

Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, ‘What are you arguing about with them?’ Someone from the crowd answered him, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.’ He answered them, ‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.’ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’

“How much do I have to believe to still call myself Christian?” That’s a question that every minister gets asked at least once in his or her lifetime – if not directly it’s at least implied. Those who usually ask the question are either under the assumption that there’s something irreconcilable about faith commitments and a very narrowly defined notion of reason, or they have formed the unfortunate impression that due to some limitation on their part, they could never really be counted among the faith-full. Before the point passes into the land of generalization, let me stop to ask, do any of you fit into those categories?

So what is belief or unbelief anyway? And what is faith? It may surprise you to know that there used to be a much greater consensus about the answer to that question. Do you remember those things called catechisms and memory verses? I imagine if you were to ask a group of first year seminary students, “What is the chief end of man?” they might look at you like you were from Mars. Presbyterians used to be shaped in part by the asking and answering of that question. It’s more common now for belief to become a private, personal affair; immune to scrutiny or examination. It can be just about anything and is sometimes little more than nothing.

This is just to say that in the climate of our times, “faith” has become a slippery word. In late modernity we’ve become so trained not to say something that might be perceived as offensive that we often end up saying things that are not very particular. I remember hearing a sermon a few years ago at a small Presbyterian church in Los Angeles in which the preacher exhorted us for a good twenty minutes to “have faith” without ever really getting around to telling us what we were supposed to have faith in. At some point we’re going to have to answer the question: faith in what? Belief in whom? And does it matter?

Ministers are often presented with the possibility of preaching about faith. I have a notion that it’s a perilous task. That may strike you as an odd thing for a preacher to say from a pulpit. But is there anything anyone can say that will give someone else faith? Imagine that you love music and you want your child to love music. You can talk about music everyday, all day long, and it won’t make a bit of difference. But if in your talking about music you also take your child to the symphony; if you also listen to music at home, and if you even set her down at the piano and provide the time and space for her imagination to be captured, she might just want to love what you love.

In the ninth chapter of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has just come down from the mount of transfiguration where Peter, James, and John saw him radiant with the glory of God. It was the very definition of a mountain top spiritual experience. But, as they say, there’s no rest for the weary. The moment of rest is short-lived. As he comes down from the mountain Jesus steps into the tense scene of an all out battle featuring the other nine disciples, in the midst of a large crowd locked in a hot dispute with the religious authorities while off to the side stands a lonely father struggling desperately for the life of his son and the existence of his faith.

Jesus was no stranger to controversy in his ministry – it was part of the Jerusalem air he breathed. And in his absence the struggle shifts to the disciples who, God bless ‘em, always seem to be a bit lost when Jesus is not around. In our gospel lesson this morning we are told that a great crowd was gathered around the disciples and the scribes to see the show. And when Jesus approaches, a curious thing happens – the spectators give way and are overcome with awe at Jesus’ arrival. You get the sense that things suddenly quiet down they understand what exactly is at stake in this debate and their hopes are riding on the shoulders of this itinerant rabbi who suddenly appears on the scene.

Jesus asks one of the disciples, “What are you arguing about with them?” A man from the crowd steps forward and accepts responsibility for setting things off. “Teacher,” he says, “I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” This is what lit the fuse – the religious leaders became incensed at the disciple’s presumption that they had the authority to drive out demons. How, they wanted to know, could Jesus possibly be a legitimate teacher if his disciples fail? In front of the crowd Jesus’ authority has been called into question and we’re meant to find in this scene all the tension of a wild-west showdown.

His response is poignant. Having just come down from the mountain where he experienced communion with the Father and where none other than the Father’s voice

declared, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!” Jesus finds himself immediately confronted with the full force of unbelief – listening to him is the last thing this crowd wants to do. “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?” We hear in his exasperation echoes of the Psalmist, “How long, O Lord?” and of the prophetic grievances against unbelieving Israel. Can you imagine the loneliness Jesus must have felt? The only one with perfect faith in the midst of an unbelieving world.

The Episcopal minister Fleming Rutledge wonders if Jesus’ exasperation is limited to the people of Jesus’ time only or if it extends right into the present to include people like you and me. It’s a burden that he alone can bear. And so rather than give up, in order that the unfaithful may be given a glimpse of God’s kingdom, Jesus bears with the crowd and says “Bring him to me”.

In just a few words the gospel writer has sketched a scene in which Jesus is the center of a great storm of activity, surrounded by people who are alternately unreliable, indifferent, or antagonistic. The disciples have routinely missed their calling, thinking that the authority Jesus grants them can be co-opted by their desires and used to serve their own interests. They have neglected to notice the connection between Jesus’ authority and Jesus’ self-abandonment to the sovereign will of the Father. And because they’ve been exposed as religious frauds, the crowd is left wondering if Jesus isn’t offering snake-oil as well. In particular, Mark zeroes in on the hopes of the boy’s father who have been dashed by the disciples’ inability to bring healing.

