

The Glory of Jesus and the Powerless Disciples

Today we return to our study in the Gospel of Mark on the gospel of Jesus – a study we've been calling, "*Into the Life of Jesus*".

And today we pick up where Daniel McDougall left off two weeks ago – in **Mark 9:2-29**. If you have a Bible, turn with me there. **Mark 9:2-29**.

And as the title in the bulletin suggests, in our passage this morning we are invited to consider both *the glory of Jesus and the powerlessness of the disciples*. And, in truth, for all the complexity of the two scenes before us, I think we'll ultimately find here both an experience that feels very relatable, **and** a word of grace that we need to hear. That I need to hear. That I think we *all need to hear*, again and again.

And it's this: that **faith in Jesus is not always easy**. In fact, sometimes, maybe often, it is *hard and complicated*. And yet, in the grace of God, as our text today will attest, our willingness to come to Jesus with honesty about *the complexity of our faith and our powerlessness* is all Jesus asks and needs of us...

So, let's simply walk through these two complicated moments together – as we seek to hear where God is speaking to us through it all.

And as we do, **let's pray**.

Now so far in our study in Mark's gospel, we've been listening in on *the revelation of Jesus*. That's what the first half of Mark's gospel is all about – **who is Jesus?** And two Sundays ago, Daniel spoke on the turning point of Mark's gospel –

where all this revelation has led Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, to finally declare his confession (in **Mark 8:29**) – that Jesus is the **Messiah**.

It's easy to take this for granted – as though Jesus' disciples always knew this.

But they didn't. This conviction and confession was *the accumulated result* of a journey they had been on with Jesus, their Rabbi, that had *incrementally and shockingly grown* into the startling revelation and conviction that Jesus was not just a rabbi, or even a rabbi in whom God was uniquely at work – but Jesus was and is Israel's **Messiah** – *the Anointed One of God* (that's what the Hebrew word *Messiah* means) –

- The One who has come from God to save God's people and bring God's kingdom and justice *on earth as it is in heaven*.

But *in the next breath*, as Daniel highlighted, Jesus – their Messiah – the One in whom all the hopes now rest – Jesus began to teach them **"that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again..."**

Which made **no sense** to them! *As it would have made no sense to us!*

Messiah's win – they conquer their enemies!

They don't get killed by their enemies!

That's what makes them **the Messiah!**

And so, not surprisingly, Peter rebukes Jesus for suggesting such a thing. To which Jesus responds by **rebuking Peter** – and then informing **all the disciples** (and the

crowds with them) that **everyone who follows Him would also face the cross**. As He says in Mark 8:34f,

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

You have to wonder if, in the following days, these same disciples – whom, in Peter, had confessed their conviction and faith that Jesus is the Messiah... You have to wonder if these same disciples found themselves wondering if Jesus really knew what He was talking about... If Jesus was just as clueless as they were – regarding what was coming... *All this talk about being rejected and killed, and rising again...*

And so, in **Mark 9:2**, we read,

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

It's a bizarre scene. I mentioned it to my Skeptics Study folks this week and was very aware that it likely sounded like I was describing a dream or some weird psychedelically-inspired vision. But according to Mark (and two of the other gospel writers – Matthew and Luke), this isn't a **vision** or **dream sequence**, but a **real event** – a *moment Peter, James and John experienced with Jesus that they would never forget*. Though it would take them some time to understand what it all meant.

But Mark **intends** for us to grasp the meaning of it all – and he does this by highlighting **a number of dynamics**, that, all together, are intended to flood our minds with the glory of **another moment** in Israel's history. One of the most significant moments in Israel's history – **Exodus 24:15-18** – where God, the Rescuing God of Israel, meets with Moses on Mount Sinai to confirm God's covenant with Israel – that *they would be His people and He would be their God...*

Let me read it for us – Exodus 24:15f –

"When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud."

Do you hear the reference points? We haven't come to **all** these pieces in today's text yet – but notice the references that **link these two great events** – **Moses, on the mountain, 6 days, the glory of God, God's presence coming in a cloud, and the Voice of God speaking.**

Clearly, Mark intends for his original readers – who knew Israel's story so well (and us with them) – to make this connection and not to take it lightly.

In this moment - on this mountain – God is speaking and revealing something that Jesus' disciples, and Mark's original audience in the first century, and us with them – **need to hear...**

And before we continue, notice the one piece that feels a bit **out of place** – that it's not just Moses who appears with Jesus on the mountain – but **the prophet Elijah.**

Scott b. Anderson
Mark 9:2-29

LPC Winter study in Mark, "Into the Life of Jesus"
"the glory of Jesus and the powerless disciples"

And he's actually referenced **first** – a literal translation reads, "And there appeared to them **Elijah with Moses...**" So Elijah is not just present, but **prominent**.

