

Awestruck: An Epic Story Unfolds
Mark 1:1-8

I am always curious about the size of crowds. Crowds tell us something about the significance of whatever movement is burbling around us. They're like a passion-meter. In Hong Kong just a year ago, two million people showed up in the streets, day after day, to protest the Chinese government's overreach into their freedom. In 1930, tens of thousands of people walked 240 miles behind Mahatma Gandhi in a salt march to the sea, protesting British rule over India. We count the popularity of public figures—political candidates, winning sports teams, even popes—by the size of the crowds that gather to meet them. This year we measured the strength of a racial justice movement by the number of people who took to the streets to say something has to change.

The Gospel of Mark—the first writing we have about Jesus—begins with a crowd. A big crowd. Not inside the city, where most people lived and it was easy to get to. In the wilderness, way out on the edge of the land that had been settled and smoothed out. In one of the very first sentences he wrote, Mark says *everyone* from the country of Judea, *all* the people of Jerusalem, went out to into the wilderness. That's a big statement. Jerusalem was a big city; its population at that time was probably 60,000 people. So when Mark said *everyone* went, he was making a point. This wasn't a small congregation that gathered. It was a stadium's worth of people. Levi's Stadium. And the preacher they were going to hear wasn't Jesus; it was John the Baptist.

John's message, the one all those people left their homes to hear, was this: You think the world is in bad shape? God does too. But you're part of the problem. So repent; turn around. If you want things to get better, you have to change your ways, live differently.

John's message sounds alarmist, maybe even a little threatening, to us; but it was good news to those Jews who were living then like unwanted refugees live now. Over the course of their history, the Jews had spent more time in captivity than in independence. Their Temple—the most precious building in their country, the palace they had built for God—had been destroyed, burned to the ground. Twice actually, by the time Mark wrote his book. God's promise to come and re-claim the promised land for his chosen people had been deferred over and over again. Now at least John offered them an explanation: It's because you haven't lived like you expect it to happen. You have to clean up your lives. So do it. Now.

This was not a comforting message. But even hard news is welcome if it helps explain what's happening to you.

On this day Mark tells us about, Jesus was in the crowd. He went to the river that day to hear John speak, and he was drawn in to John's vision of how to put the world right; so convinced, that he decided to join John's movement. Along with many other people, Jesus stepped into the river to be baptized. Baptism then didn't have the universal symbolism that it does now. It signified being part of a particular movement. Jesus became a follower of John the Baptist.

But Mark's story tells us that something else happened for Jesus that day as he lifted his head out of the water, with John's hand on his back. He had an epiphany. The light shifted. His thoughts re-sorted. Have you ever had a moment like that? Something you have always sort of known suddenly clarifies inside of you. Finally, you understand; a shift in your own eyes changes the way you see everything. That's what happened for Jesus. As he came up out of the water, with his head back and his hair dripping, it was as if the sky split open. A warm light came over him. The words he heard weren't threatening or harsh. They weren't a warning to clean up his behavior. "You're my child," a voice said. "I love you, dearly. You make me very happy."

We don't know who else heard God's voice that day, but Jesus heard it. Baptism was a life-changing moment for Jesus. He was *awestruck*.

Mark's story of Jesus is different from the Christmas story we read in Matthew and Luke, the story we tell on Christmas Eve. Mark understood differently than later storytellers did how Jesus came to be the One that God sent. Jesus wasn't born into holiness, Mark says; he discovered it. Something happened to him that day he stood in the water and heard God say, "I love you, child of mine." Jesus heard those words and they changed the way he saw his place in the world. He understood God meant this for *him*, and that he was being called to a purpose bigger than his own life, bigger even than John's vision for restoring the Jews' political independence.

Immediately, Mark says, Jesus felt the need to go out and be by himself—even further out into the wilderness. He stayed out there for forty days—a long time. You know what happens when people go out into the wilderness by themselves? They change. They find themselves. They become themselves.

When Jesus came out of that vision quest, he turned in a slightly different direction from John the Baptist. He still believed in John's vision of the kind of world that God intended. But he no longer believed that the work of faithful people was to keep hoping for a better future, hoping God would come sweep away everything that was wrong; or to wait for a heaven that would come with the next government or in the next life. No; the kingdom of God, Jesus realized—a world as peaceful and loving and just as God intended it to be—is here. God is present enough already to make peace and love and justice a reality. Not someday; now. It won't happen by some supernatural intervention in the universe. It will happen in us.

That opening of Mark's Gospel, the story of Jesus that begins with a crowd that gathered around John the Baptist, is meant to tell us that God's good news is always found in the wilderness, on the edge of what we know already. Before Jesus could hear that life-changing 'I love you' that altered the direction of his life, he had to leave home. He had to follow a whole crowd of people who had turned off their regular news channels to go hear some fringe preacher who refused to wear regular clothes or say nice things. People who ventured outside the city walls, into rough places.

Maybe that's true for us too. I think God is just waiting to take our breath away, but we can't see it until we cross the border of our comfort. Maybe hearing the God of the universe say 'You make me happy' won't astonish us until we've heard a harsher voice first. The voice of someone

like John the Baptist, who does not come to bring us comfort. A forerunner who delivers hard news, who says, 'First, you have to turn and face in a different direction.'

Think about every Advent story you know. The angels who came to Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph, even Mary. The angels did not leave those characters feeling beloved. The angels challenged them, pushed them totally out of their comfort zones. Asked them to take up tasks they did not want to do. Told them to set aside their own plans and their pleasures, and to risk everything.

Prophets and angels, our stories say, speak for God. They prepare the way, not by quieting us down, but by stirring things up. They come to remind us that God is not only about stability and order; God is also the "basic source of unrest in the universe," to quote the theologian John Cobb.¹ God put the system together and God shakes it up from time to time.

That's what John was telling that crowd out in the wilderness. And maybe that's exactly what we've learned in this year we are living through together. Maybe we too, by no choice of our own, have been driven out into the wilderness, past the edge of life as we know it and like it, beyond the plans and machinations of capable human beings. Out here, life feels abrupt and unsettling; it's left us longing for predictable and familiar. Out here, we've heard a lot more 'You can't' than we have 'Go ahead.'

And maybe that is exactly the way God has been preparing you for what comes next. Maybe this year life has unsettled you, pushed you, until you too feel as underwater as Jesus did at the moment of his baptism. Cracked you open, so that you can hear, all the way to the core of your being, what God will say to us in the birth of a baby at Christmas: "You too are my child, and I love you dearly. Being in this life with you is what makes me happy."

Take that in. All the way to *awestruck*.

¹ John Cobb, *Process Theology*, p. 59