

Mark 9:14–29

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Taught for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) ·

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In the texts for Pentecost 16, Jesus picks us up and carries us out to the edge of our limits under the power of the resurrection, and then sets us down on both feet under the sign of the cross.

The disciples are on their way back. They have come down the mountain; Jesus has convinced Peter not to start his building project. They are coming back to the other disciples to be reunited. Up there in the clouds they heard God's own voice, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him," and they got an eyeful as well: Moses and Elijah talking things over with Jesus as he turns now to go toward Jerusalem. But as they come back down the mountain into the doings of every day, they run into the same stuff they left behind. There are the scribes, gathered like so many faculty at a faculty meeting, one of the worst things imaginable, checking Jesus out to make sure he fulfills all their expectations, and of course being properly critical in the process. There are the failing disciples, a little afraid. They have run into a demon they can't deal with. They are upset, not quite up to par, as usual. And there is a crowd gathered that is just plain full of expectations. What have you done for me lately? Expecting the best for the lowest possible commitment, of course.

So it's no wonder that in this text Jesus is a little irritable. He's got a heart full of heaven. He has just been up on the mountain, and now he has an eyeful and an earful of all the ordinary stuff, and he gets a little ticked. Who can blame him? "How long am I to bear with you?" How long do I have to put up with this? This is just a little too much of the ordinary. You want it low-down and common? Here's low-down and common overflowing, the same old stuff.

But it's just like Jesus. Even when he has a justifiable complaint, he turns and does what he does. He is the Savior of the world, of course, and when he sees that little boy in front of him, that child who is possessed, thrashing, foaming, crying out, he goes and rescues him from the powers of darkness right there in front of everybody.

This makes Jesus a companion to two of the other preachers who show up in these texts. One, of course, is the greatest preacher in the Old Testament, none other than the prophet Isaiah, singing one of his Servant Songs, the third one. It's absolutely gorgeous, one of the great texts of the Old Testament. Side by side with him is the psalmist in Psalm 116, one of my dear favorites. Both are working a common theme, the theme we've set out for today: the power of the resurrection under the sign of the cross. So we'll hear both sides from them. They speak of the promise and its power, the gifts of grace, and at the same time acknowledge that they are standing up to their shoulders, maybe up to their noses, in the stuff that stinks. They are under contradiction even as they preach.

So we've got Jesus, Isaiah, and the psalmist in Psalm 116. That's quite a choir to sing together, enough that we can even handle Little Jim, as my old friend and teacher Bill Hume used to call the epistle of James. Of course he is going to run on short legs with preachers like these around. He can't quite keep up, but he has a helpful word for us anyway, if we don't expect him to preach too much grace. So we'll ask him to speak his piece too.

We'll start with the gospel, because of the way this gospel works. This is one of those gospels that works back from the resurrection to the cross, so we'll begin with it and come back that way. Then we'll take up James, just so he gets a word in. But we'll give Isaiah and Psalm 116 the last word, because these fellows are just singing for all they're worth.

Mark 9: If You Are Able

First of all, Mark 9:14–29. Here Jesus takes us out to the edge of our limits under the power of the resurrection, before planting our feet firmly on the ground under the sign of the cross. Having been up on the mountain and heard God's voice, having been in this discussion with Moses and Elijah, he has gotten a foretaste of things to come. He has seen the end of his work up there, the resurrection of the dead.

You remember Peter's ridiculous suggestion when he sees this marvelous gathering: we'll build three booths. It's so ridiculous that God himself breaks in. "No, no. This is my beloved Son; listen to him." So Jesus has gotten God's endorsement once more. The voice that spoke at his baptism has spoken here, right in the middle of his ministry, and Jesus knows the significance of this promise: the end of it is going to be the resurrection from the dead. So when he starts dealing with the father of this young boy, you can feel the resurrection just surging through this text. It's as though Easter has broken out ahead of time. It's really fun.

So the father comes and speaks to Jesus. He has spoken to the disciples, of course, and they have failed him. So he turns to Jesus and, in the end, pleads with Jesus to give his son his life once more. And he says, "If you can do anything."

