

Help my Unbelief.  
Mark 9:14-29

Deuteronomy 31:1-13

Hebrews 13:1-17

Congregation Psalm 119 145-152

(read Mark 9-29) Hot on the heels sort of speak of the account of the transfiguration we see in our passage this morning that Jesus was confronted again with a multitude of people, but this time the commotion was around the disciples that had been left behind and while they were waiting for Jesus return it seems that a father had brought his demon possessed son to them. As we see in the first few verses here that was a debate going on between the disciples and the scribes, likely it was over the matter of these disciples failed attempts to cast out this demon from this child. It is not entirely out of the question that they would be attempting to do so, for previously Jesus had given them the power to do so when he had sent them off on their own back in chapter 6:7 which says, “And he called the 12 to himself, and began to send them out two by two and gave the power over unclean spirits” and we can see that they were actually successful in doing so in verse 12 of the same chapter. “So they went out and preached that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

So it is not as if they were just acting on their own thinking that they could do something they could not, Jesus had previously charged them with the mission and granted them the ability to do this very thing. Yet here, we find that they are unable and have now gotten into a debate with the scribes. This is one of the most detailed and graphic accounts of such a miracle, to which it would seem most of our horror movies today have probably taken an influence from. In other accounts it is never really mentioned how long these people who have become demon possessed have suffered, but in this case we see he has been suffering since childhood. I can only imagine the frustration and desperation of his parents in their description of his affliction.

There has been quite a few major trends as we have gone through this book, one of the major ones is the theme of those who are on the inside, close to Christ, and those who are on the outside, the nameless multitudes and religious elite. Also Jesus' constant urging for “those who have ears to let them hear” To listen up, to pay attention. But as we have seen in most of these cases that it would seem that Jesus' words largely has fallen on deaf ears, but in the large masses of deaf people unable to hear and understand Jesus' teaching there was always a few who act in faith. Mark doesn't really record what happens to these people as they go on their way with the exception of the Demoniac of Garasene, who asks Jesus if he may join him on his journeys but instead Jesus sends him home, to be a witness to this family, and friends. Then later we see when Jesus returns to those Gentile shores across the sea of Galilee he is not met with fear as he was at first, but large crowds gather there as well to hear him speak.

So while it may not be explicit, we see hints of people coming to faith, believing that Jesus is the Messiah who was promised, whose power and ministry has come from the Father. But in the midst of all these multitudes of people we read about, the leper, the demoniac, the paralytic, the woman with the issue of blood, and the resurrection of the ruler of the synagogues daughter, all of these who acted out of faith, and as Jesus tells them it is because of their faith that they are healed. Which makes this account of the demon possessed boy a rather interesting one for as Jesus exclaims when confronted with this scene “Oh Faithless generation, how long shall I be with you, how long shall I bear with you?”

As we have seen in all of these accounts that even the disciples are often lacking faith, even when we see the faith of others the disciples are doubtful and fearful. Remember when they were on the boat and Jesus was sleeping? They thought they were going to die, which if you think about it is interesting. Jesus came to them, called them out to follow him, they listen and obeyed and have witnessed and heard his ministry, and had even been instructed as to the meaning and purpose of the parables yet they doubt and think that their ship will sink and that they will all perish, yet Jesus is on this ship. Later, what we saw in the end of chapter 8 when Jesus explicitly tell his disciples that he will suffer and die, Peter rebukes him because he believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God therefore he can not die. What we really are seeing here is the progression of their understanding but I just thought that it was interesting that they have gone from even though they are claiming to understand and believe that Jesus is the Messiah they were afraid that their boat was going to be bashed into pieces by the storm which would have meant to the death of Jesus, to here where they deny the possibility that he would die.

I guess in actuality what that ends up proving is the difference in their faith, and how it has grown. From following Jesus and agreeing what he is telling them, to in the case of Peter rebuking him we see that it has turned to true belief. But all of that is to say, that throughout all of this even the disciples lacked faith, and lacked understanding and we are just now starting to see them beginning to grasp what they have been taught. But as we have seen, every time that they are away from Jesus it seems that a crisis arises. The major lesson we can learn from that, just as the major lesson that is in this passage of scripture is that we are powerless without Jesus. When we try to do things on our own it will more than likely end up in failure just like we see the disciples here trying to cast out the demon from this small boy.

