3-2/3-19 The Astounded Crowd Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 9:28-43a

When have you ever been astounded, astonished, shocked or surprised in your life?

Maybe you were the recipient of another’s generosity. Maybe you were disturbed by the images of yet another school shooting. Maybe you were in awe of a brilliant sunrise. Maybe you were concerned when prayers seemingly went unanswered.

Many were shocked last weekend at General Conference, especially at how voices that began together in prayer later turned on one another with hurtful language, across the theological spectrum.

There have been times in my ministry that I have been astounded when bitter rivals came together for a common good, and actually complimented one another. There have been times in my ministry that I have been surprised at the ways God worked through imperfect yet beloved children of God.

When have you been astounded by the greatness of God, even within the church?

The crowds surrounding Jesus were astounded at his teaching, his healing and his ministry.

Over the past month here in worship we have been reflecting on these crowds, their emotions and Jesus’ response.

Three weeks ago we encountered Jesus preaching to the crowd from Simon Peter’s boat on the edge of the lakeshore, as the crowd was pressing in, amazed at the way Jesus taught, and wanting to hear more. We were then invited to press in ourselves, to listen and respond to Jesus’ call on our lives to follow him.

Two weeks ago we encountered Jesus in the midst of the crowd on a level plain, beginning to teach his recently named disciples about God’s kingdom ways. The crowd was now much more diverse, Jews and Gentiles, rural and city, those who came to hear Jesus teach and those who came to be healed by Jesus. We learned from that crowd to be expectant, eager for who Jesus is and what Jesus teaches us, even if God’s ways are not always our ways.

Last week we stayed with that same crowd on the level plain, but found our expectancy turn to questioning. How is it possible to practically “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you.” We were reminded that we can only “Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you” when we allow God’s agape love to guide our relationships. We were also reminded that God is big enough to handle our questions, and we are called to allow our questions to draw us deeper into faith and trust.

Today’s Scripture is the juxtaposition of two different crowds, both of whom were astounded at the greatness of God.

First we encounter the small crowd of Jesus’ closest disciples, Peter, James and John, who have been invited by Jesus to withdraw with him for a time of prayer. To get away from the large crowds, this small crowd journeyed up a mountain to pray.

In the Gospel of Luke, this is a typical pattern of Jesus. Time with the crowds, then time apart in prayer. And just as typical is the disciples’ struggling with sleepiness.

Yet this day was different. In a sudden moment, everything changed. And the sleepy disciples were caught unprepared when Jesus was transfigured before them.

To be transfigured is to undergo a complete change in form or appearance. Think of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. That is a complete transformation. Think of superheroes whose appearances change in a moment, such as the Incredible Hulk. Those are temporary transformations.

When Jesus was transfigured, his entire appearance changed, if only for a moment.

His face changed. He glowed brighter than lightening. Moses and Elijah arrived for conversation, then the disciples heard the voice of God.

Can we even begin to imagine what the disciples saw that day? Jesus’ face changed. His clothes became brighter than dazzling white. Suddenly the divinity of Jesus was on full display.

And still the disciples struggled to understand.

The two greats of the Jewish faith arrived, Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, for a conversation with Jesus about his upcoming departure. Having experienced such departures themselves, they were offering encouragement to Jesus to stay the course, finish strong, and die well.

The Greek for “departure” is *exodon*, which reminds us of the Exodus. The Exodus was God’s deliverance of God’s people out of the land of Egypt. Jesus’ death was to be much greater, for Jesus died and was risen from the dead for the salvation of the world.

Imagine being Peter, James or John in that moment. Moving from sleepiness to astonishment.

Wondering at first if what they were seeing was a dream or a vision. Then realizing it was neither. It was real. They were glimpsing Jesus’ divinity.

Of that moment, Madeleine L’Engle once wrote:

“Suddenly they saw [Jesus] the way he was, the way he really was all the time, although they had never seen it before, the glory which blinds the everyday eye and so becomes invisible. This is how he was, radiant, brilliant, carrying joy like a flaming sun in his hands.”

-Student book p.61 The Inviting Word

A little girl named Maria once felt the same level of astonishment as the disciples suddenly seeing their beloved teacher transfigured before their eyes. Maria’s story is told by Kristen Ingram, who says:

“I took Maria, my friend’s five-year-old daughter, to see her mother dance for the first time.

We sat in box seats. Maria pictured Mommy at the practice barre in their house. She’d even visited rehearsals a time or two, but she was hardly prepared to see her mother dance the lead in Swan Lake. When her mother came onstage in a cloud of white tulle, dancing on the toes of her silken shoes while the blue spotlight played over her, little Maria gasped with shock. She stood up, holding to the edge of the balcony, and finally breathed, ‘Will she still be my mother?’

“The people around us chuckled; a few in the orchestra seats below looked up, smiling. But Maria wasn’t laughing; she was awed and close to terror at the sight of her transformed mother. She had to learn to accept that Mommy was more than the gentle, warm lady who fed her, read stories, and sat beside her on airplane trips. Her mother had metamorphosed into a woman of strange powers and transforming presence.” -Upper Room Disciplines 2003, p.72

Peter, James and John weren’t prepared to see Jesus in all his divine glory. They have been traveling with Jesus since being called away from their fishing boats, nets, and families. In the time they have followed Jesus, they’ve seen him heal, and they’ve seen him cast out demons. They’ve seen him calm a storm and they’ve seen him feed a crowd. They’ve heard his parables describing the vision of God and they’ve heard his prediction of his upcoming suffering and death. Yet nothing had prepared them for this moment. They were astounded at the greatness of God in Jesus.