You can hear a little bit of a broken heart here. You know parents like this. You meet them regularly in congregations. They have children who are afflicted. Their whole life has been shaped by the affliction, and they have tried everything. This man has tried everything. He has gone to faith healers and to the doctors, to the church and to the synagogue. He has gone everywhere looking for some hope for this boy, who throws himself into the fire and into the water, who has hurt himself desperately in these fits, foaming at the mouth, the whole desperate business. So this man, whose hopes have been tempered, who is not quite sure it's worth another try, says, "If you can." Of course you can hardly blame the man. His heart has been broken time after time.

Jesus picks up his very words. "If you can!" Come on. And then he makes one of his most expansive promises, a promise like the ones he makes in John's Gospel: "Ask anything in my name, and I will do it." If you can? Come on, you're fooling. "All things are possible for one who believes."

This promise is echoed not only in the Gospel of John but elsewhere in the Synoptics as well, where the early Christian community expresses in Jesus' promises its confidence in the promise of the gospel. All things are possible for one who believes. This is faith in the promise of the resurrection. But there is a temptation hidden in it: it can also become faith in faith, and of course that becomes problematic. We know all kinds of stories of people who have been utterly confident of the power of faith, who have believed with all their heart and nevertheless met their limitations.

Of course there is a basis for this confidence. Faith aligns us with the beginning and the end, with the God who created and the God who in the end redeems all things. We are back in line with God. This is the language of justification, which is relational language. Sometimes I like to speak of it as being in alignment. If you listen to an orchestra warming up (it's an analogy you've heard me use before), you hear a cacophony of different sounds. Then the oboist plays the note, and the orchestra tunes up. They've been justified. They've been brought back into alignment. Luther used to say that when God justifies, he brings us back to the point from which Adam fell. That is to say, he brings us back into alignment with himself, so that faith literally taps into the power of God. In the same way, we are aligned with the power of the

resurrection, so that in this alignment, lined up with the power of creation and the power of redemption, there are no limits. All things are possible. For the one who believes, this promise is literally and completely and solidly true.

It also happens, however, that this was pretty much the faith of the earliest Christians. They believed that the resurrection had annulled the cross, that there could be no more suffering, that by believing we were translated into a new age beyond the cross, and that possessing the power of the resurrection we were completely free of all limits. So in the Corinthian community, “All things are lawful for me” was the slogan under which the congregation was founded. Can you imagine? This is faith in the resurrection. It is faith in the power of faith. But what it is missing is the sign of the cross. Sometimes this is called enthusiasm, God-within-ism, *en theos*: we possess the power of God, and possessing the power of God we can literally pass beyond the suffering and sorrow and limitations of everyday life.

One of the most important things about the Gospel of Mark is that he is bringing this enthusiasm down to earth, and this text from Mark 9 has exactly this structure. He is never going to deny the power of the resurrection, not for a minute. But he is going to insist, as the apostle Paul does, that the resurrection always comes down to earth under the sign of the cross. That is, the resurrection’s power shows itself amid contradiction, despair, and difficulty.

So we have one side of the dialectic. Jesus takes us right out to the limit. If you can? Of course I can. All things are possible for one who believes. Ask me anything in my name and I’ll do it. There’s the resurrection breaking loose. And of course, when Jesus gets hold of this little boy, the boy is freed from the powers of distortion, the demonic forces at work in human life. He is freed in such a way that he can go home with his dad, back to his family, to his mother and father, whole and alive. That’s what happens. This does happen. We see it happen. We know it happens under the power of the Word. We see the resurrection break out here and now.

Lord, I Believe; Help My Unbelief

But, but, but: under the sign of the cross. And so we see the cross showing up, first of all, in the father. Isn’t this interesting? It’s a lot of fun. “I believe; help my unbelief!” Here is a man who has had the stuffing kicked out of him, who has worried and fretted and loved and given and done everything he can for his son, and who has batted his head against these limits over and over again. So he doesn’t say, “Lord, I believe,” and stop there. He doesn’t say, “Lord, I believe, and I am such a wonderful, faithful man that I can make use of this promise, and I’ll

do so.” No, no. He says, “Lord, I believe,” and then he does exactly the right thing. He calls out to Christ Jesus to complete what is missing in his faith. He knows his faith is shaky. He knows the despair he has fought with. He knows he can’t present himself as a reclamation project. “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”

We live in circumstances that are a direct contradiction of the power of the resurrection. We live in circumstances where death is determined to get the last word, even though Christ has taken it away from death. We live in conditions in which young children like this bear in their bodies the sins of those around them. So there is plenty of fuel for unbelief, and the only one who is going to deal with it is Christ Jesus. “Lord, I believe; you’d better help my unbelief, because if you leave it to me, I’m going to go right down the drain.” It’s like one of my favorite verses: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.” But if I open them, good luck. If I open them, what you’re going to get is the same old drivel you’ve been altogether too familiar with in the past. Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.

