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The Story: Jesus' Ministry Begins

Mark 1:21

We are continuing our journey through *The Story*. How many read chapter 22 this week? Remember, from the earliest moments of God's Story, we have seen a recurring promise that one day God would send a Messiah to save his people. But thousands of years later, as the Old Testament comes to an end, the Savior still hasn't shown up. And when the Romans invaded Palestine, all but the most faithful began to wonder if God had given up on his people... given up on his promise.

But last week, at last the Messiah showed up. Although, it wasn't quite the grand entrance we might have expected. An out-of-wedlock mom gives birth in a barn. The only visitors are a flock shepherds, considered vermin in Jewish society. And shortly, they flee for their lives to Egypt. And when they return, they flee again from another evil king, this time up to a podunk town in Galilee. Galilee was the Hicksville region of Palestine, and Nazareth was the armpit of Galilee. As I said, not exactly a grand entrance for the long-awaited King of the Jews!

And then he disappears for 30 years. The only glimpse we have of Messiah is as a 12 year old speaking to religious leaders in the temple. Other than that, nothing! Why 30 years? Because when John wrote, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," this is what he meant. The Eternal, divine Word of God became this kind of flesh—baby flesh. We had to wait for the Messiah to grow up! By now, Herod is dead, the oldest shepherds are dead, one or two wise men are probably dead, even Jesus' own father is dead. It's been a long time. But now at last, Jesus makes his appearance.

Something happened to me as I read this week's chapter of *The Story*: I was reminded how amazing Jesus was when he came on the scene. He grew up in Nazareth, but it was 30 miles northeast in a town called Capernaum on the shore of Galilee that Jesus' made his home and made his name. For you golf fans, Capernaum was to Jesus what the Masters is to Jordan Spieth. It was where Jesus flourished, where some of his greatest miracles were performed and where his ministry was launched!

I want to look at a passage from Mark's gospel. Remember, Mark is a man of action. His favorite word is "immediately;" it appears 36 times in his gospel. For Mark, everything happens immediately! It's like watching the Indianapolis 500... you can hardly keep up with it! Do this for me: I want you to listen to these opening stories as if you've never heard them before. Imagine what it felt like, sense the

rapid-fire pace; listen to the gasps of the crowd, listen for words of astonishment as the amazing Jesus takes this place by storm! (Mk 1:21)

²¹And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²²And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

Okay, did you hear the amazement... the astonishment? It was Sabbath and Jesus did what he always did on the Sabbath; he went to church! And he was invited to teach, but they had never heard teaching like this. Did you hear the response? “...they were astonished.” Why? Because Jesus “taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

Scribes were respected religious leaders. They were a combination of theologian, preacher and lawyer, all wrapped up into one. They were smart and educated. But they always based their teaching on precedent. Like our legal system. They would say, “As Rabbi So and So once said,” ...and Rabbi So and So would have quoted Rabbi Whosit and Rabbi Whosit would have quoted Rabbi What’s His Name. Every word the scribes taught was based on the words of some previous authority.

But Jesus amazed them because he taught “as one who had authority.” We learn from Matthew what that means. Jesus would say, “You have heard it said, but I tell you...” In other words, Jesus taught as if he had the right to make law, not just interpret law. He taught as if he had written the book—which of course, he had!

The people were amazed at the authority with which Jesus taught, but then they got really amazed when a demon-possessed man started making a ruckus in church. The evil spirits that were harassing this poor soul cried out: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” Jesus simply says, “Be silent and come out of him!” And unable to resist the authority of Jesus, the spirits leave the man—as he convulses on the ground, shrieking at the top of his lungs.

I’ve had some weird interruptions to my sermons over the years. I once had a guy walk up in the middle of my message and hand me an old coin, without a word, and then sit back down. But that was nothing on the weird-o-meter compared to this! A demoniac jumps up, screaming at the preacher, the preacher orders the demons out, the man falls to the ground in seizures, shrieking and moaning. Now that would make a captivating children’s sermon.

Did you see what the demons called Jesus: "Holy One of God." Do you know the only other person in the Bible given that name? Samson! Jesus is recognized and named by the demons as the ultimate spiritual strong man! They know their days are numbered. Can you imagine sitting in the pews that day? ²⁷And they were all amazed, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." Amazing!

And that's just his first sermon! Jesus keeps on amazing the people. He walks across the street to Peter's house and, with a touch, heals Peter's feverish mother-in-law. And that evening, after Sabbath had ended, we read that "the whole city was gathered together at the door. ³⁴And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons." Amazing! But wait! There's more!

A few verses later, we read that a leper runs up to Jesus, throws himself on the ground, and begs to be healed. This was unheard of! Everyone was terrified of leprosy. Lepers were supposed walk around ringing a bell, crying, "Unclean, unclean." They were supposed to remain 50 paces away from "healthy" persons. So imagine the desperation and faith of this poor man. He broke every social and religious custom by approaching Jesus. "If you will," he says, "you can make me clean." "I am willing," Jesus says, and then he does the unthinkable. He reaches down and touches the leper and "immediately," he was made well. Amazing! Are you out of breath yet?

