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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 28, 2024
Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28
We Should Be Amazed Too

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's sermon concerns two of the three heroes in our church's rear altarpiece. I mean Moses and Jesus. Moses is the fellow on the left. He holds the Ten Commandments in his arms and there are rays of light radiating from his head. That refers to the shining face of Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai holding the Ten Commandments. We read of this in Exodus 34:

²⁹When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tables of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰And when Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. (Exodus 34:29-30, RSV)

Talking with the LORD left its impact on Moses, so that he himself became radiant.

Before I speak of Jesus there in the center of our reredos, let me mention the fellow on the right. That is St. John the Evangelist. There are four Evangelists in the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each has his own traditional symbol. St. John's is the eagle. You can see the eagle there at the foot of St. John. The eagle is a good symbol for St. John because his Gospel has always been thought to be elevated, high-flying, with a sublime perspective on the holy Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So, Moses on the left, Jesus in the center, and St. John on the right. I have mentioned this to folks before: Moses represents God's holy law. St. John represents God's holy Gospel. And Jesus in the center is the inner meaning of both the holy Law and the holy Gospel, such that we understand neither the Law nor the Gospel apart from Jesus. And so it is that our rear altarpiece preaches its own little sermon to us — an important sermon.

Today we talk about Moses and Jesus. In our reredos, Jesus looks younger than Moses. Moses is an old guy, while Jesus is probably, say, thirty-three years old. That is the traditional age of Jesus when he was crucified — thirty-three. But the truth is that Jesus is much older than Moses. Once upon a time, when Jesus was speaking in the temple in Jerusalem, he spoke the plain truth when he said to the people, "before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Well,

Abraham was much earlier than Moses. Jesus, then, is older than both Abraham and Moses. In fact, Jesus is the Ancient of Days. That is because Jesus is the only begotten Son of God. He always was and always will be. Before our universe was ever born, Jesus was. He lived long before Moses, long before the stars and planets twirling out there in space. But he did not become incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth until a certain time, two thousand years ago. And he lived but thirty-three years before he was crucified and resurrected. So, I do not mind that Jesus appears younger than Moses in our rear altarpiece. We have to picture him some way. Picturing him as thirty-three years old seems fine to me.

Still, in today's First Lesson, when old Moses speaks of a prophet who will replace him someday, he is referring to Jesus, who is much older and much wiser than Moses. Moses was a good man, but Jesus is better.

Alright. Let's turn from our rear altarpiece and from the eternal being of Jesus to the plight of the people as they are about to enter the Promised Land. Moses is not going with them. Moses has been told by the LORD that he will not make it to the Promised Land. But Moses has been with the people for a long time. He has been their pastor for as long as some of them could remember. He had been with them through thick and thin, through good times and bad times. He led them out of slavery in Egypt. He brought them the Ten Commandments. He taught them, prayed for them, interceded for them, even offering his own life for the sake of the people. His defense of the people has always struck me with awe. He prayed thus to the LORD:

³²But now, if thou wilt[,] forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.
(Exodus 32:32, RSV)

I'm telling you, Moses was a good man. He was a good man, and the people knew they were going to miss their old pastor.

Especially they were going to miss his preaching, for his preaching was authoritative. Moses was a prophet. Prophets are not theologians. Prophets are better than theologians. Theologians speak *about* God, but prophets speak *for* God. The prophet opens his mouth and says, "Thus saith the LORD." The people of Israel have had a prophet among them for forty years, but now they are about to lose him. Moses dies on this side of the Jordan River, and the people have to cross the river without their old pastor.

So, in today's Bible Lesson from Deuteronomy 18, Moses comforts his people on this matter of a prophet among them. He says that the LORD will not abandon them, but will send a prophet like him to be with the people. And so we come to today's first verse in our Old Testament reading:

¹⁵The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. (Deuteronomy 18:15, RSV)

In the long history of Israel to follow, Israel is indeed blessed with prophets. I am thinking of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, for example. But the most perfect fulfillment of the words of Moses is Jesus of Nazareth.

