

Mark 9:30–37

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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

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This is the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost. My pastor is with me today, and we've discovered that the texts we use are the same this time, which makes it a lot of fun.

In the texts for Pentecost 17 there are four different responses to conflict or affliction. Going by the statistics, you might not want to start writing life insurance policies on prophets. They live at considerable risk, and most of them die early. There's something about the prophets that ticks people off, to the point where they start swinging things and trying to do away with the person who provoked them. Maybe it's the certainty with which the prophets speak: "Thus says the Lord," in the sure and certain confidence that it is the Lord using their mouths and that they are not simply delivering their own opinions, the latest convictions of the alienated upper middle class, but bringing God's own Word to bear.

It could be a matter of judgment. Generally the prophets have something to speak over against, and we'll see that today. That has a way of making people angry and putting the prophet in the bull's-eye. And of course there's something more here too. When people start getting mad at Jesus for delivering others from evil, you start to suspect that grace itself may be the provocation. What is Jesus doing, going and being gracious with sinners, for crying out loud? It's enough to tick off the pious royalty and send them looking for guns or clubs or crosses, anything they can find. At any rate, the promise is at stake, and that starts to move the crowd against Jesus, so that already in Mark 9 he is anticipating trouble the second time around.

So all four of our texts come out of a situation in which something over against us has put the prophet, the preacher, in the bull's-eye. It's as though there were a full staff ministry of four at an annual meeting. They're all going to be running by the time it's over, except for one, and you know who that is.

So we'll take Little Jim first, the book of James. Bill Hulme, one of my favorite old teachers, always used to call James "Little Jim." Then we'll move to the Old Testament text. James, of

course, is convinced he has a solution for all this: if we'd just be more humble, this wouldn't happen. Well, if you want to buy that, I've got some land in Florida you can have cheap. Then Jeremiah and the psalmist. This is much more substantial stuff. They know we live in the context of enemies. Jeremiah can be a little bitchy about it, and that's Luther's term. At the same time we get a full picture of faith dealing with conflict in a particular way.

And then we come to this Gospel from Mark 9. Jesus is a prophet, among other things, and so he knows he is going to get a prophet's reward. He announces here for the second time that he is not going to come out of this alive. But he deals with the threat in the most marvelous way, and in the process he exposes the preachers in the other three texts. So this is a lot of fun. This is one of those Gospels you can preach until Tuesday and never exhaust.

James: Moralism

First, the supporting texts. Today we'll start with Jim and be done with him: James 3:13–4:10. His response to conflict and affliction is the simplest and most predictable of all. It's flat-out moralism.

Now we have to give him credit, and I want to give him as much credit as I possibly can. In verses 17 and 18 he has a beautiful description of the wisdom from above: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace." Who could ask for anything more? This is the wisdom that is not resident in us but comes down from above. When this wisdom takes hold of you, when it is manifest in you, it's absolutely marvelous. You can't ask for anything better.

But typically, when he has delivered himself of this great message, he's a little ticked off. So he turns from the wisdom from above to some spleen, and that's a very typical response to conflict: it's your fault, cut it out, get out of my way. "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?" Well, I'll be more than willing to tell you, you jerks. "Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" Of course that's true. "You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder." Well, I suppose some do. But we're in church now, and murder is not the norm, even though it has come close at church council meetings and annual meetings. At Ladies Aid meetings we try to avoid murder. "Adulterers!" All right, he's off to the races now. "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity

with God?” In fact we do. But it isn’t going to be solved by lectures and such stern business, wagging his finger.

So I’m afraid James has taken us about as far as he can. Willpower will do it. We’ll summon ourselves up to be humble. But of course you know what happens: I’m a little more humble than you are. And as long as I’m more humble than you are, I can desire whatever I please, thank you very much. Well, enough of that. If you’re going to preach on this text, singing praises to Christ Jesus for the wisdom that comes down from above would make it worth your while. That’s a lot of fun. That’s James at his very best.

Jeremiah 11: Hand Your Revenge to God

The Old Testament texts are considerably better. We’ve got the big leagues going here: Jeremiah, whom Luther loved to gripe about, and Psalm 54. Luther liked to compare Isaiah and Jeremiah. He said Isaiah was a broadaxe, a great huge axe twelve inches wide that you swing to square the edges of logs so you can build with them, and by comparison Jeremiah was a plane, a tool that takes a shaving a thousandth of an inch thick. He also compared Melancthon and himself in the same terms: he was the broadaxe, and Melancthon was the plane.

