

“Doubting”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 25, 2024

2nd Sunday of Lent

Psalm 22:22-28

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 9:14-29

The ninth chapter of Mark begins with the story of *the Transfiguration* or, as Amy-Jill Levine prefers to call it, *the Metamorphosis* of Jesus. Atop a mountain, with his disciples Peter, James, and John, Jesus’ clothes are transformed to dazzling white, and he is seen talking with Moses and Elijah – two icons of the Jewish faith. Then, a voice comes from the clouds saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.”

On the way down from the mountain, Jesus instructs these three disciples not to tell anyone else what they had seen; at least not yet. Today we hear what happens when they meet back up with the rest of the disciples and the crowds that have surrounded them.

The word doubt is derived from “duo” meaning “two,” as in, being of two different minds. When we doubt, we are being pulled between two choices or possibilities.

In this morning’s text, Jesus – with Peter, James, and John – rejoin the rest of the disciples amid a crowd, and a desperate father approaches Jesus on behalf of his diseased son and pours out a narrative of the boy’s suffering. In Matthew’s gospel, his condition is called epilepsy; in Mark, it is described as seizures that cause foaming at the mouth and a rigid body. The father comes to Jesus because the disciples were unable to drive out this demonic spirit; he is desperate to find help for his son.

The disciples must have been puzzled. Jesus had previously sent them out in pairs to go heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons – and they’d done it. It may have seemed easy to do; deceptively easy, as it turns out.¹

Now, while Jesus was away on the mountain, they were faced with this new challenge. When Moses had come down from the mountain, he found the people had rebelled in his absence, breaking the law he carried by crafting a golden calf. The disciples have not been making idols, but Jesus still seems upset. “You faithless generation;” he says, “how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?”

¹ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*

While Jesus was absent from the disciples, their faith wavered; they doubted. One part of their mind told them they could do again what they had already done, while another inner voice said that this was too difficult; that they were not equipped for such a challenge. The faith they had possessed evaporated when they needed it.

“If you are able to do anything,” the father pleads to Jesus, “have pity on us and help us.” Jesus replies, saying that “all things can be done for the one who believes.” If faith is even the size of a mustard seed, Jesus says elsewhere, then it can move mountains into the sea.

And then, in what Levine calls one of the most powerful statements in all of scripture, the father responds, “I believe; help my unbelief!” Here, we find an acknowledgment of the reality that, within all of us, faith and doubt co-exist; that, even if we believe, there will always be some things that lie beyond our imaginations or expectations.²

As much as we may not want to admit it about ourselves or others, we all experience doubt: of two minds, pulled between different possibilities. It may be, like the father who came to Jesus, because of the health of a loved one. Or it may be because, like the disciples, we face obstacles that can seem beyond our power to overcome. Doubting does not mean that we do not believe, only that we need God to help us believe.

The Psalms are filled with questions and cries of doubt; today’s Psalm encourages us to “fear the Lord.” In other words, no matter the circumstances around us, we are to remember that God is God and we are not. Our ability to imagine different outcomes is limited; that is a part of our human condition. But our doubt, our unbelief, does not limit God’s ability to transform the unbelievable into reality.

Jesus, of course, goes on to heal this boy; bringing out the spirit that was casting him into fire and water, threatening his life. Jesus also brings healing to this parent, helpless to protect his own son from this devastating condition. Even in what might seem to be a “faithless generation,” Jesus is filled with compassion and works to heal those who suffer.

Thus, it seems to be not the size – or purity – of our faith that matters; even faith like a mustard seed can do amazing things. Think of it this way. If you want to see the moon, the size of the window you are looking through isn’t important; what matters is that you’re facing the right direction. A tiny slit in the wall will do if the moon is on that side of the house. A huge window facing in the wrong direction will be no good at all. That’s what faith is like. The smallest prayer to God will produce great things; the most elaborate devotions to a ‘god’ of your own choosing, or indeed, someone else’s, will be useless, or worse.³

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner’s Guide to the Good News*

³ Wright, p. 22

This *god of our own choosing* might not look like a golden calf, it may not be a literal idol that we bow down to, but most of us have experienced how placing faith in something that is not divine can fail us. Unbelief is the decision to act as if there is no God. Just because we do not have proof of our faith does not mean that it is not true.