This brings us to this morning's Gospel Lesson. The thing to especially note in that reading is the amazement of the people. Our reading starts off this way:

²¹And they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:21-22, RSV)

St. Mark does not report what Jesus actually taught. His emphasis is simply on the amazement of the people.¹ They knew themselves to be standing before authoritative teaching. Jesus has no credentials. He does not have a doctorate in theology. He is not a Pharisee, nor a priest, nor a scribe. He has no books of theology to his credit. And for all the world, he looks rather young. But the people understood that they were in the presence of Someone they could not doubt. Forget his credentials. This man is the real thing! And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Now, let's turn to you and me. Someday you and I are going to stand before this same Jesus, and he is going to say something absolutely authoritative to us. It goes this way:

Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master. (Matthew 25:21, RSV)

And when we hear these words, there will be no doubt left in our minds. Before hearing these words, we might have worried whether we were worthy to enter into the joy of our Master. We might have wondered whether some other voice — some accusing voice — would come along and send us elsewhere — not into the joy of our Master, but somewhere else, somewhere bad. But when we stand before Jesus and he welcomes us into his kingdom, in hearing his voice, we will know that the matter is certain. It is settled. Let the

¹A nice point made by William Abraham in the *Lectionary Commentary* on this passage.

Devil and all his lieutenants rant and rave all they want might, it does not matter. When this Prophet speaks... when Jesus speaks... it is so. It is certain.

And judging by the Bible, some of us will be surprised by the welcome of Jesus. We had not figured we had done all the much or amounted to all that much. But when the gracious words of Jesus come to us, we will recognize their absolute authority:

³⁴Then the King will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." (Matthew 25:34-36, RSV)

My aim in this sermon is to encourage us — you and me too — to be amazed by what Jesus has been saying to us. To some of us, we grew up in the church and so Jesus has been speaking to us all of our lives. We hardly remember a time when Jesus was not speaking to us. And yet, in this fallen world, our minds and our hearts can become dull, so that the words of Jesus pass right on over us, without much moving us. So, our Gospel Lesson about the amazement of the hometown folk in Nazareth at the wisdom of Jesus... this great Gospel story gives me a chance to invite us to pause and marvel at what Jesus has spoken to us over the years. The words of Jesus are not mere puffs of air. They are words of power. They are authoritative. They fix reality for us, unless, alas, we should rebel against them. Then, who knows what will happen to us? I do not want any of us to take that gamble.

We begin with Baptism. We have witnessed baptisms here at Immanuel many times. But let us pause now to be amazed at what Jesus is saying to the one being baptized. The opening lines of the liturgy explain what is happening:

In Holy Baptism our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life.

Think of that! Liberation from sin and death! That has got to be worth all the tea in China. Rebirth as children of God and inheritors of eternal life. Wonders are spoken to us in our baptisms. My theme for today is simply that those wonders are true. They come from the One Moses spoke of. They come from

the very Word of God. And they are worth being amazed at. Indeed, they are worth organizing our years around.

Then, think of all the comforting things Jesus has said to us here in church:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28, RSV)

Jesus is not whistling Dixie here. He is speaking words to us that change the world for us.

Likewise with his instructions about our manner of life. For example, we hear this in our Lord's Sermon on the Mount:

⁴³You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... (Matthew 5:43, NRSV)

What I am urging is a renewed appreciation in us for what Jesus is saying to us. The folks in his hometown synagogue were stunned by the words of Jesus. They were amazed by his wisdom. You and I hear this same Jesus. That is what Easter means for us. We hear this same Jesus, and if we focus our minds and work at it, we can live as if the words of Jesus mean all the world to us. They need not be mere puffs of wind on a Sunday morning, but rather, they can be what they are in fact: authoritative and good words from our Maker, meant to both comfort us and guide us in this world. Our God is not silent toward us, but speaks words worthy of being amazed at.

To this One Moses spoke of, even Jesus Christ our Lord, be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.