

In the Message two weeks ago we were up on the Mountain of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John. We saw Jesus transfigured before them, and heard of Elijah and Moses appearing and conversing with Jesus. We heard the voice of the Father, the same voice heard at Jesus' Baptism: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Don't argue with Him. Listen to Him!

In our Scripture this morning we are coming down off the mountain, moving away from that moment of glory on the hilltop, and returning to ministry among the people. Moving away from the majestic, authoritative, voice of God to the complaining and accusing voices of the crowd. We think of Peter's suggestion up on the mountain: In Mark 9:5, "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." It was indeed good to be on the mountaintop, and it was hard to come down.

Remembering what we have been discovering about the structure of Mark's gospel, I would remind you that we reached a climax in the gospel with Peter's proclamation that Jesus is the Christ in Mark 8. This revelation is then confirmed in Mark 9 by the Transfiguration on the mountaintop and by the voice of God saying, "This is my Son whom I love. Listen to Him!"

After this high point at the end of the first half of Mark's gospel, the movement of the gospel is toward Jerusalem and the cross. Opposition increases. The mood darkens. The apprehension of the disciples grows. It's a downhill slide until we get to Easter morning. The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus on the mountain actually help to predict this downhill movement. When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments what did he run into? After Elijah defeats the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, what did he run into? Do you remember? In the case of Moses, he ran into a mutiny. The people under the leadership of Aaron were having an orgy and were worshiping golden calves. In the case of Elijah, he ran into the wrath of Jezebel and felt it necessary to run for his life. Coming down from mountaintop experiences with God can be pretty tough.

We face a similar though much less severe challenge in our service this morning. Last Sunday was another high moment for us as a church. There was a lot of joy and excitement as we witnessed five persons being baptized, a great reminder of God's Spirit moving among us. It was good for us to be there on that "mountaintop," and hard to come back down this morning.

It seems to me, however, that this is always the main work we face. How do we apply what we learn and experience on the spiritual mountaintops to ministry in the valleys? How do we take the work that the Holy Spirit is doing within us and apply it and keep it alive in our relationships with others and in the challenges we face from day to day? Certainly for those who were baptized last Sunday, the devil has probably put you to the test already. Maybe even before you left the church building last Sunday or on your way home or later that day or bright and early Monday morning, the devil was laying snares and trying his best to trip you up. If you haven't faced him yet--take this to the bank--you soon will. Remember that as soon as Jesus was baptized, He was driven into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. You will be tested.

And while we are talking about being tested, let me tell you the main thing you need to know in spiritual warfare: **Jesus never fails.** That is the one thing you need to know. At one point or at another all of us mess it up; we are tested and found wanting. But, that's not the end of the story; it's not the whole war, just a little battle. Satan will try to convince us that when we slip up, we are defeated and that all is lost. He will tell us that our failure is proof of God's impotence to help us. And, when he does that this is what we need to do: We just need to look him in his evil eye and say: **"Jesus never fails."**

Think of a baby just learning to walk: How many times does a baby fall before his legs are strong enough to hold his weight and her sense of balance developed enough to stay upright? Megan Shultz has just learned to walk and she is doing very well, but ask Kevin and Amber how many times did she fall down before she learned to walk? Does she still fall? Will she fall less as she gets older? Absolutely.

I would remind you that much of what happens in Mark's gospel has to do with Jesus training his disciples to become future leaders and apostles in the Church Jesus has come to establish. He has already given them hands on experience in healing the sick and casting out demons. He has given them the opportunity to assist Him in the feeding of the multitudes with several loaves of bread and few small fish. His disciples have experienced great success in going out and duplicating the miracles of the Master. But, when Jesus, with Peter, James, and John in tow, come down from the mountain of Transfiguration, something has gone terribly wrong in their absence. Mark 9:14-18 say,

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, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

When Jesus went up the mountain with Peter, James, and John, I'm sure He said something like this to the rest: "We are going to be gone for a few hours and I'm leaving you in charge until we get back. You know what to do." It reminds us of how Moses left Aaron in charge when he went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Like Aaron, the disciples of Jesus, whom I like to think of as our spiritual ancestors and prototypes, have fallen down on the job. A man came to them with a need that they had been trained to handle. His son was demon possessed. He wanted them to deliver his boy. They ought to have been able to handle this assignment, for they had already cast out many demons; they knew what to say and what to do. But, this particular demon was particularly strong, and would not obey them. The disciples had failed.

