As it turned out both Potts and Boyle won the entire competition the years that they were on the show and went on to have successful musical careers recording multiple albums.

Both of these singers illustrate that power can come from the most unexpected places. Powerful words and powerful music can come from voices of the most unexpected people who come from the most humble and modest of upbringings. But the experiences of Potts and Boyle also serve as a reminder that we can sometimes have a narrow, limited, and exclusive view of power. We can sometimes expect powerful words and voices to come only from certain people who come from certain places, and not others. In doing so we exclude, limit, and restrict the power of the words and voices to impact us and our lives.

In our Gospel reading this morning we tune in just in time to see Jesus enter the stage. The stage he enters is not that of a music hall in the city of London or New York but rather it is a synagogue in the sea-side city of Capernaum set on the Sea of Galilee. He stepped into the synagogue where the Jewish people regularly gathered for worship and instruction. He opened his mouth and began to teach. The Gospel writer Mark puts it this way, “And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and he was teaching” (Mk 1:21).

And Jesus blew the congregation away with his power. His words had power and authority and the people did not expect it. Mark says, "And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, not as the scribes" (Mk 1:22).

Apparently, like us, the people at the time of Jesus also had a tendency to hold too narrow of a view of power and assume that powerful words and teaching come only from certain people from certain places, and not others. At the time of Jesus the people expected the powerful religious teaching to come from prominent people in particular groups like the Pharisees. It is with this group of religious leaders that the scribes mentioned in our Gospel reading were often connected. The people at the time of the New Testament were not expecting a man named Jesus who was born in "backwater Bethlehem" and later relocated to "nowhere Nazareth," to have anything authoritative or powerful to say. They weren't expecting power from him. For, as we heard Nathanael say to Philip a couple of weeks ago in our Gospel reading, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth" (Jn 1:46)?

As if Jesus' powerful and authoritative teaching performance in the synagogue was not enough to capture the attention of the crowds and blow them away, he demonstrates his power even more fully by finding a man with an unclean spirit, a demon possessed man, and shows that he has the power and authority to master such a spirit. Such powerful, authoritative action was unexpected. The people say of Jesus, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mk 1:27). They were so amazed that Mark tells us "his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee" (Mk 1:28). He has become the talk of the whole territory. The people at the synagogue in Capernaum were blown away and taken aback by Jesus' unexpected power.

What kind of view do we have of Jesus and his Word that he speaks? Do we have a limited and exclusive view of the Word of God and the power of God? Do we actually expect that God can use his powerful Word to do things in our lives and through our congregation that blows us away? Do we expect the unexpected power of God's Word?

In our Gospel reading we witnessed the power of God's Word at work through Jesus to cleanse that which was unclean within a man. Do we expect that God's Word is powerful enough to cleanse that which is unclean in our hearts, minds, and actions through the powerful Word of forgiveness that we receive from Jesus in Word and Sacrament? Do we expect that God's Word is powerful enough to cleanse our character and help us do battle with the sinful, unholy, ungodly desires that rear their ugly head every day of our lives? Do we expect that God's Word and its truth-filled teaching is powerful enough to transform the heart and life of someone who is "dead-set-against" the teachings of Jesus and the message of Christianity? Do we expect that God's Word is powerful enough to make an impact in our community through our small congregation and our modest efforts? Maybe we do sometimes have a limited idea of the power of God's Word to do powerful things among us and through us today.

Perhaps we need to expect more fully the unexpected power of God in Christ. The Jesus who stepped onto the stage of a synagogue in the sea-side city of Capernaum and blew the people away with unexpected power and authority in his teaching and through his driving out of unclean spirits is the

same Jesus who constrained that power and refrained from using it as he was nailed onto the stage of the cross. In a remarkable turn of events, at the scene of his crucifixion, he was blowing the crowd away by his seeming lack of power. Some in the audience cried out, "Aha! You would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross" (Mk 15:29-30)! Others said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (Mk 15:31-32). On the cross this powerful one who blew everyone away with his Word of power seemed powerless.

But with God we expect unexpected power. We expect his power to be displayed in unexpected ways. And to purchase forgiveness of sins for the whole world requires unexpected power to be displayed in an unexpected way. To drive out the unclean spirit of Sin within us, render it powerless, and then fill us with the Holy Spirit of God requires unexpected power to be displayed in an unexpected way. It requires the sacrificial death of God himself incarnate in this Jesus of Nazareth. And three days later God's unexpected power was made abundantly clear as he used his power to raise Jesus from the dead.

Now you and I can expect God's unexpected power to cleanse us of our sin, unite us to Jesus' cross and resurrection through such ordinary elements as water, a word, and bread and wine. Now we receive and trust more fully in God's Word of power. His Word that is powerful enough to heal diseases. Strong to save, demonstrating who this Jesus is. It has power enough that no authority can withstand. May this power of God blow others away as well as God uses us to bring his powerful Word to them. May God use us to make this Word of power the talk of the territory. Amen.