

Exodus 3:1-14 ~ Mark 9:14-29

*If You Are Able!*

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Child Baptism

September 30, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

***Introduction to Gospel Text***

Today's story occurs directly following the Transfiguration of Jesus. Let me set the scene for you: Jesus, Peter, James and John have just descended the high mountain, each absorbing the strange and wonderful event they have just experienced: Jesus all lit up like they've never seen before, and the next thing they know, enter Stage Left: Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, add to that God's mysterious voice, then as they began their descent, more of that scary talk from Jesus about the "Son of Man rising from the dead." Imagine the internal swirl of emotion and confusion, intensified by the long hike down the mountain, thigh muscles quivering, toes jammed into the straps of their sandals, then they catch sight of trouble brewing below. When they get in range they can hear their fellow disciples arguing with some scribes in the middle of a hostile crowd. While they were high up on the mountain with Jesus, something had gone wrong below. Let's find out what has happened and how Jesus responds.

***SERMON***

Have you ever tried to teach a small child how to swim? Think for a moment, what is the biggest hurdle you have to get the child to overcome? Standing waist deep in the water, holding this child, what do they instinctively do? Yes: They thrash around, arms and legs flailing wildly. The biggest challenge is to get them to relax and trust the water. Once they can do that, they float. You hear yourself saying, "Just relax, it's OK, you will float....trust the water." As Marcus Borg has written about this apt metaphor in his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, "Faith as trust, is trusting in the buoyancy of God. Faith is trusting in the sea of being in which we live and move and have our being." He acknowledges his original source for this metaphor, Soren Kierkegaard, whom he says put it like this, "faith is like floating in seventy thousand fathoms of water. If you struggle, if you tense up and thrash about, you will eventually sink. But if you relax and trust, you will float." <sup>i</sup> Yes, we were created to be buoyant. OK, I realize some body types are more naturally buoyant than others... But the metaphor holds true for us all.

In our gospel text this morning, we have flailing disciples in a sea of skeptics. You might say the disciples were sinking rather publically in their call to heal in Jesus' name. Their attempt at healing the epileptic boy, without Jesus there, had failed. The disciples were so freaked out, that as soon as they were alone, with Jesus, they ask him, "What did we do wrong? What happened? Why we were unable to heal him?"

Whatever Mark wants us to hear in this story, we can be sure it is extremely important: He lavishes 15 full verses on this story. This may not seem like much until you compare it to the number of verses he thought sufficient to describe the

major events of Jesus' life: Mark used 9 verses to tell the story of the resurrection, 3 verses on Jesus' baptism and 0 verses on Jesus' birth. And yet he spends 15 verses on an incident you might think they would all prefer to forget. For an evangelist whose purpose is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus the Christ, for the first gospel writer, who was in a big hurry to get down only the most essential, bare bones account of the Jesus' life, this seems like a strange story for Mark to record with such great detail. Why did he?

I think he did because it cuts to the very core of what being a Christ follower, or Christian is all about. In the tension between belief and unbelief, between going up and down a mountain, between getting it and not getting it, it's the call to trust God to do what seems impossible to us. Like the first time we get in water over our head and can't imagine how it could hold us up. It's about facing Jesus just as we are, praying to Jesus as honestly as we can, especially when we feel like we are sinking, and being raised by Jesus to a broader vision, a new perspective. This ability God has planted inside each of our souls: The ability to believe. Yes, we were created to be buoyant.

But you may be saying, wait a minute. This seems more like a story about disabled believers, dysfunctional disciples, and a botched healing that Jesus had to come in and fix. I think this is precisely why Mark decided to take this real life event and shape it into a 1- verse fully developed parable about our ability to believe, as individuals and as a community of faith.

Matthew and Luke also record this event, but Mark alone records with great detail the conversation between Jesus and the father of the boy, who is first introduced as "someone from the crowd." Yes, that someone could also be you or me. In this one-on-one encounter with God-incarnate we witness the most basic, most profound prayer any of us could ever pray, "Dear Jesus, I believe, help my unbelief!" The father blurted out this prayer after Jesus turned around his first, timid request, "*If you are* able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus reframed it saying, "If **YOU** are able!" (My capitalization.) The man was asking the wrong question. It is not a question of whether God is able, or Jesus is able. The limitation that holds us back, the small-mindedness that ties us in knots, is US. Can we believe in the power of God to do the impossible?

