

God Out of Context
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They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he 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.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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Some years ago, on a cold Friday morning in January not unlike today, at ten minutes before 8, a man carrying a violin case got off the metro at L'Enfant Plaza, the hub of federal Washington DC's morning rush hour. The man positioned himself near a wall, took out his weathered violin, dropped a few dollars and some change into the instrument's open case, and began to play. He began with the “chaconne” from Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor. This piece, considered the pinnacle of solo violin repertoire, occasioned little more than a glance from passersby, busy hustling about their business. After the nearly 15 minutes it took to play the chaconne, the musician continued with Franz Schubert's Ave Maria, Manuel Ponce's "Estrellita," then a piece by Jules Massenet, a Bach gavotte, and a final reprise of the chaconne.

The violinist played for almost 45 minutes before putting away the old instrument and disappearing into the crowd. A handful of people stopped to listen for a few moments or toss a dollar bill or some change into the case, one woman greeted the violinist when he finished his final reprise of the chaconne. This woman had seen the violinist three weeks earlier at a free concert at the library of congress. She knew little of classical music, but recognized the musician.

After playing at L'Enfant Plaza that morning, the violinist left for a tour of European capitals, then returned to accept the Avery Fisher prize for outstanding achievement in classical music. The beat-up instrument he played that morning is now worth about 10 million dollars.¹ The musician? Virtuoso violinist Joshua Bell, who was used to performing to sold out crowds and audiences willing to pay upwards of \$80 for a seat. In fact, if you want to see him for yourself, he'll be performing with the Chicago Symphony in June. What a surprise it must have been to play that morning in the subway – unknown and practically unnoticed.

I can't help but think that this is exactly the kind of scene the author of Mark's gospel is trying to set for us this morning in our reading from chapter 1. Jesus entered the synagogue and began to teach. He was an unknown entity in Capernaum. Mark's author believed Jesus to be nothing less than the son of God – a veritable rock star, a virtuoso like Joshua Bell – so it must have felt strange to write of a scene where he was completely and utterly unknown. But then something happened. A man stood in the back of the room, he met Jesus' eyes, a light clicked on in his brain, he recognized the teacher, and he 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 may not have received much by way of introduction from the other teachers, but this man, this "possessed" man knew more than his name and hometown – he somehow understood Jesus' purpose – but to everyone else in the room, Jesus was just another teacher. To the

¹ Gene Weingarten. "Pearls Before Breakfast," Washingtonpost.com, April 8, 2007:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html.

passersby in the D.C. suburb that January morning, Joshua Bell was just another starving artist street musician. The truth is, context matters. You don't expect the world's greatest violinist to be performing with his case open on the floor of a train station and you don't expect "the Holy One of God" to be teaching in a simple synagogue. And yet, these things happen and people are either pleasantly surprised to experience unexpected people in unexpected places, or they simply go about their business, completely oblivious to the fact they just brushed elbows with a rock star. Context matters. In fact, that was exactly the point of Bell's performance in the train station – to see if people would recognize transcendent beauty in an unexpected setting and stop to drink it in. For the most part, they didn't.

The author of Mark's gospel seems to have drawn the same conclusion – that people simply won't stop to drink it in unless someone points it out for them. Throughout their gospel, the author sets up scenes like this one, where Jesus does something entirely unexpected and causes the observers to ask existential questions about his nature like "who is this?" And yet, in real life, in 21st century life, there is no all-knowing author like Mark who walks us through the story, causes a commotion at just the right time, and then poses thought-provoking questions intended to help us arrive at their exact same conclusion. I wonder, how often do we cross paths with the divine and not even know it? Context matters.

Who would be surprised to experience the holy in a moving church service, a spirited song, or a heartfelt prayer? Who would be surprised to experience the holy in Communion or Baptism? Who would be surprised to find Jesus in a manger or on a cross? Honestly, none of us, because that's exactly where we expect them to be. Context matters. We expect to experience the divine in church, but that's only one day a week. What about the other 6 days? Is it possible that like a world-renowned musician in a train station or, as Mark says, the Holy One of God, unknown in the synagogue – is it possible divinity actually shows up in other places, at other times, through other people and, because it's out of context, we don't even recognize it?

The truth is, friends, that church is meant not to be the one place in the world where we see and experience the divine. It's meant to be the place that teaches us to expect the divine in all places. And not just all places, but in all people as well. Context matters and if we expected the holy to show up in our day-to-day lives, in common people and normal circumstances, maybe, just maybe, we'll start to see that that's exactly what it does.

May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to receive divinity in unexpected places and unexpected people. And may those unexpected people and places become exactly where we expect it to be. Amen.