What Luther was specifically complaining about was the six personal laments of Jeremiah scattered throughout the book. This, Jeremiah 11:18–20, is the first one. Luther thought they were kind of whining and peevish, and you can hear a little of that here, though not as much as in some of the other laments. That certainly is one response to affliction and suffering: we feel a little sorry for ourselves and start whining. You can hear it at the edge of this, toward the end, where Jeremiah gets real interested in retribution. Fix my enemies! I have a list, like old Richard Nixon, and I pretty well know where I’d like the lightning to strike: right in the middle of a faculty meeting. That would be a dramatic gesture, smoke and mirrors and the whole business.

“It was the Lord who made it known to me, and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds.” The Lord exposed the plot to assassinate him. “But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.” Here we go: sweetness, innocence, and light. “And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, ‘Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!’ But you, O Lord

of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them.”

As I always say, if you’re looking for vengeance, the best thing you can do is pray for it, because if you pray for it, God will take control of it. The thing about vengeance as a human emotion is that it’s insatiable. The vengeful are never satisfied that they’ve done enough damage, and so they keep pounding away, pounding away, pounding away. When God takes revenge, he knows exactly where to move, and when he moves, he knows when he’s done. So this is a nice prayer. Jeremiah is praying that God will do it. We don’t necessarily have to admire Jeremiah for praying for it, but at least he is praying for it. He is handing his desire for revenge over to the good Lord, and that’s a form of faith. That’s faith itself. We say, “This neighbor has offended me, has plotted against me, and now, dear Lord, you handle him.” Well, better that God should handle him than us. And better that God should handle it than that James should show up ready to read another lecture. We’ve had enough of these wagging fingers. So Jeremiah’s response is a little whiny, all right; Luther says he has it coming. But basically it’s faith; faith is taking hold.

Psalm 54: Faith Straight Up

Now Psalm 54. I just love the Psalms, and the older I get, the more time I spend on them. They’re absolutely fascinating. Psalm 54 is shoulders squared, two hands on the wheel. This is straight-up faith responding to trouble.

The psalmist describes his situation in the first verses. “Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might. Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.” He is calling out to God, addressing his complaint, his concern: “For the insolent have risen against me, the ruthless seek my life; they do not set God before them.” All right: a prophet getting a prophet’s reward. He’s probably a priest, but priests have enemies. As we all know, if you preach God’s Word you don’t know when the offense is going to break loose, even though we might try to control it. The Word is basically out of our hands. So now he has provoked somebody. Maybe it’s a group in the congregation, or some other of the pious, or another group of priests who figure he has done the sacrifices wrong. Or maybe it’s the basses, or the tenors. In one of the choirs I sing in, the trouble always starts among the altos; you can just count on it.

At any rate, there's an enemy here, and the psalmist describes that enemy: the insolent have risen against me, the ruthless seek my life. He has called out to God and named his situation, and in the next verses he confesses his faith: "But surely, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life." Well, he's got a little revenge in mind too, I'm afraid: "He will repay my enemies for their evil. In your faithfulness, put an end to them." Better to say that to the good Lord than to hire a hit man. Better to call on him and hand your trouble over to him than to go out and do it yourself.

So, having called out to God in faith, the psalmist, very much like Jeremiah, turns it over: "With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good. For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies." What a wonderful sight: *Schadenfreude*, joy in other people's pain. Well, of course we've all been hurt, hurt right to the quick. You can't hang around churches without that. You go to church to hear the Word, and it gets lost. If you start looking at the ruin of your foes too much and rejoicing a little too long, a good word might help. But if you enjoy just a little bit of it, with thanksgiving, all things are consecrated through thanksgiving. You can go home after the annual meeting and say, "Well, I got there." I'm afraid this isn't lessons in righteousness. But the psalm is having lots of fun with it, and confessing faith in the face of it.

Mark 9: The Text Turns and Preaches

In marked contrast to all of this, in splendid and gorgeous contrast, we have Mark 9:30–37. This is just one great Gospel. I remember the first time I preached on this text, thirty-five or forty years ago, when all of a sudden one of the great things that ever happens to a preacher happened to me. The text turned on me and started preaching. What do you mean, I'm the preacher? Oh, no: the text was the preacher, and I finally heard it, and I just buckled, because it is so utterly fabulous, the way Jesus deals with the animosity and hostility coming his way. So we'll pick our way through it. This is really fun.

