

## **“THE FALL'S LEGACY: THE STRUGGLE OF FAITH AND DOUBT”**

**Text: Mk 9:14-29; Jas 3:1-12**

Lord, I believe; help my unbelief! I can't think of a better description of a Christian and of the Christian life than that. Six little words that summarize our lives so perfectly. More on this in a bit, but first let's see what's going on in our Gospel text.

Just before our text, Jesus, Peter, James, and John had just come down from the mountain where Jesus' was transfigured before them. Having seen and heard Jesus in conversation with Moses and Elijah speaking about what Jesus was about to accomplish on the cross, they rejoin the other nine disciples. Which means that while Jesus was showing His divine nature and glory to Peter, James, and John by shining like the sun as God in the flesh who had come to die for the sin of the world... at about the same time, the story we heard today was taking place at the foot of the mountain.

It started off well. A father, concerned for his son who is in desperate need, brings his son to Jesus.

Jesus isn't there, so knowing them as followers of Jesus, he asks the disciples to cast out the spirit, but they aren't able. And as a result an argument breaks out and that apparently draws a great crowd. The boy and his father are still there... and the father is still worried and concerned... and the son still possessed and in desperate need maybe even rolling around on the ground, convulsing and foaming at the mouth... but the scribes and disciples - and others? - are standing around arguing. Did not! Did too! You can't! We can! Frauds! Hypocrites!

And you can imagine Jesus, when He gets there, doing a face palm and sighing: “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.” Suddenly, Peter's suggestion of setting up three tents when they were back up on the mountain and staying a while is looking like a pretty good idea now!

With that expression of disappointment, Jesus now turns the focus back on the boy and his desperate need, and to the real problem here (the faith problem), which showed itself in the scribes, the disciples, and the father. The father, the honest one here, who in confusion, in desperation, in faith, and probably on the verge of tears and at the end of his rope, finally cries out to Jesus: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

He really did believe. That's why he came. That's why he brought his son to Jesus in the first place. And what does he believe? That Jesus can help. That Jesus wants to help. That Jesus has come to help. And yet at the same time there's something else in him that he wrestles with - those doubts...

- that maybe he's not worthy of Jesus help;
- that maybe Jesus doesn't want to help him;
- that maybe he's beyond Jesus' help.

He's this mixed up jumble of belief and unbelief, of saint and sinner... Just like us.

Because this is really what we're saying every time we confess our sins:

- Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.
- I believe that you are the Son of God who came to die for my sins on the cross.
- I believe that you have given me my faith and new life.
- I believe in your promise of forgiveness and that I am your child.
- I believe that you are blessing me and working all things for my good.
- I believe that you are merciful and gracious.

Yes, I believe all this... and yet...

- I have lived this day, this week, as if I didn't.
- As if everything were up to me instead of living as a child of God and trusting in my heavenly Father.
- As if I were in competition with others instead of seeing them as ones you have put here for me to help and care for.
- When trouble came I doubted your love and when it stayed I doubted your mercy, and \* When things were going good, I didn't even think of you much of that time, as the one who was giving me that good.

That's why...

- ...I've complained and failed to thank you.
- ...my tongue which blesses you here on Sunday spoke harsh and unloving things this week, as James reminded us in the epistle today when she said that blessings and cursing come from the same mouth, and brothers, this should not be!
- ...I've been quick to accuse and slow to forgive.
- ...I've rejoiced in others failures and was jealous at their success and good fortune...

I believe, and yet... what a jumbled, mixed-up combination of belief and unbelief I am. Lord, I believe; help my unbelief. Forgive me, restore me, help me, and strengthen me.

Yes, that's what we say every time we come to Jesus in the Lord's Prayer and pray for forgiveness. And also what we say at the beginning of every Divine Service here, when we come to Jesus through the one He authorized and sent here to speak His word of forgiveness to us. And your sins are forgiven. Not because your prayer is so good, or your vacancy pastor can do so, but because of the promise of your Savior when after His resurrection from the dead He said to His disciples, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. . . . If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them . . ."

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Don't overlook this fact in this story: the first person Jesus helped here was the father, who had been bruised and battered over the difficulties with his son, with the arguing of those who should have been helping him, and with his own struggles of faith. Jesus addresses him first, exposing his unbelief in order to help him, too. As He now does for you and me. He does it by echoing the man's words back to him. "If you can do anything...please have compassion...please help..." To which Jesus replies, "If I can? All this are possible for the one who has faith." He exposes the man's unbelief and will now strengthen his faith in what he will do next.

Then Jesus turns to the boy - this boy whom an unclean spirit has been trying to destroy since childhood, the father says. You can almost hear the weariness in the father's voice . . .

This is a picture of our situation as well - before we were the jumbled, mixed-up combination of belief and unbelief that we are. Because just as Jesus spoke to that boy and gave him life, so Jesus has done for us. Because in baptism, through water and the Word, Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit in each of us and raises us from being dead in sin to a new life in Him.

So both father and son were cleansed, released, renewed, and restored. As usual, Jesus gives even more than is asked or expected. And not by two miracles, but really by one and the same miracle: the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is the key. Because that's the help we need at all times and in all places - the cleanness and new life of baptism, the release from our bondage to sin, and the return to that cleanness and new life in forgiveness. And, like the father, because our sinful nature often gets the best of us, this washing and cleansing and raising of forgiveness is not just a one time, or a weekly, or even a daily, but a continual promise. That wherever we are and whatever situation we find ourselves in, Lord, I believe; help my unbelief! is exactly what Jesus has come to do. To forgive our sin. To strengthen our faith. To give us new life.

Which is why Jesus came down from His Transfiguration and didn't stay there. The transfiguration shows us that the one who hung on the cross for us was no mere man, but God Himself - the divine and glorious Son of God in human flesh. And that Son of God in human flesh would be the Son destroyed by our uncleanness. Not because our uncleanness was more powerful than He, but because He put Himself there, in our place, to bear our uncleanness and so be the unclean one forsaken by His Father, and die our death. And those who were there at the cross that day - disciples, soldiers, and onlookers alike - all said (like they did in our story today), He is dead. And then this Son who raised the dead rose from the dead Himself, so that joined to Him there may be new life for us too.

And that new life has been given to you, because baptism and forgiveness - like we saw with the son and his father - are like little resurrections. Both father and son were given new life. And now Jesus comes to us and takes us by the hand and says arise. Arise from your unbelief; arise from your uncleanness; arise and live a new life. And rising, He now bids us come to His table to be fed by Him.

That the resurrection to faith and new life given by Him be now strengthened by Him - with His own Body and Blood. So that sin and uncleanness would not have free reign or dominion in our lives, but that Christ would now live and reign in us.

And He does. So even though "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" is our prayer and will always be our prayer as long as we live on this side of eternity, it is no longer a prayer of despair, but of confidence and hope. Because as we live simultaneously as saints declared righteous and sinners who fall, it is always as dear children of God in our Savior Jesus Christ. Our Savior who came down from heaven to be born in our flesh, who came down from His Transfiguration to die our death, and now resurrected and ascended still comes down to you and me to help and to heal, to restore and renew, to favor and to forgive.

So don't despair, don't doubt, and don't fear. Pray. Pray "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" And as He did for this father and his son, so Jesus comes to do for you. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.