

Amazed and Astonished

Luke 2:41-52

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To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, to hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.

These words were penned by 18th century English poet William Blake in his poem entitled *Auguries of Innocence*. I think his words illustrate the meaning of being amazed and astonished.

Merriam-Webster defines them this way:

Astonish: to strike with sudden and usually great wonder and surprise.

Amaze: To fill with wonder; astound.

The implication is that these words point to something profound, beyond the ordinary. In fact, in the context of Luke's gospel, the word amazed has the same Greek root (existemi) as the word ecstasy, which is defined as "an overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement."¹

A couple of years ago I learned that using the word amazed or amazing has come to mean far less in our culture. I was proofreading my daughter's college essay, and decided to send it along to a teacher friend of mine who also teaches classes on SAT prep. I asked if she'd be willing to provide some feedback for Emma's essay. She agreed, and forewarned me to be sure NOT to use the word amazing in the title. She indicated that it is the single word which appears most often on such essays. I checked this out with another friend of mine who works in college admissions. She verified it.

These words have become overused and therefore ubiquitous. As a result, the true meaning has been diminished. That is to say that the word amazing, which used to mean something astonishing and wonderful has now become an overused, generic term for just about anything, and holds almost no meaning any more. I hope we might give some thought to this today, and make an attempt to reclaim the word as it is reflected in today's Scripture.

I find it fascinating that two phrases which appear in Luke 2:17-19 are repeated in Luke 2:41-52. I'll read the earlier passage first, and listen for the two phrases from the passage Glen read for us this morning. The context of the first is when the angels brought good news of great joy for all people, and told the shepherds about the birth of the Messiah. They hurried to see the child, Jesus, who was wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

The Scripture reads:

¹⁷ When they (the shepherds) saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2:17-19)

¹ <https://biblescan.com/searchgreek.php?q=existemi>

Did you catch the two repeated phrases? The first is “all who heard were amazed.” The second is “[Mary] treasured these words and pondered them in her heart.”

Today’s story appears in Luke’s gospel between the ritual purification in the temple and the beginning of John’s public ministry leading to Jesus’ baptism in the wilderness.

Let’s remind ourselves of the story of Jesus’ purification. Mary and Joseph had taken Jesus to the Temple. There the elderly Simeon and Anna, long faithful witnesses to the people’s hope for a promised One, see the infant Jesus and identify him as the one waited for, the Messiah. The holy family then returns to Nazareth, where Jesus grows in ways needed for him to become the One he is claimed to be.

Today’s story takes place twelve years later. It is the only story in the (canonical) gospels referring to Jesus as a child, so we don’t know much about Jesus’ life between his birth and the beginning of his ministry.

However, it is clear from other writings in the Greco-Roman world that other such stories exist which express the idea that a great man was assumed to have had a precocious childhood. For example, Cyrus who was to become king of Persia is said to have been recognized for his unusual skills at leadership while only ten years of age. Pythagoras, the famed Greek philosopher, was said to have been renowned for his wisdom while still a child. Even Moses was advanced beyond all his peers in learning while still a child.²

Therefore, many in Luke’s original audience must have recognized this story about Jesus as a literary type in which a heroic figure exhibits extraordinary characteristics, even at an early age. It serves to reinforce the idea that the heroic figure was endowed with powers that were greater than others of the same age. It was assumed that such powers derived not from the earthly parental heritage but from the gods, and therefore functions to define Jesus as an extraordinary child who cannot be held to normal human standards.

Despite Luke using a literary type in his excellent storytelling to portray young Jesus, we nevertheless get a sense of Jesus’ divine nature. Jesus is listening and learning in the Temple. Some commentators describe this incident as the beginning of Jesus’ theological education. Jesus is engaging in a serious study of the law with the teachers. Though still a young boy, he is showing himself to be advanced in the knowledge of the law. Those around him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. He is more than an astute student or precocious child. He is manifesting his status as Son of God.

I see a theme of **wonder** here, which encapsulates the intensified emotions of this story. Consider the crowds as they hear Jesus with the teachers and are amazed. This is where that Greek root word (existemi) which I mentioned earlier shows up. This amazement is greater than simply being impressed. Seeing the boy learning and teaching in the Temple among the teachers of the law, they are truly amazed.

His parents were astonished about how un-phased he was to be in the Temple which he referred to as “my father’s house.” Though Mary and Joseph do not understand his reasons, Mary “treasured all these things in her heart” just as she had done at Jesus’ birth among the angels

² (Smith 2014, 57)

and shepherds. The Greek verb here is *diatereo*, which means to carefully hold³. In other words, Mary holds fast to the troubling details of this event, as she had done earlier. Though she may perhaps be perplexed and deeply troubled by what she cannot fully understand about her son, she holds the tension between her astonishment and her faith. Perhaps her astonishment is her faith made manifest.

I believe there is something really important in this story for us to carefully hold. That is: the good news that Jesus' presence with us calls out of us an openness to wonder; a willingness to be surprised; a tendency toward true amazement, as well as the patience sometimes required to hold the experience for a future time when we might understand more than we do now.

I think we might have a clue about how to begin from the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who wrote:

“Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal, everything is incredible, never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

And, there's more. You may have noticed the quote at the top of your bulletin this morning, which was written by poet Mary Oliver:

*Instructions for living a life:
Pay Attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.*

While Heschel describes the paying attention and being astonished, our Christian faith calls out in us the need to be disciples... to tell others about the good news of what we experience! About the transformation that is possible in living a spiritual life... the transformation which occurs by being in the presence of Jesus, by knowing that God is with us always even though we may not always notice or may not always understand.

The invitation is before each of us. Be amazed. Be astonished. Don't keep it to yourself.

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³ <https://biblescan.com/searchgreek.php?q=1301>

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