**Does God Still Surprise You?**

**A Reflection on Mark 6:1-6**

*To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*

*As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy upon us.*

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*Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.*

*“He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!*

*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.”*

Rev. Roberto and St. Andrew’s Saskatoon Friends, thank you very much for having me today and for allowing me to share my reflection of the Word of God with you all this Sunday. It’s my second year of summer ministry online and I still haven’t got the chance to meet you all in person. But I hope I will—in a near future! Regardless, I’m grateful for this opportunity. So, thank you.

Friends, a couple years ago, I brought a friend of mine (who’s just arrived in Vancouver) to Whistler. As many of you have probably know, the journey from Vancouver to Whistler is through this stunningly beautiful highway, called the “Sea-to-Sky Highway”. During our journey, there was a particular moment when he suddenly cried a little bit. With his face covered with tears, he said this, “God, wow, I have never seen anything as beautiful as this.” At that moment, I can’t help myself but to also have a greater admiration to the familiar scenery that I’ve took for granted. Approximately 50 million commuters pass by the Sea-to-Sky Highway each year, I wonder how many of them could still experience the sense of wonder and awe like what my friend experienced that day. Most of the times, it can be really hard for us to see beauty in familiar things. Oh, how I pray that our hearts could still be vulnerable enough to be surprised and to be in awe.

Shall we pray together? Jesus Christ, our Lord, open our eyes so that we may see You. For You are the Everlasting Beauty who surpasses anything that’s beautiful. And this morning, open our hearts also, so that we could enjoy Your ever-more-beautiful presence. Amen.

As a full-time theology student, I spend a significant amount of my time studying about God. The word theology, of course, simply means a study about God and God’s nature... If you think about it, isn’t it interesting? …….. Isn’t it interesting that we, humans, really love to study? It seems that we cannot help but to study everything, even things that many people thought no need to be studied. For example, some people spend their whole life-time studying about time; there are those who study about friendship and what it means to be a friend/to have friend—weird, right!?; there are those who study about love…. Human seems to deem everything in this world as something to be studied—well, even God needs to be studied.

But why? Why is it that human wishes to study everything? Why is it that deep down in our very human nature, we have this hunger to understand everything? Well, perhaps, we crave to understand everything because it gives us power. Knowledge is power—so they say. Knowledge and understanding give us the power **to control** everything around us and what happen to us. We’ve learnt that humankind—even from earliest days—need to use their knowledge and understanding to be in full control of their environment so that they could survive. Our knowledge enabled us to tame even the cruelest beasts. We use our knowledge—our knowledge of everything around us—so that we could control it for our survival.

But here’s the problem: The human heart—as John Calvin says—is a “perpetual factory of idols”. You see, while it started as a mean for our critical survival, we’ve now become so mesmerized by having the power to control—to the point that we use knowledge and understanding to control and to manipulate other people as well. How exactly do we do that? Well, the moment when we see other people and we thought that we have fully understood them, we have actually dehumanized them. Rather than seeing them as persons who are full of mystery—full of surprise, we objectified them (often without realizing it); we see them as if they are objects that we have understood completely (like our cellphone that we have understood and mastered fully). And soon enough, just like any other objects that we have fully understood, we’ll now be able to control them at our disposal; to manipulate; to “handle” them according to what we wish. Slavery and Canadian residential schools are just two among many big concrete examples of that.

Unfortunately, we even do that to our loved ones. When we see the face of our loved ones, more often than not, we no longer see them as mysteries that can still surprise us. Rather, we see them as something that we have fully grasped—like a puzzle that has already been solved. Our loved ones have become too familiar to us that we no longer expect any surprise; that we no longer able to be in awe of. We have reduced who they truly are to be who do we think they are or who do we want them to be. And once we thought we have fully understood them, we have then the power to control; to manipulate; to handle, even our loved ones, according to our wish. I know it may sound too negative. But the truth is: these days, when we say that we love someone, many times it actually means that we love what they could give to us.

