

**This Sunday's texts:**

Isaiah 50:4-10

James 3:1-12

Mark 9: 14-29

**"I Believe! Help..."**

**Pastor Jim Cords**

**September 12, 2021**

The holy gospel according to Mark, the 9th chapter:

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all of the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 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." "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." 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. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that the 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." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can only come out by prayer."

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we ask today that you would speak into our lives, that you would allow us to experience the promptings of your Holy Spirit, that you would help us to discern when you speak to us through those who are around us, and we ask

that you would help us to live our lives as witness and service to your goodness and glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This prayer of this desperate man here in this gospel text followed, by the way, if you'll remember last week. Pastor Johnna preached about this desperate woman at Jesus' feet who would not take "no" for an answer. I love the prayer of this man in desperation. He's already learned through his own experience that the problem his son is experiencing is not easily resolved. Chances are he's already been to doctors. The text tells us that this little boy has struggled with this from childhood. You can imagine the desperation of the father when, in this convulsion, the boy has been thrown into a fire or thrown into the water to drown and the anxiety that must exist as he tries to care for his son. So in desperation, he seeks to find Jesus. When he gets there, Jesus isn't there. Jesus is up on the Mountain of Transfiguration with two of his disciples. So he says to the other disciples who, by the way, have already been known at this point to be able to go out, heal people, and cast out demons. He says, well, will you help me with my son?

We don't really know much about that story. All we know is that as Jesus comes back down the mountain, he sees them arguing. We're left to our own imagination what the argument is about. It seems to also involve some of the Jewish leaders. So who knows what they're trying to say. Part of me wonders if the disciples aren't telling the man, you know, go ahead and go back home. There's nothing we can do. That is, a part of me wonders if they weren't arguing about the disciples giving up because they had tried and failed.

And then there's the reaction of Jesus. It seems harsh. It seems judgmental. It, by the way, leads me to wonder about the reading in James today. The timing is kind of ironic. Isn't it? You noticed that I invited those who had already agreed to be in the teaching ministry up *before* I read the letter to James, which said only a few should do this because they're going to be held to higher responsibility. I didn't want you to chicken out before we got to the installation part. Jesus comes down hard. "You unbelieving generation ... how long will I put up with you?" It's a hard word.

You know I actually prefer the word from Isaiah a little bit better. Did you hear how Isaiah started this morning? I think it's really beautiful. Listen again to these words. "The

Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue.”<sup>1</sup> - very different than the tongue spoken of in James that brings hell - “to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being well instructed.”<sup>2</sup> and then he says “Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light.”<sup>3</sup>

Here's the thing about these texts. The word is a word of encouragement, that God will instruct your tongue, that God will bring you light, but if you listen carefully, the other thing you discover is that the circumstances aren't quite so delightful. Do you know why you need to be taught? Because you're ignorant. Do you know why you need light? Because you're in the darkness. Do you know why you need strength and encouragement? Because there is an enemy against you. That's the context of this writing from the prophet Isaiah. It's that life is going to be a struggle. Has anybody experienced that?

Then we hit times like these. These “unprecedented” times. These seemingly hard to predict times and we reach into our past, our experience. We look for those experiences in the past that can teach us how to handle the present. We started making the best decisions we can. We start relying on people who we trust to give us guidance and support and help for how we're supposed to live. Like we'll stay home. Stay six feet apart. Wear a mask. Oh no, masks don't work. It doesn't matter anymore. Now that you're back, oh no, now it matters again. It's confusing, and what we want is certainty. What we will not get is certainty because the truth of the matter is we live in the midst of the struggle. There are circumstances coming at us that we don't predict, so we don't see coming, and quite frankly, often we are ill-prepared for.