And so Jesus says, “Bring the boy to me.” The moment he does, we are told that “the evil spirit saw Jesus” and seizes the boy. The horror of the scene resets – the boy is thrown to the ground in convulsions. Most commentators agree that the boy is suffering from epilepsy, in fact Matthew’s gospel makes the connection explicit. But Mark doesn’t want us to lose the sense that the boy’s condition is part of the brokenness of the world that Jesus has come to set right. He wants us to be clear that the epilepsy is differentiated from the boy - there’s a force beyond his own consciousness at work in him. I’m reminded of the experiments that the neuroscientist Wilder Penfield conducted where would cause a conscious patient to move his hand by applying an electrode to the motor cortex of one hemisphere of the brain and then ask the patient to describe what happened. Penfield writes, “Invariably his response was: ‘I didn’t do that. You did.’ When I caused [the patient] to vocalize, he said: ‘I didn’t make that sound. You pulled it out of me.’”

We are to understand that Jesus is not healing the boy by using the power of persuasion or positive thinking. There’s something from outside that is oppressing him – interestingly, Jesus never speaks a word to the boy himself. The boy also never speaks to Jesus, or to anyone else - all the terror of the scene is happening with him at the center, but the boy himself is quite removed from the scene.

And so the drama unfolds on two stages at once. On the one hand this is a story about a real boy and a real father’s desperate longing to see him freed from an oppressive force. On the other, this is a story about the power of God confronting and abolishing the powers of darkness forever.

In Mark's gospel, the demons are always terrified of Jesus. But the father can't see the second stage where the cosmic plot is being acted out while he's personally involved in the drama of the first. He, like any parent confronted with the illness of a child, is held captive by fear, bewilderment, helplessness, and profound distress. He has brought his son to Jesus' disciples in the hope that their reputation is accurate, but their failure has shattered that hope. Jesus asks him how long his son has been affected by these seizures. The father's journey toward faith begins with this simple exchange. The question allows him to tell his story – he can come to Jesus as a total person with hopes and fears and his last comments to Jesus reveal the depth of his despondency, “if you can do anything, please have compassion and help us.”

These are some of the most real, visceral words in all of scripture. He is looking at his son whom he loves with the certain knowledge that his life is about to be snuffed out by an evil power, and he is very doubtful about Jesus' ability to do a thing about it. Everything in the story comes down to this point. The action halts on both stages. The cosmic forces are ready to claim their victory. The boy is convulsing uncontrollably. We have already seen Jesus vanquish the forces of evil with a single word. But he pauses. Evoking faith is a much harder matter. His disciples have failed, the crowd is waiting for the dénouement, the religious leaders are cursing Jesus, willing his failure and yet he draws out the conversation just a little longer. “*If you are able? All things can be done for the one who believes?*”. Immediately, the father cries out “I believe; help my unbelief!”

With a single prayer of desperation, this father casts himself into the very presence of God. All of his hopes and aspirations are placed in the hands of Jesus – into the hands of the only sure source of hope and healing power. The scene is powerful. Sensing that the critical moment has arrived, the crowd begins to stir and Jesus speaks words that reveal his singular authority, casting the demon out and leaving the boy looking like death. In an act that foreshadows the crushing defeat of death, Jesus raises the boy from his death-like state and restores him to his father.

Jesus says, “All things can be done for the one who believes.” On the face of it, this must have seemed an elusive hope. The one thing needful is the think he lacks. The biblical Scholar Jim Edwards writes “true faith is always aware how small and inadequate it is”. The father does not become faithful when he reaches a certain degree of conviction, but rather when he takes what little faith he has and stakes everything on it. Jesus is not asking this father to believe in the principle of belief. He's not asking him to make an intellectual assent to a particular set of doctrines or to engage in a particular set of spiritual disciplines. Those things have their place, but what Jesus is calling for is radical openness to God; “a decision in the dace of all to the contrary that Jesus is able.”

Most scholars believe that St. Mark was part of a congregation that was facing terrible consequences for its confession of Jesus as Lord. It's not difficult to see how Mark could have had this in mind throughout his telling of Jesus' story. Most people in his world did not place their trust in Jesus. To his world, their faith in a God who could heal illness or raise people from the dead seemed like madness or so much wishful thinking. When the evil Spirit abandons the boy, most of the onlookers believe that he is dead. I wonder how many of them started to pack their bags and go home. Jesus acting on this father's behalf appears to have made things worse rather than better. Was that what the father placed his hope in?

“But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up.” The phrase in Greek reads literally, Jesus “raised him, and he was resurrected”. Here is the Easter affirmation. In the verses that precede and follow the disciples ask what it means to be resurrected and here Jesus lifts the curtain and gives them a wide open viewing of the triumph of God’s kingdom.

Friends, Jesus is not waiting for you to have it all figured out. He is not holding his breath waiting to see if you or I have got what it takes. Christ alone has perfect faith. A sort of mentor of mine told a story a few weeks ago on his blog about what he calls an unexpected encounter with God. He went to visit a friend’s mother at a care facility and after a good conversation asked if he could pray with her before he left. “Yes,” he writes, “she was eager for it. So we held hands, and before bowing my head I asked, “Is there anything in particular that you would like me to pray for?” She paused, then said, *“Just pray what you have. That will be enough.”*

Just pray what you have. Friends, that’s the promise of the gospel. Just take what faith you have and surrender it to the one whose faith is perfect – the only one “for whom all things can be done.” It is by Christ’s faith that we receive our faith. You may not particularly feel too faithful, but you wouldn’t be here if you did not have at least an inkling of faith. Just take what you have and pray, “I believe Lord, help my unbelief” and do so in the knowledge that Jesus will speak the word that silences our fears forever.