

Message: Why Believe?

“Has God ever surprised you?”

It’s amazing when that happens, isn’t it? Particularly when there’s a lot of uncertainty and doubt involved. Those things happen often in the Church. We can make plans and have hopes, but sometimes we aren’t certain. We doubt. We aren’t sure what will happen. Our belief is weak, particularly if we’re putting our trust in people, rather than God.

On January 18th, the California-Baptist male chorus came to our campus and gave a concert on the Sunday evening before the day we remember Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. What you may not remember or know is the doubt we had before the concert. We knew the group was coming. Yet there was little interest expressed by the congregation or the community. We received no calls asking for information, even though we advertised the concert and put it on the front of our web site.

We doubted. We knew the event would happen, but didn’t believe in the power of God. At one point, I thought we would probably have the chorus and twenty people in the audience – half from the Church and half family members. I turned it over to God in prayer. Ask anyone who came: it was an amazing, Spirit-filled event. We were surprised to see 250 people at the concert! Best of all, the room was filled with the energy and passion of a group of men who love God with all their heart, mind, body and soul. There was surprise and amazement on both sides that day. The chorus director, young men and everyone who attended commented on the evening. God did an amazing thing, even though we doubted and were filled with unbelief.

Mark 6:1-13 is also the story of unbelief and amazing things. It’s very relevant to our lives today. Mark calls us to believe and act on our faith, in the face of very real, human doubt. Jesus has been traveling back and forth across the Sea of Galilee. He recently returned to Capernaum, where Jesus is staying with Peter and his family. On his way back to Capernaum, Jesus encounters two women, raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead and healing an older woman. Jesus restored those families and the community because they were willing to reach out with faith and hope. They did not let their fear overcome them.

Right after this, Jesus travels from Capernaum to Nazareth, his hometown. His disciples followed him. Jesus was probably staying with his family, since they are mentioned in the passage. So far, it was a nice visit home. The Sabbath came and Jesus taught in the synagogue. The Greek text used tells us the people were “*amazed, astounded beyond measure, in shock*” at his teaching (v2). The people are his neighbors, people who knew Jesus while he was growing up. They knew him while he was in diapers and as a young man learning the trade of carpentry from Joseph. They haven’t known him as a prophet, as one who proclaims God’s message. They’re confused. So much so, they began to ask questions: mostly “how did this happen?” They want to know the source of Jesus’ teaching.

They ask: where did Jesus “get all this”? What is the source of his authority? “*What is the source of his wisdom? Where did he get his power?*” (v2). Jesus’ neighbors say: “we know Mary and Jesus’ four brothers.” They list them by name – James, Joses, Judas and Simon, and they know his sisters. You can hear the real, human discussion: “we know Jesus! He was a carpenter a couple of months ago. How did things change?”

It’s a good question: it’s the same one the Pharisees and Scribes ask. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record it: what’s the source of Jesus’ authority? It’s a fair question. It’s a question that baffles us. It’s a question philosophers ask. It’s the same question science asks. It’s a question about how things happen. It’s the question of how the universe works. I think it’s really a question of how we understand the miraculous, wonderful things that occur when people live and act by faith. Jesus’ miracles, his works of power can’t be explained. Jesus’ teaching can’t be explained. Jesus’ wisdom can’t be explained. The disciples and crowds following Jesus can’t be explained. What’s the source of all this? The problem is, they’re asking the wrong question.

What Jesus’ neighbors, friends and family should be asking is “why?” Why does Jesus have this authority, power and the ability to use it? Why does Jesus have great wisdom? Why does Jesus have the power to heal, cast out demons, and more? Asking “why?” isn’t a question about the type or source of power. “Why?” is a question about who

Jesus really is. “Why?” is a question about the existence of God. “Why?” is a question about Jesus’ true identity: Jesus the Messiah, God incarnate, the Son of God veiled in human flesh.

“Why?” is a difficult question. We want to avoid it because it makes us realize we’re mortal. We are created to live on earth for a short time. Jesus is not a created being. Jesus is the Son of God, begotten of our Creator. Jesus is the same substance as God. Jesus has the same nature and character as God. Jesus has the same power, majesty, righteousness and holiness as God. Jesus is the one sent by God to make things right, to save humanity from sin and death. And yet that very same Jesus was born as a baby and grew up in Nazareth to be a man.

