

Mark 9:14-29

Philippians 2:12-13, 4:4-9

When Jesus and Peter, James and John returned to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw Jesus, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. Jesus asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?'

Someone from the crowd answered, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.'

Jesus answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw Jesus, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.'

Jesus said to him, 'If you are able! All things are possible for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this child from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the child was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

When Jesus had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

You may remember that, during the weeks that will lead us to Easter, we're asking ourselves a Lenten question that might provoke the sort of discipline of taking stock that one associates with this season – and that might nudge us to do that spiritual work, not only as individuals, but as a community. The question we've settled into is, "Why are we here?" – which is a way of wondering, what does it mean that we feel drawn together in the ways we do? To what ends? What does our being together make possible? How does our being together change who we are?

Of course, at the time we made our plan to focus Lent in this way, we couldn't have imagined that the circumstances around us would shift so dramatically, and that they would take in, not just this congregation or this city, but the whole globe. Nor could we have imagined the poignant irony that, right in the middle of our wondering what it means for us to be here, we can't be *here* – at least, not physically together in this familiar and beloved room, under these reassuring rafters, in these corridors that hold so many memories and have hummed with so many projects. But I think Lent is a time for the pushing and stretching of questions; so it feels right, today, to ask the question with some extra moxie: why are we here *nevertheless*? Why are we here *anyway, in spite of, notwithstanding, even in the face of*, circumstances and forces that seem to be trying to pull us apart? What part of the nature of the here-ness of our being together transcends mere geography and lives in the waves of sound and the pulses of electrons that we can visualize rippling out from 1432 Washtenaw Avenue? How are we here even when we're not here? That's the kind of question, if you think about it, that our faith gives us some practice with: for instance – how is it that he's alive even though we saw him die? And how

is it that grace abounds and amazes even though we've seen so much of the brokenness of the world? And how is it that we believe even in spite of everything that fuels our doubt? Among questions like that, *Why are we here (even when we're not here?)* fits right in.

Each week of this Lent we've given a particular experiential edge to the question about why we're here. Two weeks ago we named the fact that part of why we're here is to seek wholeness – because our lives have taught us about brokenness. Last week we said that part of why we're here is to seek movement, direction, restoration – because our lives have taught us about being stuck. And today – we are here seeking trust – because our lives have taught us about two powerful things that obstruct trust: doubt and fear.

And each week we've been over-hearing a piece of an ancient letter to a community: Paul's attempts to encourage them to take stock and refocus and realign themselves to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to transform their life together. Listen, today, to a few verses from his letter to the Philippians –

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.

Paul wrote those words from a Roman prison, so presumably he knew a good deal about both fear and trembling.

The gospel offers us this morning a story of an anguished father beset by fear and trembling, longing to find a power for good he can trust to save them from the frightening reality he and his family are facing at home. An illness resembling epilepsy has been threatening the life of his child for years – which has caused him to seek out the itinerant rabbi whose reputation as a healer has been drawing crowds. But when they get to the place where they expected to find the teacher, Jesus and a few of his disciples have gone off on a prayerful retreat – and the rest of the disciples who stayed behind are unable to do anything for the terribly afflicted child, try as they might. This is the more disturbing to the disciples because, only a little while earlier, Jesus had actually sent them off to confront the forms of illness that, in their time, were associated with evil spirits (Mark 6:7,13). But their preparations seem to have been of no avail in this case; and to make matters worse, in Jesus's absence, a group of the scribes who've made it their business to taunt Jesus and his followers have shown up, and an ugly scene has broken out around the failed healing, so that now there's wounded pride to be healed along with epilepsy.

But when Jesus returns it gets worse before it gets better. When the father steps out of the crowd to explain the healing that he'd come hoping to find for his child, Jesus actually loses his temper. This is not a state of mind we like to attribute to Jesus; and in this case it's not entirely clear what provoked him to say such harsh words: "You faithless generation! How much longer must I be among you – how long must I put up with you?" We can probably assume that he's impatient with the disciples – who, he must have hoped, would have begun to develop their own abilities as healers – rather than with the father, who only wants relief for his tormented child. Since we can assume that this story found its way into the gospel through the memory of these very same disciples, I almost wonder if they remembered his words having a particularly sharp edge because, in hindsight, they realized that they had indeed squandered some part of the blessing of his company during that painfully short time that he was with them.