"They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it." We can think of at least a couple of reasons they didn't want anyone to know. Jesus has just come down from the mountain of the transfiguration, and he has announced to his disciples that he is going to suffer and die. But the time obviously isn't ripe yet, and so he's being careful. He doesn't want to provoke any premature encounter. When he goes through Galilee, he knows the Pharisees and the Sadducees and all the fat cats from the temple in Jerusalem will have their vigilantes up there looking for him. So they're on their way to Capernaum.

You remember Capernaum: the home of Peter and Andrew and James and John, way up at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. When the Syrians were sending missiles over the Golan Heights, some of them landed up there. It is one of the prettiest and most peaceful places in the whole world. I was there one beautiful morning, and I'll never forget it as long as I live. It's no wonder Jesus went back there time after time. So he's going back to where it all started, where his ministry began, and he's keeping quiet about it.

And it's not only a concern for safety. He is teaching his disciples. He has a difficult lesson to give them, a lesson antithetical to all their assumptions. He is teaching them that he is not going to start a parade that ends in glory, but that he is going to turn and go down. He's going down, going down, going down toward his death. As you watch these chapters, they are shaped like a funnel. As Jesus moves closer and closer to the end, unrealized possibilities disappear, and soon he will set his face like flint toward Jerusalem. He is moving inevitably toward his death. He is losing his alternatives, and as he loses them he is being foreclosed upon by all the powers, and soon it is going to end.

But we're not there yet. This is just the second of the passion predictions. There is one more to go, and then the trip will be on. We read *For All the Saints* together every morning, and we've just finished reading the Passion according to Saint Mark. It's so powerful you can hardly stand it, and you see Christ giving himself with such graciousness. That's what's going on here.

Who Is the Greatest?

He has his enemies to contend with, of course. But sometimes it's pretty hard to tell the difference between your enemies and your friends. So while he is getting ready to go suffer and die, his disciples, true to form, are contending with one another like those old women in *Zorba the Greek*, wondering who's going to get what when the old guy kicks off. They are disputing among themselves who is the greatest.

You could hardly find a more striking contrast. This is the contrast between the new Adam and the old. The new Adam, who, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited," turns to go down into his death. You can see the end from here; it's coming. The disciples meanwhile, the old Adam, are rising. They're wondering what kind of self-transcendence is going to be available to them. Who's the greatest? Who's going to be the pope? Who's going to be the cardinal, and who the bishop, and who the altar

boy? I suppose that's an unfortunate comparison right now, but that's exactly what's going on here.

They're divvying up the leftovers. And that, of course, is one response to suffering: you only go around once in life, so you've got to grab for all the gusto you can get. Peter and James and John were up on the mountain; they're among the chosen, the first three. The rest are a little jealous: "How come he got to go up there? I saw him drunk the other night. What's he doing up there? He never can agree with me about anything." You can just hear it. They're after one another, chewing on one another's backsides, celebrating sins of omission and commission with relish, roasting one another in their ambitions and disappointments. Same old story. Jesus is going down, and they're looking for the cheapest, most effective, most efficient route up.

So what does Jesus do? It's going to be the death of him; he knows that. He has said as much right here: he is going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. And now he's got these jerks of disciples who figure they can cash in on the glory trip. One of them thinks he's Oral Roberts and is going to start a university. Peter is still thinking about the seminary he was going to build on the Mount of Transfiguration. They've all got ideas about becoming administrators and living happily ever after. So what does he do? I'll tell you what I would have done. I would have said, "You stooges! I'm going to go die, and you're going to live forever? Is this how it works?" I would have given them a mouthful.

A Child in His Arms

But what does Jesus do? Oh, gosh, this is one of the sweetest things in the Gospels, and it is so devastating, so powerful. "But they were silent." At least they knew enough to keep their mouths shut when they were caught. "For on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest." And what did he do? "He sat down, called the twelve," and taught them.

The way of the old Adam is relentless self-promotion. The old Adam has only one topic: me, myself, and I. And when the old Adam gets religion, it wants to talk about what it has allowed God to do, how it has let God into its life, how God is now working with the old self. It's the same old garbage. When the new self comes forward, when the new self raised in Christ starts to learn, it serves. Simple as that. It does what Adam and Eve were meant to do: it loves God and the neighbor, and it cares for the earth. It starts laying itself down, bestowing itself, giving itself. That, of course, is what Jesus is about, and that is what he does.

So what does he do now? You wonder who was gathered in this meeting. They were in a house they obviously knew. Maybe it was a safe house, or someone long associated with them, a friend of Peter's or Andrew's or James's or John's, somebody from up there. But there's a child present. Now, children in this world were definitely meant to be seen and not heard. Children were a nuisance. Having children around is already an indication that something different is happening here. When trouble comes, when there's a threat, you put the children away. You don't want them exposed; you try to protect them. But now Jesus knows he's going to suffer and die, and there are women and children in the room, right there.