Just as Jesus challenged that father in the heat of the moment as the boy was convulsing, the crowd was arguing, and things were getting completely out of control, God calls to us saying, "If **YOU** are able." Here's the Good News: If you are able to access that divine spark that is within you, all things can be done. So here's the question you may be asking: what blocks our access to this ability we have inside of us? For some of us, especially most Presbyterians, like the scribes we lead with our heads. We like straight answers, clear lines of what we can and cannot do. They make us feel in control, ready with an answer at every turn. But God resists this kind of labeling. It's about a relationship, not a formula for success or a list of rules.

On Mt. Horeb, in our First Scripture lesson from Exodus, you heard God make a specific covenant with Moses, but at the same time refuse to be pinned down with a name that would contain God's essence. "I AM WHO I AM, thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you." (Exodus 3:14) If our belief system depends on trying to understand or define God completely, our God becomes very small and hardly worth believing in. God will not be nailed down by a single name, nor by a single wooden cross.

Jesus is talking about something deeper than intellect here. As was God in God's conversation with Moses on Mt. Horeb. The pre-modern meanings of the word "believe" as I have learned from Marcus Borg, are "to hold dear, to prize, to give one's loyalty to, to commit. "Most simply, 'to believe' meant to 'to love,' What we believe is what we love. Faith is about loving God."<sup>iii</sup> Earlier in our service today, Sarah Beighley reaffirmed her belief in Christ, just before we baptized her son Jonathan, and all of us said together "I believe" as we read the Apostles Creed and committed to helping raise him in the faith. We believe, help our unbelief. We are saying that we love Christ.

With the crazy week we've had in Washington, D.C., our belief in our U.S. system of democracy, the brilliance of our checks and balances to guard against self-interest, distortion, and the imbalance of power in the hands of the few is being tested. I heard what we are going through as a country right now described as a "stress test of our democracy." I think we are all feeling it in one way or another. We need the ballast of a healthy two-party system, and we need to believe that the Supreme Court is the nonpartisan supreme arbiter of justice in our land. When these are called into question, I feel seasick or heart sick inside and you may, too. We find ourselves asking the most fundamental questions: What is truth? Who is telling the truth? Our heads alone, will not give us the answer.

Even if you've never taught a child to swim, you've likely used a GPS system to find your way from where you are, to where you want to go. And you may have questioned the directions your GPS voice has given you. And then perhaps found yourself in an argument with others in the car, who think they also know better? One day in the midst of such an argument in our car, our young adult daughter Hannah, said calmly but firmly to all of us, "Just relax and trust the lady." Unlike the GPS Lady (who does get mixed up and does sometimes suggest very strange routes), this mantra is a good one to remember in our relationship with the One who parted the waters for Moses, the One who stilled the waters, and the One who raised Jesus from the dead after a political kangaroo court type of trial convicted him to die by hanging on a cross. One practical way to do this is to take a breath and pray the prayer that burst from the lips of the father in today's text: "I believe, help my unbelief." That heartfelt prayer is enough to help us stop flailing in the water, and align our hearts, to relax and trust the One for whom all things are possible.

Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest and spiritual writer, had an amazing gift for putting words to our spiritual ups and downs. I will end my sermon today with his prayer titled, *A Prayer to the God of Ebb and Flow*,<sup>iii</sup> to help keep us afloat.

*Let us pray:*

Dear Lord, today I thought of the words of Vincent van Gogh: 'It is true there is an ebb and flow, but the sea remains the sea.' You are the sea. Although I experience many ups and downs in my emotions and often feel great shifts and changes in my inner life, you remain the same. Your sameness is not the sameness of a rock, but the sameness of a faithful lover. Out of your love I came to life; by your love I am sustained; and to your love I am always called back. There are days of sadness and days of joy; there are feelings of guilt and feelings of gratitude; there are moments of failure and moments of success; but all of them are embraced by your unwavering love.

My only real temptation is to doubt in your love, to think of myself as beyond the reach of your love, to remove myself from the healing radiance of your love. To do these things is to move into the darkness of despair.

O Lord, sea of love and goodness, let me not fear too much the storms and winds of my daily life, and let me know that there is ebb and flow but that the sea remains the sea. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering A Life of Faith*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2003), 31.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Durback, ed., *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997), 88.