

## *Someone from the crowd*

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Coming down from the mountain, Jesus with Peter and James and John came to the disciples. They saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able! - All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer." - Mark 9:14-29

A study Bible that I opened to prepare for this message had a heading over the passage we just heard: *'Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy.'* It's a good heading. It keeps the focus on the divine nature and authority of Jesus. It captures a boy's illness and his cure by the command of Jesus. *'Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy.'*

But the heading could also be: *'Belief and unbelief.'* Or maybe, *'The belief and unbelief of a desperate father.'* We can feel the backstory – the family engulfed by the malady of a single child. The symptoms have been awful, and also the stigma: *Demons!* Everyone whispers about it: *The boy has demons ...*

The father has doggedly chased down every possible cure. Every avenue has failed, including the one that gives rise to this story. As the father says to Jesus: "I asked your disciples to cast [out the demon], but they could not do so." The first response of Jesus is a general public lament and rebuke: "You faithless generation ... How much longer must I put up with you?"

Then more of the family story spills out, ending with the father's cry to Jesus, "... if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Here Jesus turns personal. He seems to implicate the father in the fate of his own son. "If you are able!" (Can you hear the derision?) And then, "All things can be done for the one who believes."

Some of us here have heard similar religious voices, accusations, some delivered by our own inner voices, some by well-intentioned 'believing' friends: *If only you prayed harder, or more often, or more like me – if only you really, really believed – your child would not suffer, or your love relationship would not have crashed and burned. If only you really believed you would not be broke; your dream would come true.* After all, Jesus said, "All things can be done for the one who believes." And this is not the only place in the Gospels where he insists on something like it.

Continued ...

Whatever heading one may give to this story, we should notice that by it the gospel author has led us once again into the all-important but murky realm of belief, or beliefs, and believing. And we should notice that the desperate father is never given a name in today's gospel. He is introduced as "*someone from the crowd.*" Perhaps he is standing in for any or all of us. We are *someone in the crowd* until we differentiate ourselves from it, take some risk, ask the question that must be asked, cry out.

*Someone from the crowd* in today's gospel illustrates that belief is inescapably personal. We can read about believing, in the Scriptures or in countless other books. We can learn the language of philosophers, theologians and evangelists. We can memorize creeds, vows and rosaries. But our circumstances – our dilemmas and opportunities and relationships and choices – will be the truest raw materials out of which each of us makes and shows what we believe, or in whom we believe, and why and how and when we believe. Or not.

What forms out of the circumstances of this particular *someone from the crowd* becomes an acute dilemma. Having been challenged by Jesus, he cries out, "*I believe; help my unbelief.*" He's a desperate father, and he is also, apparently, an honest soul. Surely he has been wondering forever about the place of his own religion and faith with regard to his son's suffering. His cry may ring true to any of us with regard to suffering we have known or lived with and how much and how often we have prayed and all the ways we have sought relief and wondered where God is in all of it. "*I believe; help my unbelief.*"

This drama of belief and unbelief from the Gospel of Mark interestingly follows, almost immediately, the story of Christ's Transfiguration. Belief was so easy up there on that mountaintop. Jesus was breathtakingly radiant! How could one NOT believe up there?

But trips up that mountain are rare, and not all are invited. Jesus only took three of his twelve disciples up with him. The other nine were left below, flailing and failing to exorcise the demon from a long-troubled boy. Down the mountain is where most of life's action happens. Down the mountain is where most of us struggle with failures and shame and longstanding sorrows, what we do and do not believe.

What would have happened to the demon-possessed boy if Jesus had not come down when he did? We can't know. But I'll hazard a guess about the father. I *do not believe* he would have given up on his son. I *do believe* he would have courageously carried on, prayed for strength that he didn't feel he had and wondered what to try next. And I wonder about us, in the context of our complex and ongoing sorrows and questions, our disappointments and hopes.

The father I imagine in today's gospel story is well-captured by author Krista Tippett, describing those who courageously persevere in and through belief ... and unbelief: "*... goodness prevails,*" she writes, "*not in the absence of reasons to despair, but in spite of them ... people who bring light into the world wrench it out of darkness, and contend openly with darkness all of their days .... [they] simply don't let despair have the last word, nor do they close their eyes to its pictures or deny the enormity of its facts. They say, "Yes, and ...," and they wake up the next day, and the day after that, to live accordingly.*"<sup>1</sup>

The desperate father from today's gospel, this *someone from the crowd*, invites you and me to examine and name what we believe, or in whom we believe, and why and how and when we believe. Or not. *Someone from the crowd* invites us to connect what we say we do or do not believe to our own stories down here at the bottom of the mountain – our sorrows, fears, hopes, questions, risks and cries. *Someone from the crowd* invites us to not throw in the towel, to innovate, to try something new, to persevere. "*I believe; help my unbelief.*" ***Amen.***

<sup>1</sup> from *Speaking of Faith*, Penguin, 2007.