And that’s a lot to grasp and understand. Even with 2,000 years of practice, eye witness testimonies written down in the Gospels, and the experiences of Christian friends and family, we today just can’t seem to get past our doubt. That’s no different than what happened when Jesus went home. Not only do Jesus’ friends and family doubt, those who should know better – the Pharisees and Scribes, doubt as well. Jesus doesn’t let those church lay leaders and liturgists get away with it. When they ask him *“by what authority do you do these things?”* (Mark 11:28), Jesus answers by asking them a question, *“Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?”* in v30. In other words, Jesus asked *“do you believe God is alive and working in the world today?”* If so, Jesus must have authority from God and all he has said and done is true. Jesus must be divine.

The Pharisees and Scribes balked. They could not and would not admit God’s divine presence could be before them, teaching a new way, challenging the status quo, and using power in miraculous ways to give evidence of the truth. We balk at that too, don’t we? We resist the same way Jesus’ neighbors, friends and family resisted. Mark 6:3 tells us they *“took offense.”* The word used also means *“to stumble.”* They couldn’t get past their lack of faith to see the marvelous gift right in front of them! Their unbelief was so strong Jesus felt dishonored (v4). Jesus even says some of his brothers and sisters didn’t believe. They disapproved of some of the things that were happening. And, because

they couldn't get past their disapproval, his own family members couldn't see Jesus' authority for what it was: evidence of Jesus' divinity.

Sometimes those who are closest to us can't see past our “old self” to see the new creation, the “new self” we become when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. There can be a variety of reasons. Maybe we're new believers and we haven't realized what needs to change. Maybe we're digging our heels in a bit and we aren't ready or willing to give up some things, even though we know we should. We're all being perfected by the work of the Spirit through sanctifying grace. That's a gift of God and it takes time. Sometimes those who know us have such strong mental images of us they can't see the changes that are obvious to others. Whether our family and friends see it or not, what's most important is to be true to God and to continue to follow Jesus, loving him, them and others. Don't be discouraged. You are God's child, loved and cherished. Stay on the path: follow Jesus as his disciple. God will do amazing things through you as he sends you out into the world.

That's what happened in Nazareth. We read it in Mark 6:7-13. Jesus sent the disciples out to the villages and towns to spread the word. They told everyone they met: change your ways for the kingdom of God is near. Jesus equips the disciples, giving them the power and authority they need. Jesus also sends them with specific instructions. The disciples aren't adopting an ascetic lifestyle for the rest of their lives. They're on a mission of urgency: there are many people to reach and time is precious.

We are called as members of the Body of Christ, part of the ministry of all believers. We are called by Jesus to follow him. And Jesus sends us to share the good news and joy we have in knowing Christ with others. That doesn't mean we go around, spouting religious jargon – special words and phrases designed to impress one another. No, we are called to live our lives a different way, to love God and love other people in a meaningful way. That means we are called to forgive, not to be judgmental and to say “yes” to God and mean it. Our “yes” is to mean “yes” and not “no.”

This lesson and way of living has been shown to us by our brothers and sisters of the Emmanuel AME Church of Charleston, SC. Even

though their hearts were broken, their floors bloodied and darkness was on them, our sisters and brothers in Christ were strong in their belief in Jesus. They opened their Church, spoke to the press, forgave the one who harmed them, and gathered with others in their community out of love of Christ. Their love for God gave them a capacity that is beyond normal human understanding and ability. Their love of God led them on a path that is leading to real, meaningful action to eliminate the evil of racism and prejudice based on skin color. Their love of God is bringing Churches together in unity, no longer concerned about opinions that divide, but united by faith that heals.

We are called to follow their example and do the same in our homes, neighborhoods, Church and community. That’s the message of Mark 6:1-13 and the lesson of Emmanuel AME. Jesus asks us to accept God’s love and to act on it. Let us willingly, joyfully and freely join with our brothers and sisters in Christ. As Esperanza and I begin a new year with you, the congregations of the United Methodist Church of Cucamonga, I call for a revival of our spirit to share God’s love and God’s Word with other people. I pray for God’s Spirit to fill all of us with a passion and enthusiasm for sharing our story with those who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. I ask you to make a commitment – here and now today. Reach out to others this year, even if the message seems unwelcome. There are many people to reach and time is precious. We are called to reach out in hope and faith for God is doing a wonderful work. Believe in God and do not fear!

Let us pray:

O Lord, help us with our unbelief. When our strength and spirit feel drained and our faith seems small, help us to turn to you for the courage and boldness to rely even more strongly on you and your love. Lord, our strength and mind will fail, for we are mortal. Without you, we are unable to withstand evil. Remind us, O God, of the depth of your love for us, so deep and strong that we are under your watchful care, even when we feel most vulnerable. By the power of your love, we can overcome all things, especially our doubt and fear. Open doors for us share your love with others. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Mark 6:1-13 (NRSV)

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 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?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.