And so Jesus keeps his promise with the boy, and he keeps his promise with the father. He gives what the father has so desperately sought. Here is the cross showing up under the sign of the resurrection.

This Kind Only by Prayer

And now we get a very interesting conversation at the end of the text, which I think is maybe even the heart of the text. Jesus goes back to his disciples in the last verses, and his disciples ask him, “Why could we not cast it out?” Isn’t that fun?

This is the difference between enthusiasm and faith. Enthusiasm assumes that it possesses the power of God, and because it possesses the power of God, it should not experience limits. Enthusiasm assumes that it has captured the power of the resurrection and is therefore beyond earthly reality. Enthusiasm turns to itself, assuming it has captured the power Christ Jesus holds. Faith turns to Christ Jesus and asks him to do it. That’s a big difference, and a critical one.

“Why could we not cast it out?” The disciples are making the objection of enthusiasm. They want this power, and they want to hold it as a possession. Jesus says quite quietly, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” The power of the resurrection does not belong to us. It belongs to Christ Jesus. It is his power. And because it is his power, when we face these desperate situations, when we stand, as I did yesterday and this morning, in the face of

death itself, losing people we love, we call out on the basis of this promise, expecting that Jesus will do it. But we call out in prayer, and in prayer we say nevertheless, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Thy will be done. And so we confront our limits under the sign of the resurrection: all things are possible for one who believes. But at the same time, under the sign of the cross, this kind can be dealt with only by prayer.

I am convinced that enthusiasm is one of the chief problems we are facing as churches. Enthusiasm hears the gospel; that’s the good aspect of it. But it hears the gospel and extends it. It pushes the gospel one step beyond its limits and says, “Because the gospel is true, this must be true.” I go to a text study here with a lot of the pastors on Wednesdays. I do this one with you first, on Tuesday, and then I go in and work on it there. They use the ELCA’s lectionary, so sometimes it’s a little different, but it’s very interesting to do. And we had an absolutely perfect example of enthusiasm in the text study last week.

The argument, as it has been carried on in the church, begins with grace. Grace is for everyone. It is God’s gift. There are no limitations on it. All of which is true. Jesus dealt with the blind, the deaf, the lame, the outcasts, including the Syrophoenician woman. He himself pushed out the borders and broke the limits. Therefore, the reasoning goes, we should be able to break the social limits the society has traditionally set, the ones that have come out of the Scripture. And you know where that goes: God accepts all homosexual relationships. Now that extension is made by altogether ignoring the limits set biblically, by turning the gospel into an idea, as though the power of the resurrection as an idea destroyed the law and all earthly limitations. And then of course the people who break the limitations like to say, “We’re the truly tolerant ones; we’re the ones who are open, you closed old jerks,” and they literally undermine both law and gospel by doing so.

So this is a classic text in the Gospel of Mark, where Mark is making the argument Paul makes in Corinthians. It’s not exactly the same, but it is closely parallel. Here is how Paul makes the argument: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” The transcendent power belongs to God. That’s first. We have it. We have it in the promise of the resurrection. We have it in the gospel: forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, everlasting salvation. But we have this power now under the sign of the cross, in the context of limitations we have to honor and recognize and deal with.

Here is the father of this poor boy: the father afflicted, the boy out of control. Jesus brings his power to bear in that situation. The father recognizes his limits even under the sign of the resurrection. “I believe”: there is the power. “Help my unbelief”: there is the cry of the cross. Jesus delivers, and he delivers in a context that stands against it.

So it is very important with this text to honor both sides. We have this power. Jesus has this power, and he has given it to us. All things are possible for one who believes. We can ask, and we can ask full of the expectation of good. But finally it is Christ Jesus who heals and frees, who gives faith and a future, who blesses and carries. And so we turn to him under the sign of the cross, and there, under the sign of the cross, we meet the power of the resurrection.

