

“Jesus in the Struggle of Faith”

Mark 9:14-29

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 12, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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It was just after the transfiguration of Jesus, where Jesus was on the mountain with Peter, James, and John. His glory as God was permitted to shine through Him for a moment so they could see it (Mark 9:2-8). Now He comes down from the mountain of glory. He comes back to the world of humanity tormented by the devil and beset by the fallenness and brokenness of human nature.

He comes down to wherever He had left his other disciples. He finds them with a large crowd gathered around. They were having an argument with some scribes (Mark 9:14). Apparently, the argument had to do with the man who had brought his son to try to find Jesus.

The text says that the man’s son had a demonic spirit. When it seized the boy, it threw him to the ground, caused him to foam at the mouth and grind his teeth, and then made him become rigid (Mark 9:18).

This might present some problems for us, so let’s talk about this for a moment. The problem arises because the description of what was happening to the boy sounds like something like epilepsy. We would probably want to understand something like epilepsy in physical terms. Yet, Scripture says here that there was a demonic spirit in the boy causing the boy’s seizures. That might make us uncomfortable.

So let’s say this. There are physical causes for seizures. Physical causes are what we are dealing with in the vast majority of these types of cases. Seizures could also be directly caused of an actual spirit. Dealing with an actual spirit, though, is quite rare.

Now the text says that Jesus was dealing with an actual spirit on this occasion. There are also clues to this that we see in what happened when they brought the boy to Jesus. The Scripture says that when the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion, and caused him to roll around on the ground and foam at the mouth. The boy’s father explained that the spirit had often tried to throw the boy into the fire and into water to harm and destroy the boy (Mark 9:22). What these things indicate is personal and purpose-filled behavior, such as a spirit would do.

There are two errors to avoid. On the one hand, there is the error of seeing demonic activity whenever there is a seizure and in medical conditions in which seizures are a symptom. That error could lead people not to get medical attention for someone if such a seizure should occur. That would be a mistake. And treating people as if they have a demon when they really don’t is cruel and can be damaging to faith in Christ.

On the other hand, there is the error of imposing a modern, materialistic worldview on the text, allowing the modern scientific view of things to determine what could possibly exist and what could possibly happen in categorical, absolute, and dogmatic terms. That is what the modern scientific view does. This view says that real demonic spiritual activity cannot and does not happen, ever; there is no such thing.

But it is a fundamental misunderstanding of what exists to rule out the devil and evil spirits categorically. Because then one will not understand the sources and potential of evil in the world. More importantly, then one would rule out our very deep and profound need for Jesus, and be left only with human resources, being left with looking only to ourselves. Many modern human

beings are finding deep dissatisfaction with the modern scientific view, and often despair, but they are not sure just what to affirm.

The overall point of the story is to teach us that Jesus has power over all things spiritual and physical and to seek His help in all things and take refuge in Him. The modern, materialistic worldview excludes God's action in Jesus, categorically.

In any event, in the midst of this episode, we see that the stage is set for some important teaching about faith and for Jesus's action. The man brought his boy to Jesus's disciples. They could not cast the spirit out (Mark 9:18).

This prompted Jesus to say: "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19 NASB).

Here Jesus reveals the condition of all humanity. The essential problem is unbelief. This means that human beings do not naturally have the faith in God that is required in order to have spiritual communion with God and to be right with God, and thereby to have the power to keep and make all things new. No matter how much human beings may be confident in themselves and what the human spirit can accomplish, Jesus's indictment stands, "O unbelieving generation." Human beings demonstrate and live in the evidence of this everyday. We do not have spiritual power.

So Jesus says, "Bring the boy to me" (Mark 9:19).

There is a categorical difference between Jesus and us having to do with faith. Jesus had perfect faith. We don't. We live by the grace that covers our imperfect faith. We live by Christ's power being made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). We live by trusting Christ to do what we cannot do until that day we are truly made new in His kingdom in eternal life and the glory of resurrection.