In any case, Jesus turns to the frazzled father – who describes the suffering of the child in the grip of the illness, and makes his request with all due humility: "If you are able to do anything, have mercy on us and save

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us.” But now it’s the father’s turn to encounter the startling transparency of Jesus – who seems almost dismissive of the father’s deference: “If you can?! All things are possible for the one who believes.”

But transparency begets transparency, doesn’t it? The sharpness of Jesus’s rejoinder exposes the next layer deeper in the father’s courage and candor. “I believe! Help my unbelief!” he says, unforgettably, almost as though he’s refuting Jesus’s easy confidence. If anything is possible for the one who has a full measure of unconflicted faith - well then, Jesus, what about the rest of us? The father, working out his own salvation with fear and trembling, speaks words that echo down the ages.

Afterwards – after the astonishing healing of the boy – Jesus has a gentler moment with the disciples when he takes them aside and speaks to their despair in not having been able to help the distressed father themselves. When they ask what went wrong, Jesus replies, “This kind can only come out through prayer.”

But ... where exactly does anything that could be called prayer happen, in this story? Clearly not in whatever methods of healing the disciples might have tried before Jesus got there; presumably, if they had included prayer, they would have worked. Nor do we see Jesus entreating God to intervene; you’d hardly call his thunderous command to the demons a prayer. But the one who seems to offer the faithful entreaty to God is, of all people, the father – the one whose working out of his salvation includes fear and trembling, belief and unbelief.

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Until the Coronavirus took over our landscape, we had been expecting to be together this morning in one of the most “here” moments in our life as a church, which is the sacrament of baptism. Alas, the public health crisis going on around us postponed that possibility – but I invite you to contemplate for a moment the space that the postponement left behind; it’s not an empty space, but you may actually have an easier time seeing its fullness if you’re not here and, so, looking at it instead with the eyes of your heart. The font is here, as it always is; you can hear it and picture it, brim-full of grace and at the ready. And so are the questions here, the ones that the ancient traditions of the church teach us to ask as part of every baptism; they still hover in the energy of spirit that ripples out from this place. *Who is your Lord and Savior? Do you trust him? Do you intend to be his disciple, to obey his word and to show his love?*

That second question, in particular... Sometimes, at times like this when doubt and fear fill the landscape so full that they push us apart, that question expands to fill the whole space. Do you trust? And then, alongside it, here is the ancient story of scripture teaches us the words of the holy prayer of the anguished father, “I believe! Help my unbelief!” The prayer that was somehow enough to defeat the demons, with its mixture of courage and candor, drenched in the anguished love of the father for the epileptic child, the same ingenious love of the four friends who found a way to lower their paralyzed friend through a hole in the ceiling (Mark 2:1-12), the same stubborn love of people who are unwilling to let mere geography separate them from the community where they pool their prayers and their trust. “I believe! Help my unbelief!” turns out to be prayer enough. New Testament scholar Ched Myers says that “To pray is to learn to believe in a transformation of self and world which seems, empirically, impossible – as in, moving mountains. What is unbelief but the despair that nothing can really change?” No wonder that, when Jesus takes the disciples aside at the end to minister to their broken-hearted failure to help the father themselves, he explains that it’s not magic that heals, only prayer that is brave enough to be honest.

A few verses later in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, having been honest with them about the fear and trembling that are, not antithetical to prayer but part of its deepest authenticity, he turned a stubborn corner in his letter and wrote to them –

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Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We can only see him with the eyes of the heart now – but you can't miss the clenching of his fist and the working of his jaw and his rising to the full stature of his spirit, even in chains, to reclaim and reaffirm the trust that had saved his life. Writing from prison, probably in Rome, he reminds me of the Italians we read about this weekend, confined to their apartments in a nation beset with terrifying illness, with every reason for fear and trembling – kept apart by the danger of contagion, and yet *nevertheless, notwithstanding*, rising to the full stature of their spirits: standing on their balconies, leaning out their windows and singing to each other. Pouring their pooled trust out into the street, out into the air like a prayer: I believe; help me unbelief! I am well; help my infirmity! I belong; help my unbelonging! I am here; help my not being here.

What does our being together make possible? It makes possible the pooling of our trust.

How does our being together change who we are? It puts us within hearing of the voice that banishes the evil demons of despair that try to cast us into the fires of hatred or drown us in the sea of apathy. It teaches us to practice prayer as the art of leaning toward the possible; it teaches us to believe the future into being.

Which is part of why we're here.

**The Rev. Richard E. Spalding,  
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