

Mark 9:14-29 The Real Jesus, The One with the Boy Who Has Seizures, 8/21/22

Last week in Mark 9, Peter, James and John, 3 of Jesus' disciples had a literal and figurative mountaintop experience. Jesus reveals his heavenly glory shining bright, they meet Moses and Elijah, heroes of the faith. They audibly hear the voice of God, declaring Jesus as the son of God, the Messiah. Maybe this is where we get the phrase mountaintop experience. It's a metaphor for great moments of life, great accomplishments and for Christians this can be true spiritually. A missions trip where we see God at work, a powerful worship service, a retreat, a breakthrough in a sin struggle, leading someone to Christ. I thank God for these mountaintop experiences in the Christian life and they are a great grace from God, moving the needle of our faith forward.

But most of the Christian journey is lived in the valley between the mountaintops. The valley is a metaphor for reality, the mundane, where pain, disappointment, suffering and the struggle with our broken world and our dysfunctional selves lives. Jesus said in this life you will have struggles. See on the spiritual mountaintop faith seems easy, God is palpable, worship flows out of us, we get a foretaste of eternity in heaven. But in the valley, faith is hard, we have to fight to stay focused on our relationship with God, in the presence of evil, sin and distraction in the world and in us.

This is the pattern in Scripture. Moses has this mountaintop experience on Mt. Sinai, he comes down and finds the people have made a golden calf...seriously? I can't leave you alone for a few days? Elijah is on Mt. Carmel calling down fire from heaven and taking on the prophets of Baal. The very next scene 1 Kings 19 he is afraid, exhausted and depressed...ready to give up ministry. And this is where we pick up our story. Jesus and his disciples have their mountaintop experience, they come down into the valley and are immediately plunged right back into reality, where evil, confusion and failure are present in this story. And what we will see in this story today is that while mountaintops are wonderful and faith comes easy, our faith is forged in the valleys. And faith is what this story is all about. By faith we are saved. Without faith it is impossible to please God. We live by faith not by sight. Today, evidenced in the life of a desperate father, we will see **3 Signs of Faith in the Valleys of Life**

¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.

¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

¹⁶ "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.

¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

Confusion and arguing breaks out, and no surprise the religious leaders are there at the center of it all. And what's sad is that the argument is over this poor, harassed child. We see right away that **in the valley, evil is present**, in this instance manifesting in demonic oppression inside the life this boy, mimicking epilepsy. But you will notice from the text that this is not described as a medical condition; it is described in terms of demonic possession. We should not infer from that that any incidences of epilepsy are demonically induced. When you read the Gospel accounts, you discover that the need for physical healing and the need for liberation from demonic possession sometimes interfaces, but often the two things are entirely distinct from one another. We also learn that this evil spirit is making this boy deaf and mute. This boy is essentially trapped inside his body—unable to hear any comforting words from his father, unable to give voice to his fears and struggles, and unable to control his bodily movements. Such a heart-breaking circumstance.

And the evil, demonic presence and harassment in the 1st century may reveal itself overtly, but make no mistake; these dark forces are just as real today, and you can be certain they are out to do the same thing they have been doing since the beginning: to distort, confuse and to destroy the image of God in a man or in a woman. Just one overt example of this can be seen in the skeletal figures walking in Kensington destroyed by heroin addiction...but also in a thousand subtle ways everyday.

In valley, evil is present, and everyone is confused. It doesn't take long to realize the disciples are out of their depth. They don't seem to know what to do about the presence of evil. Whatever it is they are doing it's not working. The religious leaders are arguing. Probably asking whose fault it is that this boy has this condition, they may have been interrogating the man or criticizing the disciples efforts. And then there is a crowd just spectating like it's a show. To all of this Jesus responds-¹⁹ **"You unbelieving generation. How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"** Jesus is addressing the religious leaders' lack of faith, the crowd, but he's also addressing his own disciples. Later, the disciples ask him why they couldn't fix this problem, they couldn't cast out this demon, and Jesus says it's because you didn't pray! His frustration is that in the presence of evil, they are busy arguing and finding blame, trying to fix the problem on their own.

Notice in the sea of confusion about the presence of evil, who is it that seeks out and responds to Jesus? It's the father. In Matthew's Gospel it says this father fell to his knees before Jesus and called him Lord. And here is where we see the first sign of faith in the valleys of life. **Faith Seeks God in the Presence of Evil**. Now maybe that's stating the obvious but don't pass it by too quickly, just because it's obvious doesn't mean it's easy or natural. I think most of the time we are just like this confused crowd in the presence of evil. We fail to see evil for what it is, we are too callous to it, or blind. Modern people debate if evil and Hell are real...meanwhile evil and hell are the daily experience of millions of people in our world...for families in Ukraine, or modern sex day slaves in Thailand...but you only need to go 10 minutes down the road to see the real-life hell of families torn apart by generational poverty, gang violence and drugs. Then we try to fix it in our own strength. Like the religious leaders, we intellectualize, politicize, moralize it, debating with each other. One example, the tangible presence of evil in a mass

shooting and we stand around it just like this demon harassed boy. It seems the only thing people want to do is argue about who's fault, gun control, politics...That's not to say there aren't arguments to be made, but are we too tribal, too numb, too deaf and blind to see that this is a deeply spiritual problem that should cause us as Christians, as a nation instead to collectively drop to our knees before God and cry out Lord! We repent!

What about when we encounter evil in our own hearts? Our lust, our greed, our resentment... do we just point fingers, that it is someone else's fault, or intellectualize it- it's not so bad we all have our issues? Are we attempting to fix the problems with our own man-made solutions? Or are we getting onto our knees like this father going to Jesus?