Now I will clarify here, that this is my opinion, but I believe that it is strongly implied here that these disciples were attempting to perform this exorcism trusting in their own abilities. At this point they have done this a few times at least, and have been fairly successful and as it is human nature we become confident in our own abilities. A good example of that I see at work all the time. We train a new person on the forklift and they are cautious, careful, slow and thoughtful in every action, but as they become confident is when they become more of a danger, for their confidence outweighs their ability and it usually in this sort of interim time that they make lots of mistakes. We see that in many aspects of our lives do we not? I think it was probably not different here, these disciples confidence in their ability to perform miracles actually outweighed their faith in God who had granted them that ability. I say this because of Jesus' response to them. Mark is very descriptive here in this account, and as we had put forth in the introduction to this book it is believed that Mark who was an understudy of Peter was writing these accounts as told by Peter himself, who was an eye witness to all of these things.

Picture Jesus, Peter, James, and John coming down the mountain to see this multitude and in the middle of it is the remainder of Jesus disciples debating with the scribes and probably rather frustrated themselves at their inability to heal this boy. It is only speculation but I can imagine that the scribes were likely taunting, or ridiculing them for this inability, for as we have seen throughout this entire book it would seem any run in that Jesus or his disciples has had with them was refuting their accusations, or dealing with their attempts to undermine and discredit Jesus ministry. Then Jesus approaches, people in the crowd see him and flock to him, but he passes by them and approaches the scribes who are locked in this debate with the disciples, he asks them "what are you discussing with my disciples" but they don't answer, the father of the boy steps in and answers. Then we have Jesus response.

“Oh faithless generation” It is a response of frustration, likely in his disciples who were attempting to cast out this demon which is why my opinion that they were attempting to do so by their own ability, and it was a response in frustration to the scribes who have been blinded and unable to see that the messiah has come, and that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises, traditions, and laws that they have been given and instead of hearing him, and understanding they seek to discredit, to silence, and ultimately have him killed. In verse 15 we see that the crowds recognize Jesus as he descended and drew close and they were amazed and ran to greet him. Some scholars have suggested that their reason for amazement was because his glory was still showing and his face was likely still a glow as Moses was when he returned from Mt Sinai. The problem with this idea is that he had just told Peter, James and John to keep what they had seen secret, and to tell no one until he had risen from the dead.

So it makes little sense that would be the case, I think it was more likely the excitement and the promise of hope of a resolution to the events at hand that sparked the crowd to amazement and excitement. They were likely not aware that Jesus was nearby. This shows the very reason why the scribes and pharisees were seeking to discredit, or silence Jesus for they had lost their authority over the spiritual matters and the crowds were not deferring to them, but rather to Jesus. They were not seeking the scribes for teaching and wisdom but were amazed and would rush to Jesus. This shifting focus to Jesus shows a recognition that even in the multitudes that his authority was greater than that of the scribes. Having been dissatisfied with the disciples ability, and the argument and ridicule of the scribes when Jesus arrives on the scene they now have hope.

One commentary I read had applied the hope and excitement of the crowd to the churches hope and excitement in the return of Jesus. Remembering that Mark wrote this to the churches who were suffering persecution and martyrdom under the rule of Nero, but Mark reminds them here in their hope in Jesus who is able to deliver when it seems that there is no hope of delivery. Throughout each of the events, when the disciples have felt that they were alone, when all hope was lost, Jesus always came to deliver them from what ever crisis had befallen them. And we see a picture of that in the excitement and greeting of the people when Jesus approaches. But as we see even though he approaches the scribes to confront them about their argument with his disciples the father whose son is suffering interjects, for his concern is not with the disciples inability to deliver his son, or the scribes argument as to their inability, but his concern is with his son and seeing Jesus here now brings hope for deliverance.