James 3: Taming the Tongue

Now, if I’ve done an adequate job of clarifying this, one of the deep dialectics of Scripture, which always has a way of slipping away from us, we can go on. We’ll stop briefly with Little Jim, the book of James, and then move on to the two great preachers who stand with Jesus today, Isaiah 50 and Psalm 116.

To begin with, the book of James. As I mentioned last week, it is very helpful to approach this letter as the New Testament equivalent of Proverbs, wisdom literature. The author has really forfeited his office. He is a teacher, not a preacher. He has forfeited the declaration, the proclamation, we would expect from a New Testament book. Christ appears in this book twice, and both times in formulas. He is really not interested in preaching the gospel. Apparently he assumes that is clear enough, or that somebody else has done it sufficiently, so that he can concentrate on our behavior. And he concentrates on it in a way that is fairly moralistic. He is convinced that the gospel expresses itself in moral renewal, though he disputes the Pauline connection and doesn’t establish it. Apparently he is relying on free will.

Well, those are all appropriate criticisms, and they’re fine and good, but then we are expecting the book of James to be something it isn’t. What it is, is good advice. What it is, is a good proclamation of the law. What it will do for you is help you out in situations where the tongue has become a problem, and the Lord only knows how general and common that is.

Speaking of enthusiasm, the church conducts itself as though the Eighth Commandment had been suspended. “Everybody else should stop gossiping. Y’all should stop undermining the neighbor. But boy, have I heard something you should know.” That’s just the way it happens. The tongue gets loose, and of course James is exactly right about this. The tongue is a small

member, like the rudder of a ship, which is also fairly small, and it has a way of getting away, and when the tongue gets away, all hell breaks loose. This is not a hypothetical situation. This is the default position of the human community. We work on one another's backs. We use our tongues to settle all kinds of accounts, usually behind the neighbor's back, in such a way that we feast on one another's sins.

So you could take this little text as a meditation on the Eighth Commandment, and as a very helpful example of what we need to do with the tongue, which is to keep it under control. As Luther explains in the Eighth Commandment, we are to speak well of our neighbors and interpret everything they do in the kindest way.

What happens when the tongue gets loose is that congregations divide. I have been helping a congregation over in eastern Oregon that left the ELCA. I just love those people; they are outstanding. But they had been served by a neighboring pastor who got in the habit of talking over some members of the congregation with four other members of the congregation. Well, you can guess where that went. That is not only a violation of the Eighth Commandment but conduct unbecoming. When a pastor starts backbiting members of the congregation, the whole thing is going to go in a hole. So the congregation is split. The four confidants of the pastor have decided that they know the real truth of the situation, and those who were the subjects of these discussions have left the parish. So we've got a little group that's left and a little group that left before. This is the trouble nowadays: once we divide, we enjoy it so much that we keep dividing. All of this could have been forestalled if that little member, the tongue, had worn a bridle, if the neighbor had been spoken of in the kindest way.

Of course, this is a long way from power made perfect in weakness. It is a long way from treasure in earthen vessels, a long way from this exuberant father who has now experienced the power of the gospel in his son and is rejoicing under the sign of the cross. But nevertheless it's a decent lesson. We all know this, and if we don't know it right off the top, we can learn it fairly fast. If you are having trouble with wagging tongues, this is probably a good enough way to go at it. It's not going to solve the problem, certainly not. You will be discussed at lunch; you can bet on it. But it's a worthwhile lesson.

So we'll leave Little Jim with that: a wise enough teacher, who reminds us that we are accountable for what we teach, and who reminds those of us who make our living with our mouths that we had better watch that little member at the center of them, because trouble very

quickly follows. We all know that, we're thankful for it, we've been reminded of it, and the lecture is over at that point.

Isaiah 50: The Tongue of Those Who Are Taught

But now we are going to visit with a couple of the greatest preachers in the history of Scripture: Isaiah 50 and Psalm 116, maybe David, who knows. Psalm 116 is a wonderful psalm, and we should look at it fairly closely.

Isaiah 50:4–10 is the third of the Servant Songs. Undoubtedly you studied these Servant Songs when you took an Old Testament course. There is a set of them in the middle of Isaiah, starting around the forty-second chapter. We are now coming toward the end of them; I think there's one more, I'm not sure. But Isaiah 50:4–10 is one of the great ones.