Peter being Peter, not knowing what else to do or say, impulsively opened his mouth and uttered the first thought that came to mind.

“Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Scripture notes that Peter did not know what he said. Peter wanted to capture the glory of this moment forever, and said the first thing that came to mind as a sign of wonder and honor.

Yet even before the words were fully out of his mouth, a cloud surrounded all on the mountaintop, and the voice of God proclaimed these words

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

The disciples were astounded as they heard the voice of God. Yet as quickly as the transfiguration occurred, it was over.

And because they could not yet make sense of all they had seen and heard, these closest companions of Jesus remained silent, until after Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus may have been transfigured on that mountaintop, but the disciples were only beginning to be transformed.

Even though they knew in that moment that Jesus was who he said he was, they would still have to go through the trials and denials of the cross and the wonder of the empty tomb before they would come to fully comprehend what they experienced on the mountaintop.

Then and only then, would telling their story make sense—when all could see through the risen Lord the light and love of God Almighty.

Leading up to this moment, the disciples knew they had been sent out to bring good news, heal and have authority over demons. They had helped feed over 5,000 with just a few loaves and a handful of fish. They heard him ask, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”

Jesus went on to foretell his suffering and death, reminding his closest companions he was not a conquering hero but a suffering servant. He reminded them that anyone who wanted to become his followers would also have to deny themselves and take up their own suffering.

Eight days after that conversation on identity and discipleship, Jesus took Peter, James and John atop the mountain. And there they viewed the greatness of God.

Yet still they did not fully understand. Read on in the Gospel of Luke and you will find the disciples arguing over who among them is the greatest, and still not recognizing God’s kingdom ways and still not living fully by God’s ways in this world.

On the mountaintop they were astounded, yet still not fully comprehending Jesus in all his divine glory.

Then the time came to go back down the mountain. For no mountaintop experience lasts forever.

Henry Drummond, the Scottish theologian once said,

“God does not make the mountains in order to be inhabited. God does not make the mountaintops for us to live on the mountaintops. It is not God’s desire that we live on the mountaintops. We only ascend to the heights to catch a broader vision of the earthly surroundings below. But we don’t live there. We don’t tarry there. The streams begin in the uplands, but these streams descend quickly to gladden the valleys below.”

-Ed Marquart, sermonsfromseattle.com

So the very next day following Jesus’ transfiguration, these three disciples found themselves with Jesus once again surrounded by a crowd of curious and faithful, skeptics and sinners, those needing to hear a word of welcome and those needing healing.

Among those in the crowd was a desperate father and his son. The disciples could not cast out the demon from the boy, so Jesus healed him. Our passage concludes by declaring:

“And all were astounded at the greatness of God.”

The crowd around Jesus continued to be astounded, astonished and amazed at the power of God flowing through Jesus. Although Jesus knew that soon he would turn his face toward Jerusalem, and the agony that awaited him there, Jesus still saw and paid attention to the crowd surrounding him. He offered healing. He offered hope. He offered welcome. He offered grace.

Do we recognize that there is still a crowd surrounding us today? They are yearning to be astounded by the greatness of God, not the inadequacy of humans. They long to encounter Jesus in his divine glory, yet will give thanks when God’s presence is experienced among us in the ordinary and extraordinary ways of life.

Not all of us may experience mountaintops. Yet we are all called to minister in the valleys. Mountaintop experiences are brief respites, for healing and renewal that then call us back of the mission and ministry of the church being the hands and feet of Christ to all in the crowds around us. On the mountains and in the valleys of life, we are all still called to listen to Jesus.

If we have been astounded on the mountaintop, maybe our amazement will turn into a new ministry. If our mountaintop experience was a mission trip, might we continue to lift up the issues of affordable housing, decent wages, or hunger and homelessness. If our mountaintop experience was a Spirit-filled worship service, might we find ways to worship the Lord with the same energy even in the midst of everyday life. If our mountaintop experience was a retreat, might we find ways to alter our lifestyles to allow room for Sabbath rest and intentional prayer in order to feed our spirits. If our mountaintop experience was a revival, might we find ways to continue to serve and praise the Lord in the midst of our congregation and community. If we have been astounded only by God’s greatness in the valleys of life, remember to look for the divine in everyday life.

In Jesus’ own life his divinity was on display when he spoke kindly to ostracized women and outcast lepers. His divinity was on display when Jesus wept over a dead friend and when he smiled gently at a misguided yet earnest rich young ruler.

In our own lives we may catch glimpses of this divine glory in the hug of a friend after a deep loss or the welcome of someone who is very different from us. We may catch glimpses of this divine glory through a specific Scripture or study or song. We may catch glimpses of this divine glory with a co-worker or spouse or even a stranger in the grocery aisle.

My prayer today is that we may all catch a glimpse of God’s greatness through the bread and cup of Holy Communion. This holy mystery reminds us that we are all still God’s beloved, all still shaped and formed by our faith in Jesus, all still called to be in ministry to the world around us.

This holy mystery reminds us that God is still present with us. On the mountains and in the valleys of life. In our joy and in our sorrow. In our expectancy and in our questioning.

In our pressing in and in falling back. In our doubt and in our astonishment. God is with us.

As we now turn to the journey of Lent, the journey to the cross and empty tomb, may we not only be astounded by God’s presence with us today, but also share God’s love and hope and welcome and grace with others, continuing in ministry and mission to the crowds around us.

May it be so.

Let us pray.