We see as this boy is brought to Jesus that the spirit who has been tormenting him convulses him and he starts foaming at the mouth. Just like with the Demoniac, this evil spirit that has possessed this boy reacts at the arrival of Jesus, but as we see that Jesus has authority even over the demons when he casts them out. There is no debate, no battle of wills and powers, there is only his authority and command, leave, and never return. I was talking to Aaron a few weeks ago and he was saying that there has been a massive resurgence in religious paganism. This idea of evil spirits, in fact in a conversation I had with a coworker she told me she was attempting to scare off evil spirits by burning sage and walking through the house. People are afraid of demons, ghosts, and the supernatural. They get caught up in the idea of places being haunted by spirits, or the possibility of demonic possession. They are afraid of these things, yet give God little thought, or out right mock him.

Yet as we see the demons are powerless when confronted by God, indeed they are subject to him. He commands, they obey, yet people are obsessed and afraid of demons. They should be afraid of God! They believe in the demonic, in the supernatural yet, they deny God. I am reminded of Jesus teaching that we find in Mathew chapter 10, verse 28. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”

God is the ultimate authority, and as we have seen has indeed already defeated Satan and his minions, rendering them powerless in the presence of Jesus. As we saw with Satan's 40 days of temptations of Jesus after his baptism, Jesus has come and is the more powerful one, who has come to bind Satan, the strong man, and liberate his captives. But just as we see here with this boy, it is the same when one who is enslaved to sin, whose father is the devil is confronted with Jesus. When the light of God's word shines into our dark souls it is not met first with love and peace, but anger and turmoil. It is our natural tendency in our fallen state to reject God, not having eyes to see, or ears to hear to the natural mind faith in God is foolishness, ridiculous superstition, a crutch for the weak.

This account here of this father and his son really does not focus on the child, while it pertains to him and his suffering that he has gone through for probably years, to the point of being near death as we see in the fathers description, that he is often thrown into the fire and into the water to destroy him. Then he asks Jesus, If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us. Of course this really has nothing to do with Jesus ability, or even his compassion for as we have seen he has compassion on the multitudes and the sick, but Jesus comes back to the father and says, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." Everything comes down to faith, and belief in Christ. In the case of the paralytic Jesus said because of the faith of his friends he was healed, and the woman with the issue of blood who said if I could only just touch the hem of his garment I will be healed, Jesus said it was because of her faith that she was healed.

And here Jesus points to the faith of this father, who cries out, I do believe, help me to overcome my unbelief. This crying out asking to be granted faith, is an act of true faith. For true faith does not presume that it is enough, or that because of it there has been merit granted earning favor. One who has true faith will recognize their own failure and lack of their ability to believe, to understand, to act and to do as they ought, knowing that this faith does not come from themselves, that the ability to believe, or to have patience in trial, or strength in persecution, or peace in time of turmoil is nothing something that one can convince themselves to have but rather it comes from outside ones self.

It is granted, faith is given, the ability to hear, and to believe is given, patience, strength, wisdom, peace all all things that are granted to God's children through grace. Faith is the bridge between our frail human understanding and existence to the all sufficient all powerful God. And that bridge has been built, by God through his son, the true temple in whom God meets man, the one true sacrifice whose blood once and for all pays the price of atonement of sin, for the true Israel, who are all of God's children who believe and have faith. This fathers crying out to be granted faith, to be given faith, to help his unbelief, it is not because he didn't believe, but because he understood that his faith, and belief was not sufficient in itself, and that he must rely on God who is the only one who can grant him such faith.

He had just seen Jesus disciples unable to cure his son, an argument arose with the scribes but when Jesus comes the father approaches him and cries out, have compassion on my family, and on my son, I believe but grant me the belief that I need! True faith has no confidence in itself, and it doesn't judge God by the weakness of his followers. After Jesus disciples were unable to cure the boy, he could have easily walked away having his hopes dashed believing that since Jesus followers can't do this, then Jesus himself would also be unable. I can only imagine it was along this line that the scribes were arguing with the disciples that were there.

And it is the same today, Faith in God through the foolishness of our attempts of ministry is because of God and his ability and power not because of our own. When God calls his children, opening their ears and giving them a new heart the turn in faith, repent and believe. Not because of the preachers ability, or our ability in our witness, but because God granted that faith by his own sovereign will, by his own sovereign grace. I think just as it was said that there was nothing in Jesus' appearance that was desirable that men should follow, it is the same with the word of God. It isn't attractive, it sounds foolish, but just like the parables, it is intentional and purposeful. For if it was our faith that we mustered up ourselves, it would be a work, it would be something that we had done to gain favor with God. And I think that many people think that is what faith is, that we somehow muster up enough faith to believe in God, and because we have faith then we have earned merit with God and are granted the new birth.

