

“I Believe; Help My Unbelief”

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Have you ever tried walking in darkness? I’m not talking about a moonlit stroll or a cautious trip through a dark room in the middle of the night, I mean *total darkness*; – the kind where you can’t see your hand in front of your face. It’s actually hard to find a place in our electronic world where some sort of light is not visible, but, when you experience complete darkness, it’s a feeling you’ll never forget. Walking in real darkness is terrifying. It is a paralyzing experience that renders you completely helpless, and it doesn’t take long in a situation like this to cry out for help.

In the last verse of today’s Old Testament reading, Isaiah speaks directly to those who “walk in darkness” and have no light, and this description becomes a pivotal image for understanding God’s Word to us today. In today’s text from Mark, Jesus had just returned from the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John. Here, these disciples had experienced a light like no other. In fact, Matthew tells us that when Jesus was transfigured, “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matthew 17:2). Peter, James and John had seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus, but, before they could even begin to process this illuminating experience, they found themselves right back in the darkness, where today’s text opens, with the other disciples in the midst of a crowd, arguing with the scribes.

Mark tells us that when the crowd saw Jesus, they rushed to greet Him, and, when He asked His disciples about the reason for the argument, a man stepped out from the mob and explained that he had come seeking help for his son who was possessed by a demon. When Jesus was not to be found, the man had appealed to the disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but, he said, “they were not able” (Mark 9:6). It’s important to note here that, earlier in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus had given His disciples “authority over the unclean spirits” (Mark 6:7) and they had “cast out many demons” (Mark 6:13). Apparently, with Jesus gone, and in the face of the questioning scribes, their doubts had gotten the best of them and they could offer no help. When Jesus heard about their inability to drive the demon from the boy, He voiced His frustration by referring to them as a “faithless generation” (Mark 9:19).

Jesus has just returned from a place of light where His glory had been revealed, and now He was standing in the middle of a dark world where the people couldn’t see a thing. The scribes were blinded by their self-righteous pride, the disciples had closed their eyes in fear, and the desperate father was groping around in his own darkness as he begged for someone to help his demon-possessed son. In the words of our Old Testament reading, these people were walking in darkness and had no light; these were exactly the kind of people Isaiah wrote about...and so are we.

This past week, I spent a few very humbling hours at Concordia High School talking with students and teachers. After experiencing two tragic deaths in the span of a week, the students and faculty at Concordia, including many of our own members, felt like they were walking in darkness and had no light. This week also brought the deaths of two Emmanuel members, as well as an accident that left another on life-support. Two young mothers from our congregation were diagnosed with cancer this week, and countless others in our church family are experienced conflicts in their homes and crises in their lives, and the collective impact of these losses and struggles is a real and disorienting sense of darkness and a desperate need for light.

That's where we find the father from today's reading. It is a place of helplessness we can all understand, and, in his desperate state, this father cried out to Jesus with one of the greatest prayers in all of Scripture: "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). This raw and honest request, spoken out of the darkness, is a prayer we all need to hear, and it's a prayer that we all need to pray because, so often, we are tempted to think that everything depends on us; that as Christians we should have some kind of "super-faith"; one that's impervious to doubt and always keeps a smile on our face. And we are tempted to think that we should just suck it up and tough it out, and, that if we really believed, we would be calm in the face of chaos and certain in the midst of struggles. But this type of faith is impossible for us, and the truth is that we are not immune to fear and we are not impervious to doubt, and, left on our own, the sinful nature that is alive in each of us, will battle against faith as long as we're on this earth. And, my friends, denying this fact about ourselves, is denying our greatest need and it is also rejecting the Savior who came to meet it.

Jesus didn't come for those with a self-sufficient "super-faith." He came to save those whose needs are desperate. He came for the weak. He came for the weary. He came to do for us, what we could not do for ourselves. In fact, Jesus said: "The son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). And Jesus said: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). And Jesus said: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). These are the promises of God to us *today!* And *today*, it's to this friend of sinners and finder of the lost that we pray: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

Professor John Pless, comments on the importance of this prayer by comparing it to Martin Luther's explanation of the Third Article of Apostles' Creed where Luther writes: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him..." Here, Pless says, "we are not merely making a statement about...coming to faith. We are, in fact, confessing that it is only by the Spirit at work in the Gospel that we believe now, in the present tense." He then paraphrases the prayer of the desperate father in this way: "I believe now! Help my continuing struggle against unbelief!"

This is a prayer of confession, and it is a prayer of faith, and in response to this honest prayer, God always answers and He does it through Christ. You see, in Christ, God entered the darkness of our world and He walked with us and He walked for us, and in the ultimate answer to our unbelief, Jesus, God's faithful servant, took our sin and the darkness of our hearts into Himself, and He suffered the punishment we deserved for it. Jesus Christ did this *for us*, and because of His self-giving, self-sacrificing action on our behalf we can take heart and we can face even our darkest days knowing that our salvation doesn't depend on us. From beginning to end, it all depends on Christ, who comes to us in our sin, who washes us clean in His blood, who opens the door to heaven and who promises us eternal life. And that is exactly what He promises us *today!*

John writes, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). We need this promise because walking in the darkness is terrifying. It is a paralyzing experience that renders us completely helpless, and it doesn't take long in a situation like this to cry out for help – and to this cry, the Lord will always answer. Today, this is God's promise to you.

"Lord I believe, help my unbelief!" Amen.

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