

CHRIST ENCOUNTERS: UNBELIEF

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Mark 9:14-29

One of my favorite children's books that I used to read to my daughter was called *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*.

The story is about one day in the life of a boy named Alexander, and indeed it was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Alexander woke up with gum in his hair. At breakfast his brothers got the toys out of the cereal boxes and he didn't get anything. Riding to school he had to sit in the middle. At school he forgot the number 16, his best friend declared they weren't best friends anymore, and after school he had to go to the dentist and he had a cavity. And so on. It's a fun book that teaches kids that some days just aren't going to be perfect.

Our scripture reading for today could also be called "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" passage. Why? Because every person in the story is having that kind of day. People are arguing, a child is sick, the disciples can't disciple, and even Jesus appears to lose his cool. That's the sort of day it was.

The day actually begins (before our reading) with Peter, James, and John accompanying Jesus up a mountain. On top of the mountain, Jesus changes—he is transfigured. Moses and Elijah appear alongside him. God speaks. If there ever was a mountaintop experience, this would be it. They are on the mountain in the presence of God and heroes of their faith. It is wondrous. It is sacred. It is divine.

But, you can't remain on top of the mountain forever, and Peter, James, and John and Jesus head back down. Their descent brings them from the glorious transcendence of the mountaintop to the distress and desperation of everyday life. This is where our reading for today picks up.

Jesus and the three disciples come down the mountain and find the other disciples surrounded by a crowd of people. There are also scribes present and they are arguing with the disciples. It is an unusually chaotic scene.

You remember when Moses was called up Mt. Sinai by God and spent forty days in the presence of the almighty and then God sent Moses back with the Commandments? Moses descends the mountain only to discover that the people had fashioned a golden idol and were worshipping it. That is the sort of vibe that you get here. Jesus came down the mountain to find everyone in a state of bedlam.

Jesus asks what is going on. A man from the crowd steps forward. He explains to Jesus that he brought his son because his son is possessed by a spirit—a spirit which harms him. But, because Jesus was not present (he was up on the mountain,

remember), the man asked the disciples if they could exorcise this spirit from his child. The disciples give it a go but they failed. Because they failed, it is likely that the scribes who were there accused the disciples of being frauds. The disciples were having a no good, very bad day.

From the father's description of the boy's condition, it is clear that the child suffers from epilepsy. In that day, there was no treatment and no cure for this disease. For all practical purposes, the boy may as well have been possessed by an actual demonic spirit. The seizures were frequent. They caused the boy to fall into the fire and fall into the lake. Can you imagine the constant stress and terror the parents experienced? The fire was not an enclosed fire in a fireplace like we have in our homes. The fire would have been the open cooking fire in the center of the house. It would have been kept burning 24/7. The parents would never know when their son might go into a seizure and be cast into the flames. As parents, they were completely unable to help their child. They must have been consumed with frustration and helplessness. In desperation, the father came looking for Jesus but found only his disciples and they were of no use. His day, like every day, was a no good, very bad day.

When Jesus arrives, the father tells him what has happened. And Jesus expresses his own frustrations—not with the father—but with everyone there. Jesus knows that the solution to this situation—to healing the boy—is faith. But faith appears to be in short supply here. Jesus says to the crowd, *You faithless people, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?*

Jesus calls for the boy to be brought to him. The father says to Jesus, *If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.*

Did you hear that question the father asked? *If you are able?* He questions Jesus' nature. Remember, the man brought his son looking for Jesus. No doubt he had heard that this rabbi could work miracles. When the disciples couldn't heal the boy, the father's confidence in all of them—including Jesus—evaporates. He says, *If you are able?*

Jesus takes the father's words and turns them back on him saying, *If you are able. If you are able, if you believe, then anything is possible.* Jesus is telling him, "It is not about me. It is about you and your belief. You must believe."

And the father understands. He gets it. There with Jesus, he has his own mountaintop epiphany. He realizes that although he has faith, his faith is thin—too thin, too weak, and too misplaced. And he makes the most heartfelt declaration of faith that we find in scripture. He cries out, *I believe; help my unbelief.* In other words, he proclaims, "I have faith, but I need help to make it stronger."

Jesus calls the spirit out of the boy and the boy is healed.

Later on, Jesus and the disciples are alone, and they ask Jesus why they had failed in casting out the spirit. Jesus tells them, *This kind can come out only through prayer*. Maybe the disciples were relying too much on the hocus-pocus of casting out the spirit. Maybe they needed to reach deeper into their own belief.

This sermon today is the first of a series of sermons that I will preach through the remainder of Lent and Easter. The series is called Christ Encounters and I will look at different people who encounter Jesus. What happens when someone confronts the Savior? How are they changed? What can we learn?

In our reading for today, it is the father who encounters Jesus. His faith in God is nearly broken. He lives in the chaos that exists at the bottom of the mountain. He lives in the chaos of having a child who is constant danger of hurting himself. The chaos has taken its toll.

He's heard that there is this rabbi who can heal. So, he takes his child, and on the waning strength of a tattered faith, he sets out to find this rabbi. But the teacher is not there. His followers are of little help. But then the rabbi returns, and with desperate humility, the man pleads his case, and confesses his damaged faith, and his child is healed.

But the father is also healed. His belief is renewed. "With no hint of pride or arrogance, he cries, "Help me."

If we declare 'I have faith therefore I am powerful' then we don't truly have faith. The only faith we have is in ourselves. That was the disciples' problem. They believed the power lay with them, and when Jesus was absent, their 'power' was, too. They had lost their connection to God.

Think about our cell phones (Warning: this is a tortured metaphor). If your phone has a camera then it almost certainly has two cameras. There is a camera on the back for taking pictures of things out there. But slide your finger across the screen and the phone switches to the camera on the front. And what is that camera designed for? Selfies! Pictures of ourselves.

We always possess the ability to connect with God, but the connection fails because we are in selfie mode. We are more interested in ourselves. Our faith is in ourselves. Authentic faith demands the humility to exit selfie mode and focus on the world. When we can do that, when we can set our pride aside, when we can become humble disciples of Christ, then God's power will flow through us into our broken world.

When the father cried, *I believe; help my unbelief*, he flipped the switch and confessed that the faith he possessed was weak. It was still faith, and it was

sufficient. Remember Jesus' words about faith and mustard seeds, *If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you* (Matthew 17:20). He had faith enough.

Finally, the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to remove the spirit and Jesus explains, *This kind can come out only through prayer*. Jesus is not implying that we need to pray louder. Instead, it means we must pray with humility. The type of prayer needed is the prayer that recognizes our reliance on God, the prayer that turns off selfie mode, the prayer that takes the power away from us and our belief in ourselves and directs it towards others. It is the prayer that confesses that we are imperfect and that we need God.

Over the past couple of years, our congregation has been deeply involved with Compassionate Hands. As we have discovered, there are a large number of homeless people in Wilson County. We are working with Compassionate Hands not just to get these men and women off the street, but to bring the healing that changes lives, that changes a system, that eradicates injustice and replaces it with love, to ultimately bring a healing that enables each of us to become citizens of God's realm.

Now, what if we tackled the homeless issue by just jumping in armed only with our good intentions and the power of our Christian conviction to fix things. It likely wouldn't work. We would be defeated by our arrogance. We would be taking selfies; we would fail. The result would be a bad day for everyone.

But, what if we approach this issue of homelessness (or any other need in our community) like the father in our reading—with a true humility of spirit, cognizant of our own weaknesses and prayerfully asking God for guidance? What would happen? I can only guess, but it would be a glorious day for all.