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**TEXT: Mark 6: 1-13**

He was back home—and it wasn't going well. Turn, please, in your Bibles to Mark, Chapter 6, starting with verse 1. Mark 6:1.

This story comes on the heels of what we discussed last week, the healing of the hemorrhaging woman and the raising back to life of the 12-year old girl. Now Jesus and His disciples are in His hometown of Nazareth. They'd walked the 40 miles between the Sea of Galilee and Nazareth—a hiking route today called the Jesus Trail—taking about 3 days. When it was the Sabbath—Saturday for Jews—Jesus, as was His custom, went to the synagogue to worship and He was invited to teach. We don't know what He said but the text says His listeners were “*astounded*.”

Were they “*astounded*” because of the profundity of His knowledge? Were they “*astounded*” because here was their hometown boy and they weren't used to one of theirs speaking with such authority? We don't know but the text quotes the crowd as asking, “*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!*” (vs. 2) You see, this is Jesus' first time back home after the start of His public ministry and His reputation had preceeded Him. As we indicated last week, He'd been a busy man—selecting disciples, constantly teaching, calming a storm-at-sea, healing the Gerasene demoniac, then the women with the 12-year flow of blood and then resurrecting the little girl. He was moving—and the grapevine of that time was a-humming.

Allow me to digress for a minute here to talk about synagogues. The synagogue, for the Jews, was the equivalent of our church. It referred to a building, certainly, but also to any gathering of the faithful, whether or not they had a building—just like “church” today refers to both building and the body of believers. The first synagogues developed during the exile of the Jews to Babylon, after the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. These Jews, wanting to return to God, first met

in homes—just like the first Christians met in homes. Later, upon their return to the Promised Land, synagogues (the buildings) were built wherever there were ten faithful men. This quorum of males over the age of 13 was called a minyan (spell it out)—to be distinguished from the little yellow creatures of recent Disney fame, spelled minion. Wherever possible, synagogues were built facing Jerusalem in acknowledgement that that’s where their true worship was to be conducted. Synagogue worship, on Saturday, consisted of three parts: Prayers (18 of them prayed in rotation), Scripture (at the time, this was what we now called the Old Testament; they called it the “Law and the Prophets”) and exposition on the scripture (i.e. teaching/preaching). Sometimes music, the singing of the psalms a capella was included, but very often there was no music. Services would last 3-4 hours. People would sit, men on one side, women on another, separated by a low wall. The leaders of the synagogue would sit on a raised platform and would stand for the reading of the Scriptures; they would sit when preaching/teaching. Much of the order of our worship today comes from Jewish worship practices—prayers, scripture, preaching, standing, sitting, etc. What we do here on Sunday mornings we didn’t make up out of thin air. The preachers would be the most learned men of the community but if there was a visiting dignitary or, in the case of Jesus, a person of some acclaim, that person would be given the honor of expositing the scriptures.

We can imagine that the synagogue was packed. Everyone would have wanted to see their “boy,” especially since He was reputed to be doing such incredible things and since He was drawing such a crowd. Verse 3 tells us that He was a “*carpenter.*” This verse and one other reference in Matthew 13:55, which tells us that He was the “*son of a carpenter,*” are the only verses in the Bible which tell us of Jesus’ occupation before He began His public ministry. And it’s the fact that everyone knows that He’s a carpenter, an ordinary tradesman, which leads His townsfolk to their criticism of Him.

Now, isn’t this strange? Wouldn’t you have thought that they would have been proud of Jesus, their hometown boy? Initially, they were—or, at least, they were impressed, because, as we said, “*they were astounded.*” (Vs. 2) They wondered at His wisdom—but then, something changed. They grew resentful. Did they think he was getting “too big for his britches?” Was He speaking truth that offended them? The text tells us (the end of vs. 3) that “*they took offense at*

*Him.*” What caused this change of mood amongst the crowd? We have to guess—and my guess is that He began to talk about sin and how each of us are sinners and that we are not the people God created us to be. That sort of talk, then and now, tends to rile people, get their dander up, cause them to think, “Look who’s talking! Who does He think He is? He’s just a carpenter the son of Mary and brother to James and Joses and Judas and Simon and sisters, too.” People don’t like to hear the truth—unless it flatters them; truth that casts the listener in an unfavorable light offends. And these people became offended.

Let’s take another sidestep here to consider the matter of His family. Notice in vs. 3 that Joseph, step-father to Jesus, is not mentioned in this citation of His family. Presumably Joseph is dead by this time. After the infancy narratives, the only time Joseph is mentioned in the Bible is when Jesus was twelve and the family made that trip to Jerusalem—you remember the time when Jesus stayed behind the temple and Joseph and Mary had to come back looking for Him. After that, the Bible is silent on the subject of Joseph. Some scholars speculate that the reason Jesus delayed the start of His public ministry until age 30 was because, as the oldest son, he had responsibility to look after his widowed mother and younger siblings—at least under some of the younger brothers could assume that responsibility. At the time of Jesus’ first miracle, the turning of the water into wine at the wedding at Cana, there is no mention of Joseph—only Mary. We’re quite certain that Joseph was dead by the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, otherwise Jesus wouldn’t have made arrangements for the care of His mother only, by John.

