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" And He was amazed at their unbelief. "



As we gather to worship on this Independence Day, it is hard to listen to today's Old Testament texts and not hear in them some reference to the great American experiment: to the special¹ and divinely-purposed qualities of not just ancient Israel ... but also of the present-day United States. Disparate tribes united into a single nation, occupying land that God has promised; the "holy hill," in the words of today's psalm, that is the "very center of the world and the city" of God. Sitting here on this Fourth of July and pondering our own country's history and position in the world, perhaps it is only natural for some of the pride and patriotism in these readings ... some of ancient Israel's celebrating its chosen-ness, under God ... to rub off on us, as well.

But just as we're getting ready to wave the flag and light the fireworks, along comes St Paul, who is at pains to say that a *true* life of faith is not pride and boasting, but of weakness and humility. For it is the weaker moments of life—the insults and hardships we endure—that connect us to the power of Christ that resides in us. These times of vulnerability build us up because we grow less sure of ourselves—our self-image; our opinions—and more open to examining ... and questioning ... the narrative we've so tidily tucked ourselves into.

This constructive vulnerability is what, I believe, Jesus experiences in today's reading from St Mark. As He's preparing to preach in His home synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus probably anticipates something of a hero's welcome ... some variation on 'local boy makes good.' Instead, however, he is scoffed at and derided by the people who know Him best. And what is His reaction? Jesus is *amazed* at their unbelief. The Greek verb² Mark uses is one that all four gospel writers frequently use to describe how *others* respond to Jesus: crowds who witness His miraculous healings and hear His norm-bending, hope-filled teachings; the disciples when He calms the raging sea or appears to them that first Easter morning; Pontius Pilate when Jesus refuses to answer Rome. But here is the only time in Mark that Jesus is the *subject* of amazement, rather than its object³: He is *amazed* that His neighbors question Who He is and what He thinks He's doing.

Amazement: It's not typical response to challenge, is it? If Jesus were angry, at being doubted ... or made a brusque show of force—a sudden healing, perhaps, to demonstrate His divinity ... we could understand. Likewise, His disappointment or grief: the readily relatable pain of one's family and intimates turning against him. But Jesus' response is of an entirely different quality: one of wonder and astonishment. *Knowing*, on the one hand, Who He is and what the

¹ Although politicians favor the term, I resist the use of "exceptional" in relation to the United States. Among other things, it can breed in us Americans an unhealthy perspective that we are somehow *excepted* from some of the norms other nations must follow.

² *I.e.*, θαυμάζω.

³ The only other time in the four gospels when Jesus is the *subject* of this Greek verb is in Matthew 8:10, when He is *amazed* at the faith of the powerful Roman centurion.

Father has sent Him to do ... but *confronted*, on the other hand, by the biblical equivalent of a Bronx cheer ... the Son of Man begins to ponder ... to re-think. He sits down on the empty steps of that synagogue, and as He replays the congregation's hoots and jibes in His mind, He begins to understand that His authority, no matter how divine, will not go unquestioned ... the purity of His intentions, no matter how assured, will not be assumed, even by those who love Him. It is, I think, a watershed moment: a moment of deep personal introspection, in which Jesus comes to grasp that others do not necessarily see Him as He sees Himself. His ministry becomes stronger because He is open—vulnerable—to the challenges others raise about Him.

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Perhaps not unlike Jesus, whistling happily as He walked up the steps of His boyhood synagogue early on that Sabbath morning, this Independence Day, America has much to be thankful for, pleased with and to look forward to. Our country's collective story is one of overthrowing an intolerable regime some 245 years ago; of constituting a single people under a banner of dignity, equality and justice; of norming individual rights and liberties that were breathtakingly radical when they were first proclaimed ... but that now, thanks to us, much of the world regards as fundamental; and of coming to the aid of the poor and oppressed, both at home and abroad, at great cost of blood and treasure. At our best ... when we muster and maintain the better angels of our nature ... our nation rallies to further God's moral purposes in this world: purposes Jesus Himself embodies.

But perhaps not unlike Jesus, sitting alone on those same synagogue steps after enduring His neighbors' withering skepticism and critiques, it behooves us, as a nation, to learn how to be *amazed*, rather than defensive or dismissive, when those close to us question our motives or challenge our achievements.

- The United States has created an enviable standard of living—economically, culturally and politically. *And* we have often taken more than we were entitled to; have failed to treat entire populations with dignity and in peace; have overlooked or made excuses for the suffering of many. When we are called on this, will we widen our eyes in amazement and pondering ... or squeeze them shut in denial?
- We have made marvelous artistic, scientific and economic progress as a nation. *And*, in the name of progress, people have been exploited—some brutally ... even sub-humanly ... so; and the fruits of our progress have been shared, especially of late, in a grossly unbalanced way. Will such criticism amaze us into re-consideration ... or further entrench us in our established (and ultimately unsustainable) norms?
- America has set standards for the world in democracy, justice and equality. *And* those standards will not endure—let alone *rise*—unless we are generous and even-handed in applying them ... and aspirational, rather than possessive, in how we steward them. Will we look at all the COULD-BES that range before us as a people and, in amazement, recognize God's fingerprints all over them ... or will we seize the American AS-IS as an idol: closing our fists around it like a vice?

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We are, as a nation, I think, at a synagogue-step moment. Long-standing narratives are being questioned, old ways are being examined and new accountabilities are being calculated. Not every challenge is legitimate; not every criticism is correct: The crowd in the Nazareth synagogue 'misses' Jesus entirely. But every differing perspective *is* an invitation to vulnerability ... to openness ... to pliantly pondering what could be, rather than reflexively defending what is.

Amazed at what He was hearing, Jesus absorbed his neighbors' disbelief constructively and set out began His mission again, renewed and reformed. As we Americans set forth on another year of our national journey, can we, I wonder, find room within us for Jesus' amazement?



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