And the madness of our idolatry doesn’t stop there. Not just other people; not just our loved ones; we even crave to control God with our understanding. I’m sure you all still remember the story when Moses was up on the Mount Sinai. While waiting for Moses, the Israelites built a golden calf. But this golden calf was not built because they wanted to worship other gods. No. In fact, when they kneel before this golden calf, they called it as Yahweh, the One God of Israel. It’s not that they worship the other nations’ gods; the Baals. What they worship was their own understanding (knowledge) of what it means for God to be God.” And the moment we thought we have fully understood this god, is the moment when we thought that we could fully control God according to what we wish. We don’t expect (or even tolerate) any surprise from God.

This is why, according to our scripture reading today, “on the Sabbath”, when Jesus “began to teach in the Synagogue”, at first, the people loved him because of his wisdom and miraculous powers that usually could only be performed by the power of God.

But soon enough…. The moment when the people realized that Jesus is their hometown’s carpenter…. The moment when the people saw the sawdust on Jesus’ hands. They were disappointed and took offense at him.

They took offense at Jesus BUT not really because of Jesus.

They took offense because in their understanding and knowledge, God could not be a carpenter; God would—or rather—should not have sawdust on his hands; for them, God supposed to fit their understanding of what God supposed to look like. There’s no more room allowed for God to surprise them…. Because to be surprised means that we are no longer in charge…. To be surprised means that we encounter the unexpected….

And we don’t like that…. Because we rather have a god whom we can control. We want to have a god whose ways we could fully understand. We want a familiar God…

Indeed, many Christians worship this kind of familiar god. Like the Israelites who built the familiar golden calf, we too build our own golden calf. We construct a familiar God according to our own image. As the president of my school often jokingly says, “In the beginning, God created us; then we return the favour.” We love to create God according to our image. Consequently, we are no longer in awe. Because we thought we already know the ins and outs of God. We thought we already “get” this god.

But as St. Augustine says God is “other, absolutely other.”

This is why it is utterly fitting to say that our God is the God of surprise. Our God is the evermore beautiful. There’s no lack of beauty in God. You cannot be familiar to God’s majesty, glory, and beauty. Even our whole lifetime—even our eternal lifetime—would not be able to catch up to God’s ever-increasing loveliness. The more we know God, the more we don’t know about God—or perhaps to put it better—the more you know God, the more you’ll be surprised by God. Like God’s grace, God’s splendour is new every morning.

And here’s the good news:

Our God is still the same God who parted the red-sea precisely when the Israelites thought no way to escape.

He’s the same God who feed the Israelites with Manna exactly when they thought they would die of hunger

He’s the same God whose voice like a trumpet shattered the walls of Jericho

He’s the same God who preserved Jonah in the belly of the fish

He’s the same One that cured countless of incurable diseases

He’s the same God who said “talita kum” and raised the dead girl.

Isn’t He’s the same God who leaves the 99 heavenlies for the sake of one; for the sake of us?

Isn’t He’s the exact same God who performs His divine power by dying on the cross; laying it all even for his enemies?

He’s the One who conquered death victoriously through His own death.

Surely, He is the God whose way is higher than our ways…. our God is the surprising God who will always make something new… He’s the One who never stops in making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland (Is. 43:19).

But today, my question for us is this: “Does God still surprise you?” … or perhaps more accurately, “Are we still vulnerable enough to be surprised by God?

If we’re not, maybe, just maybe, maybe we have become too comfortable with our own ‘golden calf’.

From today onwards, if we say in our hearts, “God, I want to be surprised again by You,” then let us earnestly expect; let us yearn to be surprised by God.

Even when we sing our hymns, when we pray our prayers, when we read our scripture, when we plan our budgets, when plan for the future of our church, when decide things for our lives, in every single thing that we do, put it in your heart and in your mind that God is truly here; that God still shows up; and that God is still in the business of making things new.

For our God never changes, --yesterday, today, and forever—God’s still the same. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may it be so. Amen.