As a result of their failure to cast out the demon, the father was disappointed and his faith was damaged. The reputations of the disciples and that of Jesus were also called into question. The Jewish teachers of the law ridiculed them and ridiculed their master.

To make bad matters even worse, the disciples also lost their tempers and ended up in a public argument with their accusers. By the time Jesus and the others came down off the mountain things had gotten out of control. A shouting match was underway and both sides were eyeing the ground for stones to throw at each other.

Perhaps you can think of a time like this in your life? Somebody was counting on you and you let them down. You promised more than you were able to deliver. Accusations were made against you, and you lost your cool. Maybe it was at work, or at church, or within the walls of your own home. You thought you were up to the challenge but when the moment came, you came apart at the seams. You experienced a meltdown and others were hurt or disappointed. Your integrity was compromised. Your testimony for the Lord went down the tubes.

In many workplace environments and in some marriages, such failures would be fatal. You would find yourself without a job or without a spouse. Second chances in the world are sometimes hard to come by. We can also be cruel to ourselves. We sometimes call ourselves names and disqualify ourselves from future use. But the good news is this: **Jesus never fails.**

This is not to say that Jesus is never grieved with our performance. Mark 9:19 says, "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" Jesus' "job satisfaction" level on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest, was at this moment about a minus eleven. His human patience was almost exhausted. I suspect it was especially hard, having just seen a fresh sight of heaven.

But Jesus doesn't abandon His disciples in their time of disgrace. Beginning at the end of Mark 9:19 we find out what happens:

Jesus said, "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 him 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 evil 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.

The first thing Jesus does is to reestablish a relationship with the father who had been disappointed and let down by the disciples. Jesus engages him in conversation and gathers history on his son's affliction. The father's confidence grows as Jesus speaks to him until he is moved to ask for help. Still there is uncertainty: "*if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*" Jesus challenges the man's weakened faith but encourages him at the same time. Jesus tells him, "*Everything is possible for him who believes.*" The anxious father latches on to the hope Jesus offers him. He says, "*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!*" Jesus overcomes the failure of His disciples and makes everything as it should be. The young man is wonderfully healed and

set free from his affliction. The demon is gone. The work of the Devil is overturned.

But what does the Lord want us to take home with us from this story this morning? What are the lessons for us? Three things come to mind. First of all, we are challenged not to give up on ourselves or give up on the Lord when we mess up or when we face the embarrassment of having promised more than we can deliver. Jesus didn't quit on His first disciples and He's not about to quit on us. **Jesus never fails.**

The second thing the Lord wants us to understand is the centrality of belief. He wants nothing more than for us to trust Him. The frustration expressed in verse 19 is toward "this unbelieving generation." The main focus of Jesus' conversation with the father of the demon possessed boy centers on the issue of belief. We need to make up our minds about Jesus. Is He the Messiah, the Savior? Is He the Son of God? Is He the Sacrifice for our sins? Is He risen from the dead? Is He here among us and within us to save, heal, and deliver? Does He or does He not have all authority in heaven and on earth? Is He victor over all the forces of the evil one, including death? The Lord wants us to have faith. The purpose of showing us His glory on the mountaintops is to give us faith for the valleys. **Jesus never fails.**

The third thing I believe the Lord has for us this morning is the recognition that we need to go deeper in prayer and find power in prayer. Mark 9:28 and 29 say, "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." The demon the disciples faced in Mark 9 was a particularly powerful demon, but it was no more powerful than some of the demons, addictions, illnesses, sins and temptations that we face today. And, the truth is that if we want real victory over these enemies of our bodies and souls, we need to pray. We need to learn how to get in touch with Jesus, because **Jesus never fails.**

Believe in Him. Pray to Him. Trust Him to stay with you even when you are struggling the most. Discover the truth I'm talking about this morning: **Jesus never fails!**

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Jesus Can!

Mark 9:14-29

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