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Mark 6:1-13, "How to Amaze Jesus"

It's been three months since I began serving as one of your pastors. That may well be long enough for you to have begun to figure out the truth about me - especially since it's a truth I couldn't really hide even if I wanted to. The truth is, of course, that I'm a bit of a nerd - though I tend to prefer the term "geek". The fact that I have a preference as to whether I'm considered a nerd or a geek is emblematic of the situation. But there is a subtle difference between the terms "nerd" and "geek". Don't even get me started on the related categories - we'd be here all day if we were going to analyze the distinctions between dweebs and dorks, too. But for what it's worth, a true geek is, above all, an enthusiast. A true geek can go on and on about what they love, every so often missing a social cue here and there indicating that maybe everyone else in the room isn't really interested in hearing, in great detail, about the object of their fascination. A perfect example might be right now, this very moment, as I geek out about the excellence of geekdom.

So, when I was a kid, I was obsessed with mythology. Maybe a handful of you just felt a little jolt of recognition - I certainly wasn't the only one on the playground who was really into Mount Olympus. I was just the only one on *my* playground. I couldn't get enough of the stories of Zeus and Hera, Artemis and Apollo. I found it particularly fascinating that when the Roman Empire arose, the same gods and goddesses kept up their capricious and self-centered ways, just with new branding as Roman deities.

My obsession continued through high school, when I chose Latin as my foreign language and became a card-carrying member of the Junior Classical League. My school's Latin Club - of which I was the vice president, thank you very much - dominated the state tournament. The ultimate Nerd Versus Nerd showdown. I didn't excel at the written tests - again, more of a geek than a nerd. But I embraced the creative categories, painting portraits of arcane goddesses, memorizing monologues, and writing poetry steeped in myth. One such poem addressed the gods directly.

It's probably for the best that it's been lost to history, but I vividly recount the gist of it: I taunted the deities. I laughed in their fabled faces, emboldened by my absolute certainty that Hades was not glowering at me from the pits of hell. The punch line was simple: their existence had been entirely dependent upon the belief of mortals.

When the mortals moved on, they were demoted to the league of mere myth.

I hadn't thought about that mediocre poem in decades, until a detail in today's gospel reading caught my attention. When Jesus attempted to bring the good news of the gospel to his hometown, he failed. Sure, the people who heard him were astounded

for a moment. Apparently, there was no way to turn off the gut-level reaction people had to Jesus - no way to avoid being awestruck. Prophets and revolutionaries were a dime a dozen in the era of Roman rule, and the vast majority of them generated nothing more than skeptical stares.

Jesus was different. But this deeply confused the people of Nazareth. They knew this guy. They knew he was a tradesman - translators love to give it the cachet of carpentry, but the original Greek word is generic. It really just meant that he was a manual laborer who probably had dirt under his fingernails. But that wasn't even the most questionable characteristic of this would-be holy man. Calling him the son of Mary was shorthand for calling him a bastard. There was absolutely no way God would actually pour power into a nobody from the block. Their initial awe dissipated into a cloud of scandalized cynics, and ultimately calcified into unbelief.

And Jesus was amazed. This is masterful storytelling on Mark's part. We have a mirror image here: the crowd, astounded at the wisdom and power of Jesus. And then in an instant: Jesus, amazed at the faithlessness of his old friends and neighbors, unable to access the divine power that had been right at his fingertips moments before.

To be fair, he was able to heal a few people - which is no small thing. But Mark is clear: being rejected had a palpable effect on Jesus's ministry. He couldn't do what he was meant to do when the mortals moved on. He may as well go hang out with the gods of antiquity.

It would be like one of those Marvel movies with an ensemble cast, a miscellany of heroes and villains from disparate storylines. Come to think of it, plenty of those Marvel characters lose their powers, too. All the disenfranchised deities and weakened superheroes could save the universe together, against all odds.

It's uncomfortable to see Jesus drained of power. It makes me nervous in part because it's a narrative detail that can and has been weaponized. When the desperately hoped-for healing does not come - well, maybe you just didn't pray hard enough, maybe you just didn't believe passionately enough. This is a misguided and harmful way of thinking that is antithetical to the gospel.

And yet - there is something chilling about the notion that our faith - or lack thereof - has any bearing on Jesus's power - or lack thereof. But, the joke's on us at the end. We know where this story is going. The rejection in Nazareth foreshadows a far greater catastrophe. Here, Jesus merely loses his power. In Jerusalem, he loses his life.

Ultimately this is why Jesus cannot be mythologized. This is why I cannot help but geek out about the gospel. Jesus was no imagined god reigning over Mount Olympus; he was a man with a mother and a hometown and calluses on his hands. And he was a man whose divine power was made perfect not through strength but through weakness. He was a man whose divine wisdom was sacrificial love. Talk about scandalous. How much

more offensive is it that the God who is the source of all life submitted to the indignity of death?

The true scandal of the gospel is that Jesus was willing to give up his life for the very same people who amazed him with their unbelief. He did not demand sacrifices. He *was* a sacrifice.

And here's the other reason why Jesus cannot be reduced to mere myth. Those of us who do believe in him - however imperfectly - are invited to participate in the scandal. The very next thing Jesus does after this total fail, is turn around and send his disciples out, two by two like animals in a Noah's Ark quilt. Because there are wounds to tend, people to love, broken hearts to be made whole. There are souls in thrall of demonic powers that live to kill and destroy. God's beloved Creation is languishing; God's beloved children are writhing in pain. And in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God extends hope and healing that can't be found in any other story.

Not everyone will accept the gift and invitation of the gospel. Not everyone will welcome the hard but good news. Not everyone will believe that some random street prophet with questionable origins is in truth the Son of God, come to save us.

If you don't want to amaze Jesus, believe in him. May it be so.