One more story: When Jesus returned to Capernaum after his preaching tour, the word was out. Soon, the streets were like I-5 at rush hour—absolutely packed. Four men carrying their paralyzed friend to Jesus to be healed found themselves in gridlock. In desperation, they climb up on top of the house, break a hole in the roof, and lower him down on a pallet in front of Jesus! When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "My son, your sins are forgiven."

And did that ever open up a can of worms! The religious leaders in the crowd were deeply offended by Jesus' words. They considered them blasphemous! Why were they so outraged? Let me put it this way. What if A here got mad at B sitting next to him, because B grabbed the last blue card in the pew—and A really wanted to fill out a blue card. He gets so mad that he punches B in the nose. And what if I saw A punch B in the nose and said, "A, I want you to know, I forgive you." How would B feel? He might want to punch me in the nose. Why? Because I have no right to forgive A for something he did to B. Only B can forgive A!

Who is offended by sin? God! We punch God in the nose when we sin. So for Jesus to say, "Son, your sins are forgiven," what was he claiming? That he was God—that he had the right to forgive sin! That is why the religious authorities were offended: Jesus was claiming to be God. That is amazing. Listen to the rest of the story:

⁸And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts?
⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk?' ¹⁰But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—¹¹"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." ¹²And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" Did you hear their response? They were amazed! "We never saw anything like this!" Okay, you can take a breath now!!

How many of you know the expression, "nose blind?" Nose blind means you live with aromas so long, pretty soon you don't smell them anymore. I was wondering this week, how many of us have become nose blind to Jesus? Many of us are pretty familiar with him. We grew up in church, went to Sunday school, we've heard it all before, and really, Jesus has become kind of old hat. We are nose blind to Jesus!

But it wasn't always so, was it? Don't you remember a time when Jesus was amazing to you? When you felt so alive and excited about what God was doing in your life—about his authority and power? You were so in love with Christ!

I snuck into MOPS this week and heard two of the most powerful testimonies. I mean, tears welling up in your eyes powerful. One of the women spoke of how God pursued her through friends and, when she finally gave her life to Christ, she felt such an incredible joy and peace and power. She spoke of how amazing it felt to have that hole in her heart suddenly filled with Jesus—the only one who could fill that emptiness. As I sat there listening, I thought, "When was the last time I was amazed by Jesus like that?"

I heard this week of a man whose disease has taken all the feeling from his legs. He is numb from the waist down. How horrible to suddenly just go numb. And yet, so many of us—all of us, I suspect, after some time—reach moments where we are numb to Jesus. We just don't find him that amazing any more. Why is that?

I was having lunch with my friend, Pastor Gino from HCC. We were both served sandwiches and started eating as we talked. After ten minutes, Gino looked over and said, "Aren't you going to eat anything?" I said, "What are you talking about? I just ate a whole BLT right next to you? You didn't see that?" He said, "I guess not!" I said, "You were so busy with your fancy, schmancy bruschetta drizzled with balsamic vinegar that you didn't notice I was eating a sandwich right next to you?"

That's what happens to us spiritually. We get so wrapped up in what's right in front of us in life, we stop noticing the amazing things Jesus continues to do. I wish I had easy 1-2-3 steps to help us recapture our amazement, but I am sure it starts by asking the Holy Spirit, "Please, open my eyes. Help me see your amazing love and power and authority in my life again!"

I love my wife's eyes. They are so beautiful, but I've lived with those eyes for a long time and it's easy to forget how much I adore them. But every once in a while, Cyndi will catch me just staring at her beautiful blue eyes—drinking them in, reacquainting myself with the window into the soul of this woman who means the world to me. (She gets flustered when she realizes I am staring at her, but I think she likes it.) But by looking again, looking deeply, I am re-amazed by her beauty and by my love for her.

What would happen if this week, every day, you asked the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to really see the beauty of what Jesus is doing or has done in your life? How about starting here: Jesus has forgiven your sins! Every awful thing you have thought or done—Jesus has wiped them all away... like the paralytic. One of the men in our LifeGroup said, "Every time in the service that we pronounce the assurance of pardon of our sin, everyone in the church ought to be shouting, "Woohoo!" He's right!

And Jesus has done more than that, hasn't he? Like the stories we just read? He has healed us, he has released us from spiritual bondage, he has cast out evil spirits from some of us, he has touched us when we were so loathsome and filthy that no one else would. He has surrounded us with friends who have prayed us into his presence. He has called out to us when we had fallen and said, 'Stand up! I want you to walk home with your head held high!'

That is what the amazing Jesus has done for us—done for you. It is beautiful, and we ought to be astonished! This week, as you read *The Story* and as you pray, would you ask the Holy Spirit to give you eyes to see how amazing Jesus really is?