But biblically we can not even see the kingdom of God without faith, we can't have faith in something we can not see nor understand. That was the entire point of Jesus discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus tells him, Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again he can not see the kingdom of God. And this new birth, and faith, is granted to us by God for as I said if it was our own it would then be a work but Ephesians 2 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, it is by God's grace toward you, not your faith, but his grace that has saved you, but it is through faith which is the gift of God that has been granted to us, not of ourselves, but of God who who shows mercy. It is not of works, we do not gain favor by our own merit, God does not owe us mercy because we exercise a faith that we create, it is a gift, otherwise its a work, and salvation is not of works lest any man should boast.

For we are his workmanship, we are created in Christ Jesus through the new birth for good works, we are God's creation, his project, created in his Son for good works, which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them. This is not an I do something I gain something situation, We are the subject of God's work, of his love, of his grace toward us while we are dead sinners to hate him.

The crying out of this father, should be our prayer as well. I believe, but help my unbelief. Our faith at times is lacking, if we have doubts, fears, worries, it is likely because we are not trusting God's promises as we ought. What peace can be had from meditating on God's sovereignty, knowing that what ever it is that is causing this doubt, or fear has been allowed by your father, and he promises that he will never leave or forsake you. When we go to him in prayer over any issue that is weighing on our hearts we should not doubt, but believe, and cry out to God to help our unbelief. Grant us the faith we need to persevere, to continue on recognizing that our hope is in our sovereign savior.

Looking at the last few verses here this morning there are a few things to point out. Starting in verse 25. "When Jesus saw the people came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it. Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more! Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, He is dead. The disciples had just asked Jesus about his own death and resurrection, and here they are given an object lesson in this little boy. This also is a picture of how God works in the lives of his children. It would seem that this little boys fate had worsened, he was free of the demonic influence, but now appeared dead. I wonder what was going through his fathers mind at this time, could doubt have risen up, guilt asking himself what have I done? Lord, it has become worse! My child is now dead! But Jesus reaches down took him by the hand and lifted him up and he arose.

Sometimes it has to get darker before we can see the light. Sometimes the trials that come before us seem to never end, there seems to never be relief, it drives us to despair, maybe even anger. It seems that often times we need to be driven to despair and to the end of our ability and understanding before we cry out to God to help our unbelief. Sometimes God allows us to remain in some sort of situation or problem that we are seeking deliverance from for the simple fact that we need to have faith and trust in him to see it through, our reliance is not on our own ability but on that which is so graciously given to us. I think of Paul and his constant prayer for God to remove the thorn in his side, whatever that may have been but God did not, but rather told him, my grace is sufficient for you. Paul understood that in this weakness his faith was made strong having to have his soul reliance upon God.

And lastly this morning, in the last 2 verses we are looking at this morning it says, “And when he had come into the house, his disciples ask him privately, Why could we not cast it out? So he said to them, this kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.” A reoccurring theme throughout the book of Mark is the disciples inabilities and their inadequacy of their ministry with Jesus. To quote James Edwards, “Service in fellowship with Christ is characterized by constant awareness of the inadequacy of the servant. As this story illustrates, Jesus calls his disciples to tasks beyond their abilities, and the fact that the task surpasses their abilities is evidence that the ministry is Christ's not theirs. The inadequacy of the disciples is not their fault, nor should it have the effect of impairing either their faith or fellowship with Christ. Rather, inadequacy drives the disciples to prayer, which is God's gift to them and another form of fellowship with Jesus as their Lord.”

This was a lesson that the disciples needed to learn, and I times I think we too need to learn it. When life is good, when things are going our way we feel little need for God, but when those hard times come usually after we have exhausted our own hope and resources we come to God. Sometimes God brings us to our own proverbial demon possessed boy problem, we try, we struggle, to attempt to make it through, but this kind only is delivered by prayer and fasting. The central lesson here for these disciples, and for us I think is the truth of our inadequacy's, and God's sufficiency. His authority, his ability, his grace, his mercy, his deliverance. Oh father, I believe, help my unbelief.