So they brought the boy to Jesus. The man said to Jesus, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (Mark 9:22 ESV). In response, Jesus said this: "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23 ESV). When Jesus says, "If you can," what He means is something like this: since you have raised the issue "if you can." And then Jesus says, "All things are possible for one who believes."

The man then responded by saying this: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24 ESV). I think we can identify with that man.

It's striking how Jesus saying "All things are possible for one who believes" in that circumstance prompts the man's reaction. The reason is that Jesus saying all things are possible for one who believes is such a stark contrast to us when we find ourselves in the brokenness of human life, broken by sin, broken in body, assaulted by the devil and evil. Adam and Eve were created in perfect faith and with power over all creation, in an unbroken spiritual communion with God. They were given rulership over all things by God as the pinnacle of God's creation here on earth (Genesis 1:28).

But they abandoned faith in God. They first doubted God's unfailing goodness, meaning, they doubted God's character and His intentions toward them. Faith has to do with trusting God's character and His intentions implicitly, in an undivided way, no matter what. But this is exactly the problem they brought to humanity.

As a consequence, they doubted the wisdom of God's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They thought themselves wiser. They were puffed up in pride by the devil's wily temptation. The devil taught them to look to themselves for the answers, and the wisdom, and the power. They acted contrary to God's Word (Genesis 3:1-6). They lost spiritual power.

What they found was foolishness, sin, and powerlessness. Their unbelief was the entry of the devil into ruining God's creation. It was the point also at which God subjected all creation to futility. Though Scripture says that God subjected all creation to futility for the purpose of hope in the restoration at the end of the age in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:20-21).

Jesus's statement "All things are possible for the one who believes" is the truth. It is also the statement of the perfect standard. As the standard it reveals to us the man's desperation: "I believe; help my unbelief." It is our desperation as we live in and experience the brokenness of our existence. For us, we live in the struggle of believing and unbelieving. It is the knowledge of good and evil. Because we live in this struggle, not all things are possible for us.

We give thanks and glory to God that Jesus does not live in that struggle. So He brings the possibility into our lives in Himself personally. He brings the kingdom of God. All things are possible for Jesus. He will do all things in His purpose, in His plan, in His timing, fulfilled once and for all in the consummation of all things on that great and glorious Day. We turn to Him. We also leave it in His hands, whatever it may be.

The man's "I believe" was fulfilled in bringing His son to Jesus. The man's "help my unbelief" was met by Jesus Himself doing in grace and mercy what the man's unbelief prevented him from doing. In faith we come to Jesus to find forgiveness; to find a gracious God who hears us; to find God walking with us; to find the faith to place it all into His hands. At the same time we recognize that we also struggle with unbelief due to the fallenness of human nature that we also participate in, being human. A fallenness that the Holy Spirit teaches us to dislike and to deplore. Yet, our faith, which faith we really do have, relies on Jesus to do what our unbelief cannot do. In Jesus all things are possible. In human strength, not so.

So Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the boy. It convulsed the boy and came out. The boy lay there as if dead. But Jesus took the boy by the hand and lifted him up in life. The boy stood up alive (Mark 9:26-27).

A little later, when Jesus and His disciples were alone again away from the crowd, they asked Jesus why they could not cast that spirit out. Jesus told them that that spirit could only be driven out by prayer (Mark 9:29). It seems like Jesus understood the disciples as referring to a technique or a spiritual power and ability they thought they had in themselves to be able to cast that spirit out. By referring them to prayer, however, Jesus was referring them to God's power and strength alone.

The words from Isaiah fit well here: "Who among you fears the LORD, hearing the voice of his Servant; [who among you] who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God" (Isaiah 50:10.).

How can we trust in the name of the LORD and rely on our God if we are in darkness? His Servant comes into the darkness. He meets us here. He speaks. He reveals the Father and does His will. His name is Jesus. And we have seen what He can do. He brings the kingdom. He has atoned for all our sin, even our lack of faith. He has risen and lives. And so He fills our faith with Himself. Though the world around us may seem to be darkness. He is our light, and we walk in Him, even if ever so imperfectly in the struggle. And He will lead us home and have the final say. For now He helps us. On that great and glorious Day He will make all things new. Amen.