

Charged

5^h Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B), February 3, 2024

Mark's gospel has a way of making the extraordinary sound – well, ordinary. Then Jesus did this, then he did that, and the next day he did this again, and more of that. The fact that what he's doing is quite remarkable doesn't change how the writer presents it. That, in a way, is part of the message and the miracle. Jesus doesn't need a host of silver trumpets ringing or a choir of heavenly angels singing as he heals *everybody in town*. He doesn't need a pep talk to get himself into the mood, get that self-doubt or impostor syndrome back in line. He doesn't need a rizzly carnival barker or silver-tongued card-sharper to get out there and wind the crowd up for what they're about to see before taking their money. He just does it, *with everybody watching*, right after making Peter's wife's mother feel well enough to get up and go pour him a cup of tea. All in a day's work. All in an afternoon's work, really. He spent the morning in the synagogue teaching everyone with authority, and the early morning turning fisherman into fishers of people (but not the exploitative, use-your-mind-and-never-give-you-credit kind.) As Mark tells it, all these things sound just so ... normal. It's as if this sort of thing happened every day.

For a while, it did. The healing and the preaching, the forgiving of sins and the banishing of demons. It's what Jesus spent his time doing, first in Galilee, then in Samaria, in Judea, all the way to Jerusalem. Three years, they tell us, he did this, living and proclaiming the Kingdom of God as he walked on earth and sometimes sat down on it. As he did so – showed forth his power in showing mercy, as it were – he gave the people some things to think about, new ways of looking at themselves and their world. Just a guy who grew up down the road and spent his time making lives better for everyone he came across, whether they were part of his people or not,

or even whether they asked him or not. He taught, as we heard last week, as one with authority. He lived, as we also heard, as one with power – the power to do good, and to make people remember that he had done so.

Remember they did – remember they must've done – for Jesus spent none of his time on earth writing anything down. He knew how to read, obviously – and in Hebrew. He read from the Torah, and from the scrolls of Isaiah, in the synagogue time after time. As far as we know, no-one who listened to him teach or watched him go around healing wrote anything down, either. It wouldn't have occurred to them to do so, or that there was a need to do so. He wasn't doing the things he did to increase his own fame or fortune, and certainly not as part of founding a new religion that would one day take over and then embody the Roman Empire. He was doing it so that real people, right there and then, would have better lives. He was also doing it so that his followers could go out and help people live better lives as well, once they'd heard enough and seen enough to feel empowered to go do it on their own.

It reminds me of the old saying, “How do you save the world?” Answer: “One person at a time.” For “save,” read also “heal,” “free,” “educate,” “empower,” “enfranchise,” and even “love.” Person by person, one by one.

It also works in reverse. One enslaves, poisons, enchains, or keeps ignorant the world one person by one. Hates, too.

Once you do any of these to one, it becomes easier to do it to others. That is why it's so important not to give into hate, or despair, or bitterness at what some people choose to do or say. It becomes all too easy to hate the many, if one ever chooses to hate the one. “Love your enemies,” Jesus says at one point. Even Paul echoes this one, if only because loving your enemies will “heap burning coals on their heads.” Again, one by one. Start small, and remember that “love” is not a synonym for “roll

over for” or “allow to hurt”. One can love an enemy and still see them imprisoned or fined heavily for their crimes, or barred from ever holding elected office, because they sexually assaulted someone or fomented an insurrection. “Pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus says, and also that blessed are you when they do, “for so did they to the prophets before you.” Pray that they stop persecuted you, for a start. Pray that they would choose love, as you have.

It’s almost as if he knew it would happen to them, as it would happen to him. You can’t go around healing the world and setting people free one by one, after all, and not have the powers that be notice, feel threatened, and start coming after you. One by one. It’s extraordinary.

By contrast with Mark’s gospel, 2nd Isaiah – that’s chapters 40–66 of the book of Isaiah – presents as anything but ordinary. It’s writers “came from the school of the Isaiah’s disciples,” and they were writing to be heard loud and clear, far and wide by any ears that would listen.¹ 1st Isaiah was written – and this may have actually been by someone named Isaiah – as the Kingdom of Israel was crashing down of its own weight, and because the Assyrian Empire was leaning heavily upon it. Isaiah knew that injustice was the cause of the kingdom’s failure, as it would cause any kingdom’s failure. Inequity, division, contempt for difference, a lack of accountability, and self-serving leadership doom them. Isaiah, like Jeremiah and the other prophet, proclaimed that doom, and made sure their people heard it, and knew what it meant.

The writers of 2nd Isaiah also aimed for the bleachers and swung for the ages. They wrote as people who had returned from exile to Jerusalem, under the protection of Cyrus of Persian, to rebuild it and start their lives in Israel once again. This time, though, they’d do it right. This time, they’d remember. “Comfort, comfort my people,” this part of the book begins, and “speak comfortably to Jerusalem” (Is.40:1–

¹ Source of quote: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-literature/Isaiah>.

2). That is, speak tenderly. Why? Because the bad times are over. You and your forebears have served your time for the evils they did as one kingdom, and then two. Now come the days of restoration, and of the Lord who makes all things new. Now come, that is, the times of justice and mercy, of the Lord's power over people, not that of the rich and the greedy. That's why the end of chapter 40, which we heard this morning, speaks so boldly of the Lord, and of the Lord's power. The Lord made the earth, made the world, and sits enthroned in the vault above it. The Lord "makes rulers of the earth as nothing" (Is.40:23b Tanakh, JPS). The Lord never tires nor wearies, and makes it so that you don't, either. It's all a way to say, We're back, we're here, and we're staying. We and the Lord will now make all things new. Just don't forget who the Lord is, and why. Extraordinary.

When Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, in the sonnet that serves as today's second reading, that "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," it is this God whom he means. The God we see and hear in Jesus, as the gospels give him to us, and the Lord we meet in 2nd Isaiah, and elsewhere in scripture, who made all that is, and made it good. That grandeur is in the goodness and in the healing, in the creation and in the redemption. The world is charged with it – charged, as a battery, with its energy and power. Charged as a field of battle – over-run, conquered, and re-defined by it. Charged as someone under direction or even indictment – made responsible for something and answerable for it. Charged as an expense – no, not that, actually. That would be "charged for." Hopkins – Jesuit-trained priest, Oxford-trained linguist – wrote "charged with." We get all this for free. For free!

Yes, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," and you can see it in anything, even the most ordinary things. Examples? Hopkins gives two: in gold foil shaken before a flame, and in olive oil, crushed from olives themselves, oozing slowly but surely into the vats where it is stored. In its renewed form, you see the grandeur

of God in the “dearest freshness deep down things” that show how “nature is never spent” – never exhausted, that is, or with its charge account overdrawn. Look at the flowers and plants that grow where people have built or paved over the earth, or wherever life springs back where “generations have trod, have trod, have trod.” See renewed, and renewable, the brownfields that bear witness to the folly and ruin of industry, or the forests that eventually grow back over strip-mines, or beaches finally clean of spilled crude oil. See it in the horns of the morning that appear before the sunrise, lightning up on the top left and top right of the sky at dawn. Imagine them as the pinions of the wings of a bird the size of the moon, the Holy Ghost brooding over “the bent world with warm breast and ah! bright wings.”

Hear in that gasp of surprise how extraordinary that is – how extraordinary and good all of that is. By the grace of God. By the power of God. By the grandeur of God that charges us all, and the world we share, to be in all ways, in all we do and all we are, good.

Extraordinary. *Amen.*