Sometimes, like my daughter Kristen, we want to say to God and the whole world I'll do it myself. I'll figure it out. I'll take control of the situation. Only to find out that we don't have enough information to take control of the situation. We don't understand or know enough. That doesn't mean we don't know anything. That doesn't mean we can't do anything, but it does mean that, as children of God, we want to ask God to instruct us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 50:4a

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 50:4b

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 50:10 (ESV)

One of the instructions says “to know the word that sustains the weary” This phrase in Isaiah is not to know a word that sustains *me* when I am weary, but rather, that the word of God would give me a word that I could say that in saying it to those who are weary, they would be sustained. That is, this idea, again, this blessed to be a blessing, that I can make a difference, that I can be an encouragement to others because God is an encouragement to me. God gives me the words I need. His mercies are new each morning. He allows me to listen to him so that I can know what to say to others. This great word in Isaiah 50:10 “Let [him] trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God.” Brothers and sisters in Christ, that's the journey of faith that we're on and God is faithful.

Now I've noticed something and I don't like it. If I could change it, I would, but God did not make me God. He only made me pastor and unfortunately, he won't listen to me in this regard. I would really like it if God would align his clock with mine. Right? If he could align his schedule with my schedule, so that when he does all these blessings, he does in the timing that I would prefer and that I'm looking for. And instead, he says wait. Wait on the Lord and he will renew your strength.<sup>4</sup> Part of this journey, this struggle that we're on is when we ask God for help, the help that will come will be, in fact, the help that we need, but it will come in the timing that God selects. Listen to this from Isaiah 43. “This is what the Lord says - ... ‘Forget the former things; do not dwell in the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.’”<sup>5</sup>

Our confidence is that we serve a God. Our confidence is that we have been redeemed and claimed by a God who will make a way and it may not be in alignment with the way we've always done it before. It may be something new. So we, like this desperate father, will sometimes need to pray “Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief.” I believe even though I don't see a way. I believe even though it's dark. I believe your light will come, but I'm not perceiving it right now. I'm putting my trust in you to meet my needs, to guide me and bless me that I might be a blessing.

There's this song in the contemporary genre and it's been on the radio now for quite some time. “Way Maker” is a great song to remind us that the God we serve, the God we pray

---

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 40:31

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 43:16, 18-19

to, the God we cling to is a God who makes a way, a God who, in fact, brings light into darkness. That's our hope. That's our promise. That is who God is. God is a way maker. It's good news and its bad news, just like that Isaiah text, because it tells us that God is a way maker because we need a way made. If we didn't need a way maker, it would be different. But we do. And so we pray that prayer, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief." Lord, I believe. Help me to believe that that is who you are. That you are a God who stays engaged with your people and makes a way and that, in fact, your timing is better than my timing, even though it's hard to wait. And so, in the waiting, in the darkness, in the struggle, I profess. Lord, you are a way maker.

That song acknowledges the struggle, doesn't it? It goes on to say this. "Even when I don't see it, you're working." That's a faith statement. I can't see it. I can't see any evidence of it, but I believe that God is working. I believe that he neither slumbers nor sleeps.<sup>6</sup> He is at work, even when I don't see it, and maybe these days, even more importantly, even when I don't feel it. A lot of what we're struggling with in these days is our emotions. In the midst of isolation and disconnection, a lot of our emotions are struggling. Lord, I don't feel it. I feel distant from you. I feel distant from others. I feel alone. This profession of faith in the song is even when I don't feel it, Lord, you're working, that, in fact, you never stopped working.

What I want to add to this idea for each one of us, as God's chosen people, he never stops working for *you*. Don't let circumstances. Don't let low emotions. Don't let the struggle into darkness cause you to believe that God isn't for you, that God isn't on your side, that he doesn't love you and that he isn't at work in the world and never stops working for you. We, who wait on the Lord, our strength will be renewed, will soar like eagles. That is who we worship and serve. That is the God who sent his Son, Jesus Christ into the world, *while* we were still sinners. He is for us. If he would not withhold his son, what else would he, could he withhold? He will not withhold anything. Nothing in heaven and on Earth will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our lord. That's who we worship today. That's who we serve today. That's who's at work in us and through us to give us words that we might be able to share hope and encouragement with our families, with our neighbors, with our co-workers. It is indeed who God is. Amen.

---

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 121:4