

Strange Things
Mark 9:14-29
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Last August many of us participated in the solar eclipse. Our family drove hours west in order to be in the center of the path of totality and to avoid the heavy clouds obscuring eastern Nebraska.

Part of what I enjoyed that day was the shared experience. Not only was the eclipse itself sublime, but there was an extra joy in knowing that so many people were sharing it together and posting their stories and pictures for others to see.

One of my favourites was something Colin Jones said. He was with his grandma and a few others. After the eclipse was over and the sun had returned to normal, he said, “The word awesome ought to be reserved for things like this.”

We humans crave experiences of awe and wonder. And fortunately they do surround us. We hike to the tops of mountains or to see a waterfall. We get up before dawn to see and hear the Sandhill cranes as they awaken. We experience moments of wonder before great art, dancing with our beloved, attending a concert of our favourite band, or watching our child take his or her first steps.

We need to feel deeply, to be part of something wonderful. We long for transcendence. Kendra Creasy Dean writes that “Passion must *feel* like life and death—nothing less—or it is not passion.”

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus comes down from the mountain after his transfiguration and the crowds are astounded, amazed, overcome with awe. The Greek word here is *ekthambein*—a word which no other New Testament writer uses. Some do use *thambein*, which is the normal word for wonder or amazement, though even it is sometimes associated with terror or being rendered immovable. *Ekthambein* is an even more intensive form which will appear again when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane wrestling with what awaits him and will be used the final time when the women appear at the empty tomb on Easter morning.

So the crowds see Jesus and experience an even more intensive form of amazement and terror that overwhelms them. There is just something strange about Jesus.

The television series *Stranger Things* has captivated audiences in recent years with its brilliant mix of 1980’s nostalgia. The show is full of homages to 80’s sci-fi and horror and is of course the story of a group of childhood friends who go searching for the one friend who has disappeared in strange circumstances. Alternative worlds and monsters and evil government agencies are all in the mix. Plus a mother so devoted she goes a little crazy.

I am almost the same age as the characters in the story, and the series plays right into

the myths that shaped my childhood world and my imagination ever since. Think of *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *E. T.* Or the role that Harry Potter plays for a more recent group of children. These childhood stories give us a feeling that life can be adventurous and can contain something greater.

Then, most of us grow up and realize that life is generally more boring. Adolescents and young adults and sometimes even middle aged folk and older experience the boredom and despair of a life without passion and awe.

And so you end up with angst and despair, maybe best expressed by the character Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, “We’re the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war... Our great depression is our lives.”

Or even more cynically by Trent Reznor in the song “Hurt,”

I hurt myself today
To see if I still feel
I focus on the pain
The only thing that's real

Season one of *Stranger Things* ends rather typically with the lost child recovered and the monster defeated, but season two lets you see what you often missed in most stories from our childhood—what happens after the adventure is over?

[One blog](#) I read this week writing about season two of the show said that the characters “seem to be carrying a burden, struggling to cope with the disturbances of their past. They are worn down by a fallen world and its harsh realities. . . . The horror of these characters’ circumstances and the hurt they’ve suffered are beginning to take a toll. They are all just trying to get back to ‘normal.’”

In order to defeat the new monsters of season two, the characters must overcome their burdens. To be victorious they must first defeat their own despair. Despair is not only the enemy of hope; it is also the enemy of awe and wonder. In so many of the great adventure stories, if we give in to our despair, then we fail our mission. The Nothing destroys Fantasia. Dory doesn’t find her parents. Harry won’t return from King’s Cross Station. All of these good stories remind us that if we give in to despair, then we will never succeed at the adventure.

In the Gospel of Mark we also encounter a frightening demon who has captured a little boy and the father who is trying to save him who utters the great words, “I believe; help my unbelief.”

The disciples have been unable to cast out this demon and save the child. Jesus is disappointed and frustrated, angry, they they’ve have proven themselves incapable. Their lack of faith has robbed them of the power they should be experiencing as children of God. When the disciples ask what went wrong, Jesus tells them that they lacked prayer.

Commentators point out that this is a surprising conclusion to the story, given that prayer seems otherwise absent. Ben Witherington writes that maybe the disciples had believed the power to cast out demons, given to them chapters ago, relied upon their own ability and control rather than a continued reliance upon God. In that case, prayer is a reminder to quit

looking to ourselves but to God. Witherington writes, true “discipleship does not result from the effectiveness of one’s own piety but only from the action of God.”

But it was the commentary of Ched Myers I found most insightful. In this life and death scenario—a demon that would kill the boy and Jesus who gives him new life—the real issue is a struggle for belief. Myers then asks, “What is the meaning of ‘resurrection?’” And he proposes “Is it not the exorcism of crippling unbelief, which renders us dead in life rather than alive in our dying?”

The real issue in this gospel story is the same as in the great stories of our childhood--the threat to life is the despair that robs us of awe and wonder.

Myers goes on:

And what is prayer? . . . To pray is to learn to believe in a transformation of self and world, which seems empirically, impossible—as in “moving mountains.” What is unbelief but the despair, dictated by the dominant powers, that nothing can *really* change, a despair that renders revolutionary vision and practice impotent. The disciples are instructed to battle this impotence, this temptation to resignation, through prayer.

If we are to practice passion, then here’s some spiritual wisdom. We must not give in to despair. We must cultivate our sense of awe and wonder. We must remain connected to God as our source of power. And we do that through prayer.

Our childhood stories remind us that we are long for transcendence, we need to feel deeply, and we desire to be a part of something wonderful and strange. Today’s Gospel also reminds us that Jesus is strange. And the most exciting thing is that Jesus invites us to become part of that wonderful strangeness. “The word awesome ought to be reserved for things like this.”