When does doubt become unbelief? When we let it; when we get hopelessly preoccupied with the doubts that are a natural part of the Christian life, or when we cling to unrealistic ideas about faith. We need not feel ashamed about doubts. Talking them through with others can be a vital safety valve to prevent them from building up like steam. We need one another to help us manage our doubts. Jesus sent his disciples out not alone, but in pairs, because he knew they would need the support and encouragement of each other to maintain courage and resolve. We need a community around us to support us through periods of doubt; we can draw on the example of those who have gone before us to help us make good choices today.

According to the letter of Hebrews, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (11:1) The father of this boy with a mysterious medical condition comes to Jesus asking for healing: both for his boy and those who love him. Jesus wants them to be free of this affliction, this spirit, that is causing them so much harm. Jesus does not condemn unbelief; instead, he responds with compassion. He takes the boy by the hand and lifts him up.

And those disciples, the followers of Jesus who had, at one point, been able to cast out demons but, when confronted with this ailing child and his afflicted father, are now unable to do so; these disciples ask Jesus what had happened; what was different about this time. Isn’t that the question we so often want to know: why is it that what sometimes used to seem easy, like we had the power within us to do, now appears so hard? Why do the challenges we seemingly once had a handle on now feel so daunting?

Many of us remember growing up in neighborhoods in which children could freely and safely roam; where, if someone faced a crisis, people rallied around to help. We remember living in communities where we did not see people living without shelter, where there was no need for food banks.

Some of this is the result of looking back with rose-colored glasses; unaware of those, maybe in the next neighborhood over, who were suffering in the shadows. Maybe it seemed like everyone was part of a faith community which prevented folks from falling through the cracks; or that politicians in those days had the best intentions of all citizens in mind. Maybe we didn’t know about the negative effects of systemic racism or lead paint, or we thought differently about opportunities for immigrants or those with disabilities.

These days, at least it seems, doubts have crept in about how, in our communities, we are taking care of one another. On the one hand, breakthroughs in medicine and communication have transformed our world; the acceptance, awareness, and inclusion of others have in many ways advanced. While on the other hand, in many ways, our divisions and resentments have grown. It seems we are of two minds about the direction our society is going; moving forward in progress while also seemingly fraying at the seams.

I imagine that the readers of Mark's gospel might have experienced similar feelings. In the several decades since Jesus lived, they had witnessed and were participating in the spread of the Good News, the birthing of the church that had begun to spread this message of God's love in Jesus Christ, to welcome Gentiles and practice healing, compassion, and community. Yet, on the other hand, they were seeing, around them, wars and famines; oppression and persecution at the hands of the Romans and, eventually, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

We live today, as the disciples did, as Mark's readers did, in a time of doubt. And what does Jesus say to his disciples who, on that day, wondered why they were unable to do what they had done before; cast out this demonic spirit in Jesus' name?

Jesus answers them, saying, "This kind can come out only through prayer." To be sure, there are times when telling someone in the throes of pain or grief or doubt to simply pray can be an incomplete, if not unhelpful, message. As Christ's followers, we are called to share the good news in both word and deed. But, here, I believe, Jesus is trying to tell the disciples – and Mark might be reminding his readers – that prayer, while maybe not the only response, is an essential part of all that they do. Without prayer, we are more likely to rely on ourselves rather than on God's power; to forget that God is God and we are not; to fashion a *god of our own choosing*.

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with doubt. As humans, we are naturally of two different minds: belief and disbelief. Doubt helps to remind us that we are both the recipients of amazing God-given gifts and resources while also in need of God's strength and guidance. Yes, the effect of our doubts can be unsettling, sometime even crippling. But, in Christ, and through prayer, all things truly are possible. Thanks be to God. Amen.