Why? Why is this?

I'm not totally sure, but we know that Elijah also met with God and heard God on **the mountain** (Mount Horeb, to be exact – possibly the mountain that Jesus is now at with his disciples). But more importantly, Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets spoke of the coming of God's Messiah **being preceded by Elijah's return** – who would prepare the way of the Lord.

So together, **Moses and Elijah** represent **both** God's covenant with Israel and the promise of a New Covenant, **and** God's saving action in the Exodus and the promise of a new Exodus... *There is so much here that Mark wants us to see ...*

Mark continues, (v.5)... In the midst of all this, we're told,

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

I love this note by Mark about Peter **not knowing what to say**. In Luke's account, he goes even further and says that *Peter had no idea what he was saying*.

Which, oddly enough, lends credibility to the record of this event. Skeptics often talk about the likelihood that the Bible has been edited over the years. But the simple reality of Peter (one of the most significant leaders in the early church) being

presented so poorly, as clueless in this moment, is a strong affirmation to historians that this event hasn't been made up, or altered, but is **historically reliable**.

Mark continues...

(v.6) Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Again, a **cloud** and a **Voice speaking from heaven** – and then specifically, these words, "This is my Son, whom I love. **Listen to him!**"

It's those **last three words** that need to **ring out for us**. Worth highlighting – because this is the **unique revelation** and **purpose** of this moment on the mountain.

In Mark 1, at Jesus' baptism, something similar happened – we're told that,

"He saw heaven torn open and a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased.'"

These were words spoken from the Father **to Jesus** at his baptism.

But here, speaking not to Jesus, but **to the disciples** – and through them, **to all of us** – the Father declares – "This is my Son, whom I love. **Listen to him!**"

In other words, **Jesus knows that He is talking about** – and by His Word, God's covenant is being renewed and a new Exodus is taking place - **by the Word of Jesus**.

"Listen to Him."

We could end here today...

This alone is a word we need to hear continually – this invitation to **listen to Jesus**. Amidst all the other voices, of our culture, of our traditions, of our desires, and

even of Moses and Elijah, **our greatest need is to hear and follow the Voice of Jesus – trusting that He is the One who knows what is and what is needed.**

Remember how Peter, just days before this, rebuked Jesus for suggesting that He would be rejected and killed.

In that moment, Peter was convinced *he knew better than Jesus.*

And yet, six days later, on the Mount of Transfiguration, it's as though God shouts from the heavens: Peter, stop talking and listen.

Listen to Jesus – and trust what He says.

Is this not always a needed word to us?... There are days coming when, like Peter on this mountain, we find ourselves or will find ourselves puzzled and confused, not knowing what's going on or what to say – but, amidst it all, we are invited by God to trust that **Jesus does – that Jesus knows what is going on and what is needed – and we must listen** – for in His words we will find ourselves led **to life...**

Through suffering, yes, but ultimately, to life.

Mark continues (v.8)

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what 'rising from the dead' meant.

And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come [he's referring to John the Baptist], and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him."

And with that, we move into **the second scene** in our text today – a very different scene. Let me read it now in its entirety. **Mark 9:14-29**

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all 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, gnashing 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 I 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 a 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's 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 come out only by prayer."

From the Mountain of Transfiguration, a fresh encounter with the Glory of Jesus – seeing Jesus for who He is – the disciples now walk with Jesus into a very different scene – an embarrassing, frustrating and painful situation – a fresh encounter with **the powerlessness of the disciples.**

A father has come in desperate faith, seeking the rescuing and restoring grace of Jesus for his son who has been tormented by an unclean spirit for years. He's heard about the new Exodus that Jesus is bringing and he's come seeking Jesus to set his son free.

And yet in this moment, **Jesus' disciples** – who formerly, in Mark 6, had driven out demons... *In this moment, they were unable to do so.*

They were powerless in the face of this evil...

And everyone was disturbed by it...

Imagine you are one of these disciples. You've followed Jesus for some time now, and have come to actually **participate** in the ministry of Jesus – by the grace of His authority in you... Not that you've earned it, but Jesus has chosen you, you've followed Him, and along the way, you have come to **share in** His ministry – healing the sick and casting out demons – in His Name.

But here you are now – **unable** to cast out *this* spirit.

Standing face to face with a heartbroken father – **unable** to stand against the evil
that is destroying his son...

Unable to put an end to this suffering – in *this* boy and in *this* father.

How hard it must have felt for *these* disciples – to be so powerless.

Especially after having cast out demons before...

How hard this must have been for them...

And all the more so, *for this father* – who'd felt *so powerless* for *so long*.

And for all his faith in this moment, bringing his son to Jesus' disciples, nothing
has come of it but yet another reason for his faith and hope to wither and die.