Our Roman Catholic friends have a hard time with the fact that Jesus had half-brothers and sisters—at least four half-brothers and more than one half-sister, since “*sisters*” here is in the plural. They want to keep Mary a perpetual virgin—but nowhere in the Bible does it suggest that Mary was that. Our Roman Catholic friends, in their obsession about Mary’s virginity, explain this verse 3, and other verses that reference Jesus’ siblings, by saying that these were Joseph’s children from a previous marriage. Mary wasn’t their biological mother, just a step-mother. With all due respect to our Roman Catholic neighbors, there’s no need to keep Mary a virgin beyond Jesus’ birth. She was a human, just like the rest of us.

James, the first brother of Jesus that's cited, went on to become a follower of Jesus—one of the first Christians. In fact, he's the author of the book of James in the New Testament. We don't know what happened to the three other brothers, nor any of His sisters.

But back to the story. Jesus then says what has been quoted by so many over the centuries, Christian and non-Christian alike: *“A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.”* Robbie Koerperich, Superintendent of the Holbrook Public Schools, at the beginning of each school year, likes to bring back an accomplished alumnus to speak to the teachers and staff—to rev-them-up for the new school year and inspire them about the importance of their work. (And I don't want to minimize that; their work is important!) But I wonder how these alumni-done-well, if they were to live in Holbrook now that they've gone on to more education and accomplishments, would fare in our fair city? How would they like living here, and how would they be treated now that they were “fancy-pants?” There was a popular song from 1918—after World War 1—which went, “How you gonna keep them down on the farm, after they've seen Paree?” Once you've been away from home and then come back, you're different—and that doesn't always set well. I've made no secret about the fact that I'd love to have Jeff & Tiffany Flanagan come back to Holbrook and take over this ministry once I retire. Tiffany, who did her seminary internship very successfully here last year, grew up in Holbrook. She's the daughter of Bill & Lois Jeffers—Lois, who's sitting right back there. Could it work or would Tiffany, a truth-speaking prophet, bring offense? I think Tiffany, given her sensitivity, could make it work, especially if coupled with her husband Jeff, but that remains to be seen.

Now here's a very interesting part of this text: *“And He (Jesus) could do no deed of power there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and cured them.”* (Vs. 5) I find this verse unbelievable because Jesus, after all, is God—and this God, who created the universe, could surely do whatever miraculous deeds He'd want to do, regardless of the people's attitude. So, how do we understand this enigmatic verse?

Let's remind ourselves, first of all, that Jesus, as I just said, is God and, as such, is capable of doing anything. Any response from people, positive or negative, faithful or faithless, is irrelevant—unless Jesus, as God, chooses to link His power with people's beliefs. Now, we have

to be real careful here. We mustn't make the mistake of thinking that we can control God's power by our beliefs, our attitudes and even our prayers. God is God. However, God seems to want His holy and powerful acts to be linked in some inexplicable way with our faith. How many times does He say to a person, following some miracle, "*your faith as made you well?*" This happened just last week in the story of His healing of the hemorrhaging woman, remember? After He'd healed her, He said to this woman, "*Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.*" (Mk. 5:34) There's some kind of connection between our faith and God's willingness to do something miraculous. Again, we mustn't think that we can force God's hand by our piety or our prayers or our generosity. We can't control the God of the universe in this way—C.S. Lewis in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* said about Aslan, the Christ-figure: "He's not a tame lion."-- but yet there is some connection, some inexplicable connection, between our faith and many of the wondrous things God does. There is!

I'm planning to share with you in two weeks, when it fits-in better with the texts, the story of our mission team's time in Costa Rica, but today I'd like to share with you just one aspect of that trip—probably what affected me the most.

Picture a slum. You've seen pictures of them. Maybe even you've visited them or lived in one of them. The neighborhood, in fact a big part of the city of San Jose where we were, was quite slum-like. Not the worst I've ever seen but certainly not very nice. In the middle of all these shacks, at the bottom of a hill next to a river, is situated The Abraham Project. This is the name of the ministry we went to help support. Twenty-five years ago, a Costa Rican pastor named Jorge had a vision for what could be done in "the hole," which was the name of this uninhabited, swampy piece of real estate into which all the surrounding hills drained before going into the river. Pastor Jorge dreamed of a church that could be built there, and a school—and not just any school but a Christian school with high standards which would not only educate the many children of the area but provide a safe place for them to stay when their parents, usually a single mom, was working. Pastor Jorge was joined by Steve and Georgianna Thomas, a missionary couple—Steve from Kentucky, Georgianna from Panama—who not only could see Pastor Jorge's vision but expanded that vision to include children's homes where orphaned or abandoned children could live in a nice house with "mom and dad" houseparents. (Many Costa Rican children don't know who their

