

“In the Valley of the Shadow of Doubt”

Mark 9: 14-29

Sermon Series: STEPS Week 9

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My son has never heard my voice. He has never said, “Daddy.” He cannot even say his name. He lives in a world of silence and isolation. I could handle that. So could he. But there’s more. The infernal thing in him makes him dance like a marionette. It tosses him like a rag doll. It reduces him to a rabid dog. Other parents recall their children’s first words, first smile, first step. I vividly remember the horror of his first attack. His tiny body stretched taut. Eyes rolled up under his lids. Saliva foamed on his mouth. Then there were the convulsions. My wife and I tried our best to protect him from himself. We ducked his flailing arms and wrestled his writhing body to the ground. “Don’t let him hit his head.” “He’s hurting me.” “Bring him down easy.” “He’s going to fall!” “Try to make him comfortable.”

I know we did the wrong thing several times. Once we were by a lake when the disease struck. I couldn’t stop him from plunging into the water. I almost drowned trying to keep his head above the surface. Then there was the fire. Scalded by boiling water, seared by hot coals, it was all I could do to stop him from jumping into the flames. Have you seen the scars? Burns on his arms, his legs and chest. When the neighbors saw his wounds, they stared at us. They didn’t say a word. But I knew what they were thinking. How could I explain it to them? How could I make them understand the disease caused this, not us? We just avoided them and kept our boy in the house.

I am walking in the valley of the shadow of doubt. My friends tell me, “God never gives you more than you can handle.” How can that be? We can’t control the attacks. Neither can he. Did you send this God? If you did, then you picked the wrong man. I can’t handle it. I can’t take it.

We’ve been to every doctor in the area: local practitioners and city specialists, herbalists and counselors, spiritualists, faith healers and fortunetellers. They prescribed their cures. “Strap him down.” “Let him go.” “Keep him sedated.” “Change his diet.” “Send him away.” “Hide him in your house.” “Rub this on him.” “Give this to him three times a day.” None of it made any difference. Some of their methods were torturous. I wanted to stop. But our village priest told me, “God helps those who help themselves.” So I kept trying, in the hope that God would step in and do His part. More doctors. More faith healers. More alternative medicines. No change. The convulsions ruled our lives. It was hopeless. We were helpless. “I’ve tried everything and God didn’t show up.” I told our priest. “If God only helps me when I help myself, why do I need God?” He just stared at me wordlessly.

“Take your boy to Rabbi Jesus the Carpenter,” a neighbor suggested. “He will heal him.” I heard about this Jesus. To me he was just one more faith healer, a mystic who gave up the woodshop to go preaching. Some called him Messiah. Others claimed he was the devil or one of his demons. I didn’t care who he was, so long as he healed my son.

Journeys are often excruciating. Occasionally my boy comes along quietly. But then the spasms flare up, forcing us to stop and wait until they pass. This trip was unusually difficult. With every step, his resistance became stronger, his tremors more pronounced. It was pure agony. We finally reached the crowd of Jesus' followers. But my initial relief was shattered when I discovered the Carpenter was not there. A few of his disciples conducted a worship service. They quoted their Master, explained his teachings, sang a few psalms. I looked around at the crowd. It was a mixed bunch. Long bearded teachers of the law, outfitted in robes befitting their authority, sat in a tight cluster and listened with skeptical expressions. There were peasants, merchants, laborers, farmers, ladies of the evening, foreigners, traitorous tax collectors and even a contingent of Roman legionnaires keeping an eye on the crowd.

In the middle sat the hopeful: the deaf and the mute, the blind and the bandaged. Some hobbled on crutches and others were carried on mats. Skin diseases and fevers, useless limbs and twisted backs. They held a preferred position in the middle of the gathering not because the crowd had compassion. The rest kept their distance to avoid touching the unclean wretches. When the service ended, the disciples cried out, "All who want to be healed, come forward. If you believe, all will be well."

It took hours. We were a tiny point in an immense sea of human misery. For a long time, we didn't move at all. Then, gradually, we advanced in waves toward the disciples. Twice my son broke out in convulsions. He rolled on the ground, spraying me with spit. The crowd near us drew back in horror. "A demon!" they cried. "No!" I shouted defensively. But in my heart, I half believed it myself.

I fixed my eyes on the goal. Up ahead I could see...miracles. Crutches tossed aside as the lame leapt with joy. Bandages unraveled. The blind blinking in the sun. The paralyzed now carried their mats. Former lepers felt their baby soft skin. Finally, it was our turn. The disciples were about to ask what was wrong with my son, when an attack struck. They placed their hands on him. "Be healed!" they cried. He continued to writhe and shake. "Be healed!" they shouted at him. No change. "Come out you demon!" He still foamed and rolled in the dust.

This ignited a firestorm. Up till now, the teachers of the law quietly observed the healing service. Now they pounced. "You failed!" the lead teacher cried. "You are just a band of charlatans and fakers. This whole thing is a hoax." "What about the others we healed?" shouted the disciples. "Actors and performers," the teacher replied. "You arranged the whole thing to trick these poor fools." "No, those were true miracles. Ask them," another disciple yelled. "It's not our fault the boy isn't healed. It's his." The disciple pointed his finger.

He pointed it at me.

"Your faith is too weak," the disciple said. "You don't believe."