And for the disciples themselves, you have to think that their faith must have
taken a hit – a huge hit maybe, in the trust in the gospel... As they found themselves
powerless to do the very thing Jesus had called and commissioned them to do.

Something they had done before even...

You wonder if this was one of those moments when they might have thought it
was **all coming to an end** – *both Jesus, and their faith in Him...*

Well, **thankfully**, *Jesus doesn't give up in this moment* and leave it at that. No,
He leans into the confusion and invites the father to bring the boy to **Him...**

And as we read before,

"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 I can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

→ *Has that ever been you?*

I suspect it has. I know its been me.

I'm sure that every one of us have prayed and come to Jesus with this kind of **fragile faith** at some point in our journey – maybe often.

Maybe this is what our faith looks like right now.

"I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief."

We hear the faith in this, don't we? **He's** brought his son to Jesus and his disciples. **This took faith.** Especially after all the years of his son's suffering.

Sometimes the simple choice to **rally yourself to ask for help AGAIN** is itself a grand act of faith, in the midst of fear and doubts... A **hard** act of faith, even.

On this, N.T. Wright, a New Testament scholar, makes the observation,

"In the first half of the gospel, many people come to Jesus with what appears comparatively **easy faith**. They touch him and are healed; it seems as simple as that. **But for this man, in this situation, faith is hard.** Not for nothing are his words regularly quoted as an ideal prayer for someone caught in the middle between faith and doubt,

living in the shadowy world of half-belief where one is never sure whether one can see properly or not." (120)

And yet, in the grace of God, **for Jesus, this was all the faith He required.**

The faith of a powerless man – accepting his own powerlessness, even the weakness of his own faith – *and casting Himself on the One who Is Powerful.*

In truth, of all the people in this scene, the father is **only one** who understands his own powerlessness. Who is **honest** about his own weakness – that he is powerless in the face of this suffering and evil – **and who, in this honesty, casts himself on Jesus...**

And in response to this weak and timid faith, Jesus does what only Jesus can do. He casts out the unclean spirit, rescues the boy, and **restores the faith of the father...**

Faith **not in himself or his own sufficiency** – but **in the Grace and Power of Jesus.**

I love how James Edwards, a wise Christian scholar, distills this. **He writes,**

"True faith is always aware how **small** and **inadequate** it is. The father becomes a believer not when he amasses a sufficient quantum of faith but when he risks everything on what little faith he has, when he yields **his insufficiency** to the true sufficiency of Jesus..."

He goes on,

True faith takes no confidence in itself, nor does it judge Jesus by the weakness of his followers. It looks to the More Powerful One (1:7) who stands in the place of God, whose authoritative word restores life from chaos. True faith is unconditional openness to God, a decision in the face of all to the contrary [in us] that *Jesus is able.*"

"I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief."

Do you hear the humility – the confession of powerlessness – in these words?

He's not **just** asking Jesus to rescue and restore his son.

He's asking and inviting Jesus to rescue and restore him as well.

A lesson the disciples themselves needed to learn again that day.

And so let me close with this – because this is where these two stories come together.

In the midst of this man's conflicted faith, it is amazing to realize how he actually understood something we often don't – that Jesus' disciples would bear His authority.

We hear this in his words to Jesus – *"Teacher, I brought you my son... I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."*

Jesus – I came to You – in them...

And for all the ways we may balk at this, this is what Jesus intended – **that his disciples would bear His authority** – that they – that we – would be Jesus' hands and feet and mouthpiece – **through whom Jesus would continue His ministry – far beyond the days of his Incarnation.**

Mark's first readers in **70 AD** might have needed this reminder – that this is always what Jesus intended – *that they, and we, would bear the authority of Jesus.*

But, here's the condition, *to do so we must, like the father in this moment, be honest about our powerlessness*, even the weakness of our faith – and *cast ourselves on the One who is truly Powerful.*

This, according to Jesus, is what the disciples failed to do in this moment.

They asked Jesus, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "This kind can come out *only by prayer.*"

In other words, through the humility and dependence of faith – faith not in our own power or sufficiency, but in the sufficiency and power of *Jesus.*

Which means that our powerlessness is not actually a problem.

In truth, it is a gift... A gift in the hands of God – a gift that invites us not into hiding or overcompensating, but into the grace of faith in the All-Sufficiency of Jesus – in faith and prayer for His power and glory to be revealed and made perfect *in and through us – powerless disciples that we are...*

Though most of us will never experience the glory of Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration, in the mystery of God's grace, Jesus continues to reveal His Glory through the honest faith of powerless disciples...

Will we confess our powerlessness today and place our faith in Jesus?

Will you? Will I? *It's all Jesus needs.*

➔ "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief."

Let's pray -----> *come for prayer.*