Isaiah begins with his calling as a preacher: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary." Can you imagine anybody who could comfort more serenely and more confidently than the preacher Isaiah? He is a preacher of consolation. He is describing himself, and he has every right to. God has given him the tongue of an able teacher, an able preacher, and so, as a servant, he has preached the word that has been given to him.

There is always some question, of course, about who the servant is. In the Christian faith we generally regard Jesus as being described by these texts. It may be that Isaiah is thinking a little of himself here. But as a faithful servant he has delivered the consoling message with which he was sent. When a preacher can say this, it is one of the great things in life. "I delivered to you what I also received": that is the eschatological cry of a preacher. I told you what he told me to tell you. I delivered the mail. I have accomplished my work. And so he can rejoice in this.

But of course, in a world of sin and death, amid the contention released under the sign of the cross, what can you expect this word to do? It will console, but it is also going to meet immediate opposition. One of the worst things you can do is start turning the lights on in the home of the blind. That's just how it goes. So he has delivered the word, and having delivered it, he is in trouble. Isaiah is being persecuted and pursued.

Nevertheless, under the sign of the cross, he confesses his faith in sure and certain confidence. "Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in

darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.” There you go. The message has been given. It has been faithfully delivered. It has kicked up opposition, and that opposition has cost Isaiah plenty. But he still holds the two together: cross and resurrection. The cross in the form of contention and sorrow and opposition; the resurrection in the form of consolation and blessing.

So we have the same combination we had in the gospel. The power of the resurrection is given under the sign of the cross for our time, and for as long as we live those two go together. In the end the resurrection will be the last word. Then Jesus will say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.” Then the resurrection has the last word. It will all be done, and we will rejoice in him for all eternity.

Psalm 116: He Inclined His Ear

Now Psalm 116 is exactly parallel. I just love this psalm. When my dad was dying, I was sitting reading the psalms to him. He had never been able to tell me that he was going to die. And when I was reading another psalm to him, he said, “Jim, go and read 116. Read 116.” So I read 116, which says later on, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” He knew it was coming, even though he couldn’t acknowledge it.

Well, here we go. Psalm 116, verses 1 through 9. “He inclined his ear to me.” That’s a wonderful image. He has tipped his head. He has cocked his ear. He is listening to you like an old man who is a little deaf; he has it cupped so he can get the whole thing. God has inclined his ear to such a degree that he can hear a voice calling from Sheol.

When I was a student at the seminary, back in the Vietnam War days at old Luther Seminary, one of my classmates told a fundamentalist to go to hell, and the fellow said, “Do you mean Sheol or Gehenna?” There are a couple of hells in the Bible. Sheol is the living hell we enter in suffering. From Sheol the psalmist cries out, and God hears his voice. God has tipped his head and inclined his ear, and so he hears us from Sheol, and he has responded, in verses 5 and 6, with comfort and blessing. And so he will deliver, verses 8 and 9. There you go.

I always have trouble with the new translation of the Creed: “He descended to the dead.” I suppose that’s technically correct, but I like it a lot better to say, “He descended into hell.” He went there. Where the psalmist went, where we have gone with members of our congregations, where we have lived in times of deep contention, he went: to hell, to preach good news to those in prison.

There's the same combination we've been working on out of Mark's Gospel: a corrective to a theology of the resurrection that leaves the cross behind, a corrective to the promise "all things are possible for one who believes" when that promise turns into a claim and a possession and leads us to believe that we are beyond all earthly limits. We're not there yet. We're not there yet. In heaven we will be. But for the time being, our signs are Good Friday and Easter: Easter interpreting our Good Fridays, and Good Friday interpreting our Easters. The two go side by side. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." There you go, about as fine a prayer as you could possibly hear, and one that recognizes that the power of the resurrection expresses itself particularly under the sign of the cross, delivering us for our final hope. On that day, the last day, there will be no death. The devil will have been put out to pasture; his job is done. And on that day Christ will rule without contention.

Well, put that in your pipe and smoke it. There you go. We've got four texts, each of which could be preached on till tomorrow. You're going to have to pick one and have some fun with it. But I think if you work with this theme, Good Friday under the sign of Easter, the texts will come together in such a way as both to incite our hopes and to temper them with the realities of everyday life. All right, power to you. I'm praying for you, and I look forward to seeing you next week.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjoiWRd2ly0>

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