I was stunned. Every eye, every angry face turned on me. Now I was deep in the valley of doubt. Do I believe? Maybe that was my problem all along. Did my lack of faith cause my son's illness? "Do you believe?" I opened my mouth and stammered, "I...I...I..."

Before I could answer, I was cut off by a commotion from the back of the crowd. “The Teacher is here.” The mass of humanity parted for Him, like Moses going through the Sea. Suddenly he stood before me. Though he was dressed in simple homespun clothes, his presence was powerful and commanding. “What are you arguing with them about?” He directed his question to his disciples. Shamefaced, they stood embarrassed in silence. Gathering all my courage I said,

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 (Mark 9:17-18).

My words seemed to wound him. He lifted up his head and cried out, “O unbelieving generation. How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” (v. 19) At first I thought he meant me. But when I looked at the faces of his disciples, I realized they were the ones who lacked faith. “Bring the boy to me,” he said. Then erupted the worse convulsion I’d ever seen. Disciples, teachers of the law, the crowd all drew back. But not Jesus. Calmly he turned to me and asked, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” I replied and began to recount the same sad story I’d told dozens of doctors. “But *if* you can do anything, take pity on us and help us” (v. 22). As soon as the words slipped from my mouth I regretted them. He turned to me, raised an eyebrow and said, “*If you can*”? Everything is possible for him who believes.”

Now a convulsion ripped through *my* spirit. Do I believe? So many failures. So many times my hopes were smashed. So many prayers unanswered. So many journeys through the long dark shadow of the valley of doubt. And all I ever heard were hollow pious platitudes. “God helps those who help themselves.” I was helpless. “God never gives you more than you can handle.” I couldn’t handle this. “If you believe, all will be well.” I believed and nothing happened. Now this man said, “Everything is possible, if you believe.” Was it another empty religious cliché? He didn’t promise all would be well. He only said it was *possible*. No guarantees. No assurance. The question is: Do I believe God? Not do I believe there is a God. Not do I believe certain doctrines about God. But do I believe God? Do I believe God can cure my son? And am I willing to trust God even if He doesn’t? It all comes down to this: raw, naked trust in God. Complete surrender. I’m powerless, helpless, hopeless.

“I do believe,” I cried to Him. “Help me overcome my unbelief! I believe God can do it. Help me trust Him.”

Then Jesus turned and shouted at my son, “You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again” (Mark 9:25). For the first time, I heard my son’s voice – a horrid shriek that rose from the depths of hell. His body violently arched up from the ground. Once. Twice. And then he fell to earth. For sixty terrible seconds he lay motionless. Then those around me whispered, “He’s dead.” “No!” I cried.

“The First Ending”

I collapsed in the dust beside my child’s corpse and soaked the ground with my sobbing. It was over. The whole terrible nightmare was over. What good was my faith? It didn’t save him. He’s dead. But then a halting strange sound cut through my wailing. It was a hoarse voice

making its first sounds. “Daddy?” I looked up through watery eyes. There was my son, standing next to Jesus. There he stood, whole, healthy and free. “I believe,” I said. “Everything is possible, if you believe!”

“The Second Ending”

I collapsed in the dust beside my child’s corpse and soaked the ground with my sobbing. It was over. The whole terrible nightmare was over. What good was my faith? It didn’t save him. He’s dead.

Then Jesus touched my shoulder. I looked up into his eyes. “Remember,” he said, “Everything is possible for him who believes. Your son is not lost. Trust me. He is safe in my Father’s house.” I didn’t know what He meant. But I said I would trust him, no matter what.

I buried my son on a quiet hillside just outside our village. It comforts me to know he’s at peace. Sometimes I go up and sit beside his grave. I talk to him. I talk to God. That’s where I was when a neighbor told me the news. “That Teacher you went to see? The one who didn’t heal your boy?” “Yes?” “They crucified him in Jerusalem.” I looked down and swallowed hard. “So I guess his movement collapsed and those disciples scattered.” “Well that’s the strange part,” my friend continued, “his disciples say He rose from the dead. They say His death opened the door to His Father’s house.” “His Father’s House?” I asked, a ripple of memory recalled the phrase. “Yeah,” my neighbor said, “He opened the door to His Father’s House...for those who believe.” I looked at my son’s grave. “My Father’s House. Everything is possible if you believe.”

“The Third Ending”

I collapsed in the dust beside my child’s corpse and soaked the ground with my sobbing. It was over. The whole terrible nightmare was over. What good was my faith? It didn’t save him. He’s dead.

Then Jesus touched my shoulder. I looked up into his eyes. Then I turned to see my boy. He was breathing. He was alive, but trembling. The disease was still with him. “This kind,” Jesus said pointing to my child, “can come out only by prayer. Keep praying. Remember everything is possible for him who believes.”

I led my son home. His attacks are less frequent. At least I think so. I’m helpless to stop them. So I pray and ask for God’s help. Then I receive the strength I need to care for him. And that gives me peace.

Jesus didn’t heal my son...at least not the way I wanted. No, that day, Jesus healed me. I still have my doubts. But I stopped listening to all the pious platitudes. I stopped believing things about God. I started believing God. I trust Him no matter what may come.

Now, when I walk through the valley of the shadow of doubt, I am not afraid. For He is with me.

And that’s all I need.