fathers are.) The Thomas' wanted these children to experience God's plan for the family—a mother and a father, providing love and discipline and a future for their children. This now-expanded vision included grounds that looked like the Garden of Eden—so beautiful—and attractive, well-maintained houses that are considerably better than a tin and cardboard shack, a school of the highest quality and adorned with glorious artistry, and a church with preaching and music and fellowship that stood above anything the people had previously known. To me, the most impactful parts of the Costa Rica mission trip were 1) the vision of both Pastor Jorge and the Thomas' to see beyond the ugliness of the circumstances and create something beautiful; and 2) the high standard of worship and education and living that they put into place so that people could see—and imagine for themselves—a better way of living, even unto eternal life. To me, The Abraham Project provides a glimpse of heaven for the people of that blighted place.

Why do I share this with you today? In Nazareth, Jesus “*was amazed at their unbelief.*” And He, for whatever reason, “*could do no deed of power there.*” Well in San Jose, Costa Rica, there were at least three people—Pastor Jorge, Steve and Georgianna Thomas—who had faith, amazing, visionary, higher things faith—and, I believe, through their faith and their hard work over 20-some year now, God has done a miracle. Gail, Vicki, Mary—would you agree? (Solicit their responses.) Quite the opposite of what happened in Nazareth that day.

You see, we can learn from negative example. If you grew up with an alcoholic, you don't have to follow that same path; you can learn from that negative example to be, with God's help, something entirely different. If you've experienced abuse in a relationship, instead of following those same dead-end patterns in your own life, with God's help, you can learn from that negative example not to be like that in your own relationships. If you're around faithless, negative people—and don't want to be that way—you don't have to be that way. With God's help, you can forge your own path and be a different person than you've been raised or influenced to be.

Here's my point: Because of the “*unbelief*” of the people of Nazareth, Jesus did not do many “deeds of power” there. But, in Costa Rica, because of the belief, because of the faith of three core people originally, and since then countless more, God has done incredible “deeds of power” to the glory of His Kingdom and to the blessing of His people in that place. Somehow—

and I can't spell it out for you—the faith of people and the power of God are inextricably tied. That's the way God does it.

Here's my question: What kind of faith do you, personally, have? What kind of faith do we, corporately, have? Are we a faithful people or a faithless bunch? I'm believing that there's a correlation between our faith and what God does. I think that's what our scripture is teaching us this morning.

Now, I want to be careful here. It doesn't necessary follow that if bad things happen—a cure isn't found, a job isn't secured, a blessing doesn't come—it's because that person, or that group, doesn't have enough faith. I'll always remember walking into a hospital room, as a seminary intern, and encountering a distraught patient. She was weeping with worry. It seemed that three women from her home Bible study group had been in to see her just before I arrived and they said, in essence, “There must be something wrong with your faith or you wouldn't be sick.” Sisters and brothers, that's baloney. Bad things happen to the most faithful people. Look at the example of Jesus Himself. He was the most faithful person ever—perfectly faithful, perfectly within God's will—and yet He was betrayed, denied and killed. So be careful in the judgments you make equating faith with good or bad things.

That being said, there is some kind of connection between faith and God's power—I can't explain it and I can't judge it, nor can anyone else. But a steadfast, expectant faith, more often than not, sees God working in powerful, miraculous ways.

The text goes on telling about how Jesus sent out the original twelve disciples telling them, in essence, to have faith that God is going to provide for them and that they're going to witness some miraculous things. God does and they do! They were to take nothing for their journey—no security blanket, only God. They didn't know their itinerary, nor their agenda but they knew they had Jesus' authority to do whatever came before them. And they did! Verse 12: “*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.*” Imagine that! Just these ordinary laypeople—not a priest among them—and God demonstrated mighty things through them. Regular folks—like us.

Oh my people, are we trusting God with our lives, personally and congregationally? Are we living in faith, trusting that God will provide and that He not only is capable of doing great things but will do great things through us? Maybe those great things will happen quickly. (Snap fingers.) Maybe it'll take 20 years, as in the case of The Abraham Project in Costa Rica. And maybe even longer. Maybe we won't even see the results until heaven.

Let's not be like those people of Nazareth, taking offense at Jesus' authority and the truth He taught. Instead, let us embrace Jesus and be willing to do and to go wherever He commands. And then be ready. Prepare yourself for great and mighty things! Will Jesus say of you, "*O ye of little faith*" (Mt. 8:26) or will He say of you, "*O ye of great faith?*" Let's be "great faith" people—and see where God takes us. Amen.

Songs: