

Jesus, Still the Dispeller of Doubt
John 20:24-29; Mark 9:14-29

When we first heard of COVID-19, we knew so very little. We've learned much since then, but even after these many weeks of social distancing, shelter in place, scientific research, medical and economic response, there is still so much we don't know.

At a time like this, it's easy to wonder if prayer does much good. We pray for our leaders, for our healthcare providers and responders, for our friends and families. But if you're like many throughout the world today, there's an unstated, perhaps unadmitted doubt in the back of your mind – will my prayers make any difference? They can fall into the “why not” category: something that doesn't cost us anything but a little time and might make a difference. But who really knows?

Today, we encounter a father – a father overcome by desperation, plagued by life-and-death fears, debilitated by his doubt. [P] But it is *all of this* that will lead him to cry out to Jesus. He utters a plea for help. He prays a one-breath prayer.

It's one that I've prayed before. It may be one that you've prayed before. Or perhaps it's one that we need to learn to pray in these hard days. But before we learn it, let me ask you: *What questions or doubts or struggles are most on your heart today?* [P]

They may be about the coronavirus pandemic, of how it is impacting us, either directly or indirectly. Or, your questions and doubts may be about something else. One tragedy about epidemics is that other diseases don't stop being diseases. People don't stop having heart attacks or cancer. People don't stop having marital problems or financial fears ... So, name your fear, your struggle, your doubt.

Now, let's learn how to pray a powerful, vulnerable, humble prayer in response.

In verse 17, the distraught father addresses Jesus: *“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, grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not”* (vv. 17-18).

Imagine this man in our context – w/ a son with coronavirus. He has brought him to the doctors, but they can't help him. His son is getting sicker; he is getting more desperate.

Jesus responds: *“Bring the boy to me”* (v. 19). *“When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth”* (v. 20). Jesus asks, *“How long has he been like this?”*... *“From childhood. It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him”* (v. 21-22a).

Now comes the part we will focus on today. The father adds, *“But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us”* (v. 22b). *“If you **can!**?”* Jesus echoes back. Jesus is astonished. That's no way to approach a question of God's power. And Jesus will make that clear by setting no limits to the power of faith.

With the same utter confidence in God with which he rebuked the raging sea, and met the dangerous demoniac among the tombs, and took the dead daughter of Jairus by the hand, here Jesus advances upon the evil spirit that holds the epileptic boy in its grasp.

Jesus approaches in faith, and he shows us that we can approach in faith as well.

That is why, before he heals the boy, Jesus says something astounding to this father, and to all who have ears to hear. In his grace, compassion and truth, Jesus proclaims: *“All things are possible for one who believes”* (v. 23).

John Calvin, commenting on this verse, writes: *“The foundation of faith is to embrace the boundless power of God ... Christ says, ‘You ask me to aid you as far as I can; but you will find in me an inexhaustible fountain of power, provided that you come in faith.’”* All things are possible for the one who believes. [P]

Then comes the prayer I am recommending to us today: *“Immediately the boy's father **cried out**, ‘I believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’”* (v. 24). This man was not in denial. He was very much aware of his fear and doubt. He is crying out with tears! He is at his wit's end! [P] There is no feeling of desperation so intense as a parent who cannot help their child! It is an awful feeling to be helpless.

I want us to imagine the utter helplessness of this father. His son was being burned and cut; he shook uncontrollably and foamed at the mouth like an animal. We can only imagine the anguish this father was feeling!

When we are most desperate (and there are many facing this right now), when illness or trial or tragedy befalls us, our true thoughts and feelings come to light. This is what we witness in this father. In this moment, we see his honesty, his need, his surrender.

If any of us are to grow in Christ, we have to realize that it is quite possible that we do not trust the Lord as much as we would like to think that we do. And so, the best thing we could possibly do is stand before the Lord and say from the bottom of our hearts: “I believe, Lord, but please help me with my unbelief!”

I imagine we all have been down in the valley of human need where we have found ourselves doubting God – I bet many of us are there right now. Alfred Tennyson wrote: “*There lives more faith in honest doubt, than in half the world’s creeds!*” [P]

One preacher wrote concerning Job: “His backsliding friends had their theology, but Job had his God! They had their little answers, but Job had his big questions, which had more honest religion than all of them!” [P]

Doubts are a normal and expected part of the human experience. It is natural to doubt anything we cannot know with certainty. And *the more urgently we need to know what we do not, the more deeply we will feel our doubts.*

I can doubt that [the universe is 93-billion light-years in size as scientists currently estimate](#), but such doubts don’t affect my life unless I’m an astrophysicist.

But if I doubt that God can protect me and my family from the coronavirus, or heal us if we are infected, or provide for loved ones facing loss of income in a volatile economy, my doubts become very real and very personal.

Dr. Jim Denison writes, “Faith in God is like faith in anyone else in that it is a *relationship* rather than a scientific experiment. All relationships require a commitment that transcends the evidence and becomes self-validating.”

For instance, I cannot prove to you that I love my wife or that she loves me. You would have to experience our relationship to know its reality. You cannot prove you should take a job before you take it. You examine the evidence, of course, but then you step beyond the evidence into a commitment that validates itself.

It is the same with our Lord. There will always be dimensions of our relationship with God that transcend certainty & require faith. At such times, doubts are natural, normal.

We all have doubt at times, but the purpose of our passages is to drive deep into our hearts the fact that *God doesn't want us to dwell in doubt ... Instead, through faith, we dwell in possibility*. Why? Because all things are possible for the one who believes.

So, *what should we do with our doubts today?*

First: Remember what we know about God

This father said to Jesus, *"I believe"* (v. 24a). The Greek word is *pisteuo*, meaning to *trust in, to have confidence in, to rely upon*. His faith was not merely intellectual but personal. He had enough faith to bring his suffering son to Jesus' disciples in the hope that they could help. And even though they had been unable to heal his son, this father had enough faith to turn to their master now.

When we face what we don't know, let's remember what we can do ... Let's remember where we can turn – to Whom we can turn. [Pause]

Nothing about this boy's suffering – or the COVID-19 pandemic – changes anything about the nature of God. He is as powerful today as when he created the universe. He is as omniscient today as when he led his people into the Promised Land.

He hears our prayers as fully today as when he heard the Christians praying for Peter in prison and freed the apostle from Herod (Acts 12). And He loves us as much today as when he sent his Son to die for us at Calvary. [Pause]

What have you experienced about God in the past that is relevant today? What prayer has He answered? What need has He met? What sin has He forgiven? In what way can you say, *"I believe"*? [Pause] So ... remember what you do know ...

Second: Trust God with what we don't know

The 2nd part of the father's prayer is one that may surprise many: *"Help me overcome my unbelief!"* (v. 24b). "Unbelief" translates *apistia*, the opposite of *pisteuo*. Just as an "atheist" is one who denies theism, so this man's "unbelief" contradicted his belief.

When we have such doubts, we may think God won't hear us or help us ... But the opposite is true.

Remember Thomas, the one who missed out on seeing the risen Jesus that first Sunday. He just couldn't swallow the story: *"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and place my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe"* ([Jn. 20:25](#)). Fast forward a week, Jesus comes to them again, w/ Thomas present this time.

Did Jesus criticize Thomas for his doubts? Did he condemn him? *"He said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe"* (v. 27). And Thomas exclaims, *"My Lord and my God!"* (v. 28).

What ever happened to Thomas afterward? According to early tradition, he took the gospel as far east as India. Contrary to what some may think, Thomas' life was not defined by his doubt, but by his response to Christ despite that doubt. He not only had faith; the remainder of his life was a demonstration of that faith. Even in the face of hardship, persecution and death, *lingering doubts* didn't drive him; a *living Savior* did!

Thomas was not the only apostle to harbor doubts about the resurrection. In [Matt. 28](#), [we](#) read that *"The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted"* (16-17).

Did Jesus reject them? Did he expel them from his movement? Nope. In fact, he commissioned them to *"Go and make disciples of all nations"* (v. 19). And they did.

But perhaps the preeminent example of doubting faith is that of our Lord who cried from the cross, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* ([Mat. 27:46](#), [Ps. 22:1](#)). Of course, we know that Jesus was "without sin" in every dimension of his life ([Heb. 4:15](#)). And we know that his Father met him in his anguish, dispelling that doubt,

because Jesus would soon say, “*Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit*” ([Lk. 23:46](#)). In the end, it wasn’t doubt in his Father’s love; it was trust in his Father’s plan.

Like Thomas and the other disciples, and even our Savior, we can bring our doubts to our Father. We can tell Him where we are struggling and ask for His help. If we don’t have faith, we can ask for faith. We can pray, “*Lord, give me the faith to have faith.*”

In our passage, Jesus then drives out the evil spirit and heals the boy ([Mark 8:25-27](#)). He answers this father’s doubts with a demonstration of his power and love. [Pause] And our Risen Savior *demonstrates his power and love* in our lives as well, in these days as well, amidst our doubts as well. [P]

To be clear, this passage does not promise that when we bring to God our doubts, He will always meet them the way we want Him to. Our Lord healed this boy on this day, but he did not heal Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” even after praying multiple times ([2 Cor. 12:7-8](#)). On the contrary, God told him, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” (v. 9a). And Paul could say as a result, “*So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me*” (v. 9b).

It’s been said that God sometimes calms the storm; but other times He lets the storm rage and calms His child instead.

What’s important, especially in these days, is that we know that we can bring our doubts to God. We can know that we are heard. And we can know that we are loved.

There is a great line in the movie, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Edmond Dantes has been unfairly imprisoned. He meets a priest who is suffering the same. At one point, the priest says to him, “Here is your final lesson—do not commit the crime for which you now serve the sentence. God said, ‘Vengeance is mine.’” Edmond replies, “I don’t believe in God.” The priest replies, “It doesn’t matter. He believes in you.”

As we close, listen to v. 25 once more: “*Jesus rebuked the impure spirit ... I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.*” Jesus cured the boy possessed by a demon. But he also cured the father possessed by doubt! Jesus set him

free as well – replacing the desperation of doubt with the blessing of belief. Never again would the boy be plagued by that spirit. Never again would the father need to be plagued by such dread and doubt. And as those who believe in the Risen Christ, who have heard his promise and witnessed his power, neither shall we.