Let's continue in our story. In response to this first sign of faith of this father, Jesus says in v. 19 *"Bring the boy to me."* Beautiful words. Like a good doctor seeing a patient, we hear the compassion, the listening to understand in the words of Jesus. ²⁰*So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.*

²¹*Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered.* ²²*"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him."*

Can you feel for this child and his father? This condition isn't because of sin. These are the cards that were dealt to him, this is life in the valley of a broken world. And we don't understand why God allows it, why he doesn't always do something immediate about our circumstances. But while we don't know why, we do know what it isn't. It isn't that God doesn't care; that he's unconcerned, or that he's not powerful. Because we see Jesus, God in the flesh who is here and cares and is compassionate, doing something about it...and specifically did on the cross, and what ultimately he will do when he returns.

The father, in his feeble faith says, *"But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."* To which Jesus replies ²³*"If you can?"* Now I don't think this was an angry or offended response, I think this was said like, when my wife says, "I need you to open this jar of pickles for my, if you can..." "If you can? Oh, baby I'm your man! I was built for this moment!" Yes! *"Everything is possible for one who believes."*

Now we need to slow down here for a moment and ask an important question. And it isn't whether I can open a jar of pickles. *"Can anything happen if I have enough faith?"* This is one of those unqualified, out of context declarations of Jesus that some faith movements have taken to the extreme. That if I believe enough, and I speak that out into the universe, I can harness God's power to manifest what I want into existence. That our words of faith are so powerful that God has to give us what we ask for. And of course, the danger is that there is some kernel of truth in that notion, belief is powerful and God does move in conjunction with faith in our lives and in the world. But there is also an insidious deception- God's will is in submission to our will, or that his will is so malleable that we can bend it to ours. Is anything impossible for God? Of course not. But not everything is beneficial, not everything is aligned with his will, ways and

work in our lives and in the world. A good example of this is will Jesus himself at Gethsemane. Mark 14:³⁶ *“Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.”*

And so to Jesus’ statement that anything is possible for the one who believes, ²⁴ *Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”* Here we have our second sign of faith in the valleys of life. **Faith Seeks God in the Presence of Doubt.** Friends this is such encouraging news for those of us who struggle with faith at times. Notice Jesus doesn’t respond by saying, “How dare you come before me with such weak, imperfect faith! Send him away. And don’t come back until you have strong faith that doesn’t doubt!” No, Jesus can work with this, because **faith is not about the quantity of our faith, but the object of our faith.** Faith of a mustard seed is all that is needed to access the presence and power of God.

This scripture has been so important for me in valleys in life when it is harder to see God at work, when I am doubting, when I struggle to trust him and I am dealing with existential questions and the suffering in our world. I like certainty but some certainty is unhealthy. It’s not necessary for salvation and living Christian life. You don’t have to answer every question. If you think you can’t have confidence in Christ until you have all your doubts and all the hard questions answered, you will never have it. Skeptics and critics will take advantage of this. “What about...” But then fail to apply it to every other area of life that we don’t fully understand but we believe. We really don’t fully understand how atoms stay together instead of exploding apart, but we aren’t curled up in a ball all day worrying that we are going to explode into a million pieces. I don’t even understand how my microwave works.

But this man exclaims, “I do believe!” Even if I don’t understand it all, even if I struggle at times with doubt. And he says, “help me Lord in my areas of unbelief.” If you are struggling with the psychological doubts, of “What if” questions, “God, how long?” questions...that’s the prayer of the believer. Help me in my unbelief.

²⁵ *When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”*

²⁶ *The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.”*

²⁷ *But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.* Here we see the third sign of faith in the valleys of life. **Faith Seeks God in the Presence of Fear.** As this father releases his boy (his only child whom he loves dearly) to Jesus, it appears that things get worse. Did you pick up on that? It’s worse! More violent than ever, more disturbing than ever...the father might be thinking, “Oh no, what this a mistake? Was he better off as he was? What is happening to him?” Many people thought the boy was dead. Have you ever begun to surrender God with something that is precious to you and at first you say, that was a big mistake? You fear that surrendering to Jesus’ will and ways may make your life harder, he might fail you, or change you in some way you don’t want to be changed?

Eustace in Voyage of the Dawn Treader. Eustace is turned into a dragon on an island, just revealing on the outside who he was on the inside- brooding, mean and selfish. But in order to be healed and turned into a boy again, he had to surrender himself to Aslan's ways. But his healing wasn't what he expected. In order to shed his dragon scales he was going to have to allow Aslan the Lion to tear deeply through the scales to get to his flesh. "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt...Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off- and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobby-looking. Then he caught hold of me...and threw me into the water. It hurt ever so but only for a moment...Then I saw...I'd been turned into a boy again."

Remember the rich young man who said he wanted to follow Jesus but refused to surrender what was precious to him, his possessions, to Jesus' ways. Why? He was afraid that following Jesus would take away everything he had built. Faith in the valley means we must surrender our fears, surrender what is precious to us and trust God's way of healing, his work, his ways and purpose, not ours. Are we more like the father, giving over his son? Like Eustace, or like the young ruler? Are you willing trust him with your finances? Are you willing to surrender your relationship?

Faith Seeks God in the Presence of Evil, Doubt, Fear. This is faith in the valley. The tragedy yet glorious irony is that our greatest mountaintop as believers, is Jesus' greatest valley. **The cross of Christ.** [Picture] Where Jesus suffered for the sins of man. He took upon himself all our evil, all our doubt, all our fear. And in that moment Jesus sought the presence of the Father, but the Father turned his face away. And he did this out of love for you and me. See ultimately, we can't seek God in faith, until we realize that he first sought us.