And what Jesus does is absolutely gorgeous. He reaches for that child. "Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'"

Here is grace upon grace. First of all, there is grace for this child. Jesus is right at the edge now. He would have every reason to be self-preoccupied, but he reaches for this child, places the child in the center, and, placing the child in the center, blesses the child and gives himself to the child. "Taking it in his arms": here he has become the servant.

Men didn't fool with children. The idea of happy Daddy fulfilling a child's dreams is not present in this traditional world. Daddy is the big shot. Mommy holds the kids. Daddy might pat them on the shoulder or the head, but Daddy's got to go fishing. Daddy's got work to do. Daddy has too much to be bothered with the kids. And right at the edge of disaster, Jesus has a child in his arms. He has become the servant, and as the servant he blesses everyone. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Now, I hope you'll resist the temptation to give a lecture on childlikeness here. Lots of people try to find something in the child that motivates the blessing, and then of course we should all be more childlike, though some of us don't have to work very hard at that. That's not the point. Jesus is close enough to the cross that he can smell it, and what is he doing? Blessing a little child. This is predestination itself. He is giving himself to that child as a servant, just as he promised to give himself to your children in the sacrament of baptism, just as he gave himself to you when you were bawling and puking and filling your diapers years ago. This is him. He is the servant of all servants, and so he gives himself away.

He Comes in the Bargain

But he can't do that without making this promise. This is practically sacramental. If you receive one such child in his name, you are receiving him. So somebody calls you on Saturday night and says, "Hey, Pastor, can I come by the church in the morning and get the kid done?" And you say to yourself, or worse yet to them, "We don't do kids at our church. If you want instruction, you can come Wednesday." "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." That doesn't mean you have to baptize them without talking to them. It means you have a tremendous opportunity to bear witness to somebody who doesn't know any better.

If you receive one such child in his name, he comes in the bargain. He's in the potato chip bag. He's the prize in the Cracker Jack. More than that, he's coming home with you, to bless you. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." And what do you get then? If you receive him, you're not just getting him in the bargain. You're receiving the one who sent him, the one who raised him from the dead, the one who said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." You've got him.

So here's the deal. A child comes by, and you grab a toe and hold on, because your blessing is coming through that little sacrament: that squirrely little kid running up and down and disrupting the children's sermon, that little kid who can't shut up, sitting all splay-legged up there in front, looking from side to side, wondering what in the world is going on. Receive one such child in his name? Well, you've got him by the ankle. You've got him by the wrist. You hold on, because you're receiving him.

Now you see how Jesus is. This is not the way we respond to suffering. When we get into suffering, into these predicaments, we're more likely to do a rude imitation of Jeremiah or the psalmist, or worse yet James, and start bitching about how, if people would only do this, this kind of thing would never happen. Well, guess what? You live among sinners, and they're not going to get better just because you think they should.

The psalmist and Jeremiah do something better, way better: they turn it over to the good Lord. But now look at Jesus. He does something better still. He takes it and blesses. I suppose he might have enjoyed the prospect of seeing what happened to those people. And I suppose he more than once got a little impatient with those disciples; we heard a little of that the other day: "How much longer must I put up with you, you turkeys?" But even when he's a little impatient, it is his nature to give and his nature to bless, because he is not just the idea of the

new Adam. He is the new Adam. He is the new creation, after whom and by whom you have been created, the new archetype, the one who is taking hold of you to reshape you according to his promise.

So in the face of suffering he doesn't turn tail and run. In the face of suffering he doesn't start calculating how he can get even with his enemies. In the face of suffering, in the face of the utter, imperturbable stupidity of his disciples, he takes a little child and blesses. So you catch him by the ankle. You get him by the wrist. Better yet, embrace him, for he is the one who is your life and salvation.

Well, how about that? You've got texts here that practically preach themselves. Of course I'm not one to talk, because Jeremiah is a little too tempting for me. I understand him too well, and I want to gripe, if not bitch flat out. But you can't do better than Jesus. That's as good as it gets.

Questions and Answers

A comment quoting a French proverb about revenge.

That's great. I had a French brother-in-law, and some of the sayings he taught me in French are not fit to repeat on a family program. That's a good one: "Vengeance is a dish best eaten cold." I love it.

I think the world of you; it's fun to do this and get together with you. God's peace. I'll see you next week, and we'll be working our way further into the Gospel of Mark.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4ZikzuPIco>

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