

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

On the fourth day of July, in the year 1776 the Declaration of Independence was ratified by the US Second Continental Congress. The ratification of this declaration meant that the thirteen original British colonies in North America ceased to be colonies and officially became a sovereign nation. So, we mark this day as the birthday of our United States and this weekend we celebrated the 248<sup>th</sup> year of our Nation's independence. And we of course celebrate and mark the occasion with many and various firework-displays ranging from lighting a simple string of firecrackers in our driveways and sidewalks to huge elaborate firework-displays that can be seen and heard from miles away.

I love watching firework-displays, especially with little kids...their wide-eyes tell it all as they watch in wonderment while they tightly cover their ears. I love to see the pride in the eyes of the veterans as they proudly watch and celebrate and remember. The pride and the wonderment in the eyes of all who watch the fireworks along with the fireworks themselves seem to characterize a patriotic feeling or spirit that is captured in these words:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.-

Or...

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.<sup>1</sup>

The fireworks are of course an outward attempt to capture the essence of these documents. But, do they really capture the depth of the emotions these words inspire in us as citizens of these United States of America? The words of these documents evoke emotions...and some of the patriotic emotions inspired by these documents are made manifest with fireworks. And maybe, just maybe for some who watch the fireworks explode in the night sky, the words of *The Declaration of Independence* and *The Constitution of the United States* will ring in our ears along with the fireworks. But, even as folks within and outside this nation challenge the truths that we hold self-evident, they are nonetheless still the words that form us and govern our civil understanding of who we are as a nation.

Today in our Gospel lesson appointed for this "Independence Weekend" we hear that Jesus returns to his hometown. And when he returns, no one's impressed. Even though he is the "hometown-boy" they are in fact, just plain down insulting to Jesus...<sup>3</sup> Is not this the carpenter,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/> Both Documents, *The Declaration of Independence* and *The Constitution of the United States* are found on this web site.

the son of Mary, (Mark 6:3a). It is insulting in the Jewish tradition to refer to a person by their mother's name. If they knew fully who Jesus is, the tradition would have to say the son of God...not the son of Mary. Moreover, they are more or less saying in the brief comment that this lowly carpenter is just an ordinary man and not the miracle worker that the crowds are following around. They didn't have the media or the press of today to boast and to criticize the local hero, so to them Jesus is the son of Mary who is a carpenter.

The Gospel lesson, in the way in which it is presented to us today is a bit out of context due to it being edited for the lectionary. The actual first verse of this chapter of Mark says:

He (Jesus) left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him.  
(Mark 6:1)

For the sake of this passage standing on its own within the lectionary they edit it. Nonetheless, Jesus has just left the home of Jairus where he raised his daughter...from the dead. On his way to his hometown, not only does he heal the daughter of Jairus, he also heals the peasant woman who has suffered with hemorrhages for twelve years...BUT before he does all that, he exorcises the demons that shackle the man living among the tombs known as Legion. And he does all of this in front of crowds of followers. In all of this, Jesus seems to have convinced all the followers that have witnessed these things taking place, the power of the Kingdom of God. In Jesus Christ, whether they know it or not, the crowds see God making known to them and to us, the ancient promises of the prophets beginning to be fulfilled. But like John the Baptist in prison, the people of Jesus' hometown, and maybe even some of us sitting here today might be thinking or asking, is Jesus really the prophet of the new age, is he the one who is to come, or is he just a carpenter, the son of Mary, and are we to wait for another? Jesus tells us all:

'Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' (Matt 11:4b-6)

If we juxtapose these comments from Jesus to John with the comments from the hometown crowd about Jesus within our Gospel lesson today, it seems that we need all the fireworks of miracles to believe the Word of God. However, being awestruck doesn't necessarily equate with faith or lead to it.<sup>2</sup>

This episode before us in the Gospel from the hometown folks forms a very real contrast to all the miraculous success that surrounds Jesus on his journey to his hometown. While I truly believe it says something about the blessed ability of Jesus to go head first into the chaos of the Gentile territory across the Sea of Galilee and perform these miraculous acts such as: exorcising the Gerasene Demonic known as Legion, healing the chronic illness of the woman and raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead, but today we learn of the "humanness" of the very Son of God. Today in this Gospel lesson, according to the hometown crowd, Jesus is like some empty words on a page, He arrives home without all the hoopla of fireworks. Today as Jesus enters his hometown, we learn that Jesus is fully human...like each one of us sitting here today.

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<sup>2</sup> Gundry, Robert H., *Commentary on the New Testament, verse by verse explanations with a literal translation*. Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, Massachusetts, 2010. Commentary on Mark 6:2, page 159.

But isn't this typical of the Gospel of Mark to show us all that the people that are closest to Jesus, or even those we assume to be closest to Jesus just don't get it...or they just simply don't know Jesus. Are some of us today like the hometown folks in that we need to be awestruck with miracles to have faith, or we need something significant to have faith...we need some miraculous thing to happen in our lives to stir our faith or to remind us of our faith. For some it's hitting a homerun, scoring a touchdown, winning the big game, winning the lottery, arriving at a destination safely, or surgery going as planned with full restoration...in other words...we just need "fireworks" per say to inspire our faith or to remind us of our faith.

This rejection of Jesus in his hometown shows us that the great miracles and the mighty works alone do not automatically produce faith. We hear then that Jesus is amazed with the unbelief...and in that amazement, Jesus assembles the disciples and sends them out. He does not send them out with the ability to stir up a commotion and a fanfare of miracles...he simply sends them out in humility with a promise of a Good News that changes hearts. Likewise, we the church, disciples of Jesus Christ are assembled and we too are sent...there is no fanfare, no glorious canticle that is sung or performed for us...just a simple phrase..."Go in peace, serve the Lord." Listen to what happened when the disciples in the Gospel lesson were sent:

<sup>12</sup> So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. <sup>13</sup> They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (Mark 6:12-13)

The disciples of Jesus Christ, who are as human as each one of us in here, were sent by Jesus, and it says they cast out many demons, anointed with oil many who were sick, and cured them...but the point I want to lift up is that they went out proclaiming repentance, meaning they went out telling others of the Good News. The word used here for repentance is *μετανοέω* [met-ah-noello] meaning "to change one's mind. *μετανοέω* is a compound of *νοέω* [noeō], which means "to understand, to ponder, to think about," and *μετα* [meta], which means "with": *μετανοέω* means "to understand with, to use the mind with." When we repent, we are using our mind to realize that we have done wrong, to regret our sin, and to change our mind about our ways. The Greek word *μετα-νοέω* is a lot like our English word con-science: both terms imply "with knowledge."<sup>3</sup> The word is more than just simply turn or repent.

I know it's dangerous to begin explaining the depth of words during a sermon, but words without depth or meaning are like fireworks without patriotism, or like Jesus in his hometown, they are empty words on a page. If all we hear in this passage is that the disciples are telling folks to repent which literally means to turn around, we simply hear the disciples telling folks to "turn to God." Think about how effective that would be if it were said to you while you were in the process of dealing with something, be it tragic or ordinary, how would the expression, "turn to God," affect you? If the disciples spent time in the homes they visited, they were successful as the Gospel alludes to because, they were spending time with people, they were taking the time to first listen to folks to find out who they were and what was in their hearts, and then sharing the Good News that allowed them or their conscience to move their heart and their actions. Listening to another person does not require a miracle nor does it involve fireworks, it just requires an ear and an open heart and mind. The real miracle I believe these sent disciples accomplish is that they listened and they shared the Good News that is God's Word Jesus Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://lectionary.blog/2020/07/24/turn-and-repent/>

God's Word is not empty or meaningless as St John reminds us:

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. **10** He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **11** He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. **12** But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, **13** who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. **14** And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. **16** From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

**17** The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. **18** No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:1-5, 10-14, 16-18)

Today we assemble and we sit in the very presence of God in this Holy Word that is before us. We may not see the miracles or we may not see the fireworks, that come with the Word of God but they are here with us. This Word of God is not empty or meaningless, it is a miracle of promise of grace and new life, it is a miraculous Word that says to us "This is my body, this is my blood," it is a miraculous word that continues to feed and nurture our very souls, it is a word that ratifies grace upon grace, a word that ratifies new life in all who hear and believe. Today may we see the miracle that ratifies our liberty from sin and death...the Word of God that is Jesus Christ is a promise of new life made each one of us from God.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*