

Mark 9

“Lord I believe help my unbelief”

I preached a sermon on this very text two weeks ago at a funeral for a beautiful man, who like me and so many others, struggled with the reality of evil in the world. Who, the scientist as he was, wanted to see a correlation of inputs and outputs and if the input is a merciful God, how can there be an output of children dying and hell?

And, Lord willing, we found as Christians have throughout time, the answer in, again, a merciful God who shows that mercy in sending his Son to die bearing an immeasurable burden, so that the children, might have life eternal.

And we found a Savior who understands those who struggle with these questions. Who doesn't scream at those who have doubts. He will exhort them, yes, but he will still give his grace. This Savior is the one who weeps for the lost, who reveals to the infants, who gives full payment at the 11th hour. Who comes to a father of a possessed son, and doesn't walk away because the father didn't say things the exact right way. That father said “IF you can do anything,” which, uh oh, shows he didn't fully trust in Jesus or fully understand who he is as omnipotent God. Which means this father didn't have it all figured out, he had questions, and part of his faith was wavering, doubtful, fearful, ignorant, un-authentic or whatever buzz word you want to use.

But Jesus does not walk away from him. He only states the truth, that “all things are possible for one who believes,” and then proceeds to cast the darkness and demonic from his son.

In between, we heard it already, the father offers an honest confession, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief!”

Which means that belief and unbelief can exist at the same time in a person. How could they not, I suppose, unless the faith is perfect. And which of us have that? If faith is the assurance of things hoped for, how sure are you? This father wasn't completely sure Jesus could help his son, his disciples couldn't, nothing else he tried for years would work. But here was Jesus himself, maybe he could, "IF you can do anything..."

And this reading is not encouraging us to have a "blind faith" that ignores the evidence. Not at all. Just the opposite. Everything that man had seen, evidentially, was that his son could not get better. But he had heard of this Jesus and the evidence the others presented him with. So he had an input over here that said the darkness was unbeatable, then he had an input over here that Jesus was strong. And then he saw the battle waged in his own son. Convulsing and yelling and struggling, but in the end, the demon loses. Jesus wins.

And I imagine that victory, which he saw with his own eyes, helped his unbelief, and made him more sure. Sure of what? Of who Jesus is, and that everything he says and promises he can accomplish. Like dying and rising? Like giving eternal life to the world? Those are big claims, how sure can we be of them? Well, I wonder what this father would say? What do the apostles, who saw it and died proclaiming it, what have they said to us?

And so we gather here with our various doubts and fears and sins. And we are tempted, I think, to see this world of darkness and death and think, who could possibly overcome this? Everything we've seen is that dead people, stay dead... We are tempted to look at our sin and think, "who could possibly wash that away?" Everything we've seen is that when you screw up you pay the price, sometimes for a long time... We are tempted in our pride to think, "well, this Church stuff doesn't actually seem to help that much or be relevant, but I can do it on my own..."

And in each of those cases, and any myriad of other scenarios we come here with, we are tempted to look at other things, at the evil in the world, at our sins, at our accomplishments, at others to make ourselves feel better, at the distractions and entertainment....

The disciples did the same thing. They thought they could cast out the demon. “Why could WE not cast it out?” Jesus turns the focus off of them to God’s work: “only through prayer.”

They don’t beat the darkness, we don’t either. God does. And God, taken on flesh in Jesus, is who we can look to to see it in our midst.

And so we say these things that we should: “Look to Jesus, look to His Word, look to the Cross, look to the tomb.” Because there is an output outside of ourselves. A display of justice, mercy, and victory for us. And it is found in Jesus and his Work.

And so our faith is focused on an object. And forgive the illustration you may have heard before from me: Consider a bridge. How much faith you have in that bridge, how sure you are of it, does not make any impact on whether the bridge will hold your weight or not. That is completely up to the bridge.

I suppose we could point out, yes, that to have no faith at all, is to not go across it at all. But we who have the gift of faith to trust in Jesus to varying degrees, like this father, we creep out onto this bridge. And we are jealous of the “real Christians” who boldly stroll across it. But whether you are bold or scared, if the bridge will hold your weight, you’re gonna be just fine.

Jesus is the bridge, is he strong enough to hold you? Is he strong enough to overcome the darkness, is he strong enough to wash you clean of your sin? Is he strong enough to do what is right in matters of good and evil? Is he strong to overcome death and give you life eternal?

Yes, yes, and yes again!

Which is a proclamation that, by God's Spirit, would increase our faith, while at the same time comforting us with the truth that, even when our faith is weak and small, and we are afraid, well, it's not up to us to save us, it's up to him, and that bridge will hold.

He will look with mercy on us sinners and doubters, he will keep his promises made to us in baptism and in His Word. And His Work, in real time, in real history, will continue to go forth calling people to salvation. So when doubts and fears assail us, let us not look inward at our thoughts or feelings or how well we've done... look outside of ourselves. At God's work in creation – this all got here somehow! Look at God's Work to redeem creation at his Cross – that really happened, and it happened for you! Look at God's Work in His Word which tells of his resurrection and those who would die to proclaim it. Look at God's Work in your life to call you, to wash you in the waters, and to give you his promises of forgiveness life and salvation. He can keep them. In Jesus' name. Amen.