

“When Evil Is Stronger Than We Are” DRAFT
Mark 9:14-29
February 16, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return again to our series in the Gospel of Mark.

Last week, we considered the story of the Transfiguration: Jesus and three of his disciples went up the mountain, and there Jesus’s glory was revealed, and he was joined by Moses and Elijah, and God the Father spoke, and the glory cloud of God descended.

Now that’s over, and Jesus with three of his disciples are on their way back down the mountain, to join Jesus’s other followers. And that’s where we pick up the story.

With that in mind, let’s hear from our text: Mark 9:14-29.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{9:14} And when they [that is, Jesus, Peter, James and John,] came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. ¹⁶ And he asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷ And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸ And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.” ¹⁹ And he answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.” ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²² And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” ²³ And Jesus said to him, “If you can’t! All things are possible for one who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” ²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” ²⁶ And 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.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸ And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁹ And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, you are our portion,
and so we commit ourselves to keep your word.
We ask you with all our hearts to show us your favor,
and be gracious with us according to your promise.
Turn our feet to your testimonies,
that we might conform ourselves to your word now, without delay.
Grant this we ask, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:57-60]

Introduction

While Jesus and the three disciples were up on the Mount of Transfiguration, the other nine seem to have been continuing the ministry, but without Jesus present. [Edwards, 276]

And when Jesus comes down, he is immediately met with trouble, conflict, and the presence of a great evil.

And as the story unfolds, one theme that emerges from it is that: The world is dominated by evil that only Jesus can drive out, and so we should be people of prayer.

The world is dominated by evil that only Jesus can drive out, and so we should be people of prayer.

That’s what we see here. Let’s break it down in some more detail.

The Word Is Dominated By Evil

So, the first thing we see here is that the world is dominated by evil.

And I’ll go a bit further and say that what we are reminded of here in this story, is that the world is dominated by evil that is stronger than we are.

Now, that might seem like a very large, global statement to make from such a localized, personalized story like this one ... but I think that this is what our text points us to.

Think for a moment about the snapshot we are given here of this man and his son.

This boy, so loved by his father, is wracked with seizures. As the father puts it: “it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid.”

The condition has apparently been with him since childhood ... and it's not an occasional thing – it strikes him often. It dominates their lives.

And to make it even worse, these weren't arbitrary or ordinary seizures. There was a demonic and malevolent spiritual force behind them, who intentionally tried to destroy the boy by throwing him into fire or water. [Ferguson, 144]

And then, on top of it all ... because this boy was deaf and mute (as verse 25 makes clear) ... the son couldn't adequately communicate his fears and concerns to his father ... and maybe even worse ... the son couldn't hear the words of comfort and assurance that his father or his mother spoke to him, as they tried to ease his distress. [Ferguson, 144]

This was their daily lives. Fear. Distress. Danger. An inability to communicate.

Think of that pain. Think of that suffering. Think of that confusion. Think of that isolation.

All of it – the whole situation – is a terrible evil.

By which I don't mean that the boy, or the man, or God had committed an evil to bring this about, but that the situation as a whole is so obviously not the way things are supposed to be.

It is deeply at odds with God's creational intent for humanity. And that is a great evil.

The evil is physical, with the physical brokenness of this boy's condition. The evil is relational, cutting off connections between parent and child that were not meant to be severed. The evil is emotional, with the pain and distress it all involved. And the evil is spiritual, with a malevolent spiritual force at work bringing even greater suffering out of the situation.

All of those forces have combined here, so that this was no "ordinary" epilepsy [Ferguson, 143], but physical brokenness and demonic activity in this particular case are all tied up together. [Edwards, 278]

Now, we may not see demonic activity as overtly or in the same form as we see described here. And, in fact, the Gospels describe a unique time of overt demonic activity, even when compared with the rest of the Bible. But those differences in appearance or form don't mean that spiritual forces of darkness are not at work in our time as well.

In fact ... when looking at the world around us, with all its evil and all its brokenness, I think it takes a greater leap of faith to deny the presence of dark and demonic forces in the world than it does to affirm it.

As Tim Keller puts it: "Mark takes the existence of demonic activity – of a continued battle against evil, personal supernatural beings – as a self-evident aspect of reality, a fact of life. Not everyone is personally possessed by a demon like the boy in this story, but Paul says in Ephesians 6 and elsewhere that we are all fighting demonic 'principalities' all the time." [Keller, 130]

Where do you see those demonic principalities at work?

Do you see them in your personal life, in the form of your own brokenness, whether physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual?

Or do you see those powers of spiritual darkness at work in your moral life – in the force of those things you know are wrong, and that you don't want to do, but that you keep on doing – whether in the realm of anger, or greed, or selfishness, or sexual misdeeds, or arrogance, or something else – those times when you don't do what you want to do, but you keep on doing what you hate ... so that sin dominates you, in ways that you despise?

Do you see the principalities of evil at work in your relational life, as relationships that should be good, falter and break down, growing cold or blowing up – sometimes even beyond repair.

Do you see the spiritual powers of darkness at work in cultural and social dynamics around you: as institutions harm rather than help people, as power is used for the domination of the self-serving over the weak?

Whatever the scope, whatever the form, how do you see the power of evil saturating this world, like poison saturating a sponge?

We live in a world that is dominated by evil – and much of that evil is so much stronger than we are.

That's what we see all around us, and that's what we see in the concrete story of our text as well.

The boy is powerless before the evil forces that dominate him. His father desperately wants to help, but can't. The disciples try to intervene, but to no avail. A whole crowd is gathered. And no one seems able to do anything.

Everyone seems to stand helpless before the domination of evil.

And we often feel that way as well.

And we often cope with those feelings of helplessness in destructive ways.

Sometimes we turn on each other, and blame one another – as seems to have happened here, with an argument breaking out when no one knows how to help. [Edwards, 277]

That pattern is all too common in families, in communities, in whole societies. We get angry, and blame one another, rather than remaining united in the face of evil.

Other times we may lapse into despair and a sense of hopelessness.

Still other times, we cope by blocking the evil out – trying to put it out of sight and out of mind.¹

¹ It is noteworthy, that had this boy been born later, in the Western world, he likely would have been shut away in an institution so that others didn't need to think about or even see his struggles.

And other times, when faced with evils beyond our control, we respond with busyness – scurrying about, controlling what we can control, as if frantic activities will somehow push away the evil that dominates our lives or the world around us.

There are many ways we try to cope with our sense of powerless before the evils of this world ... but none of them work.

The evil remains. And try as we might to deny it ... in moments of clarity ... when we can't avert our gaze ... or as the realities of such evils crowd our minds, late at night, as we lie awake ... we are faced with the fact once again that we live in a world that is dominated by evil – and much of it is stronger than we are.

That's the first thing we see here in our text.

Only Jesus Can Drive It Out

But then the second thing we see is that only Jesus can drive the evil out.

We live in a world that is dominated by evil ... and only Jesus can drive it out.

That's an obvious theme of this story. There is evil that is dominating and victimizing this boy. The boy cannot drive it out. His father cannot drive it out. The disciples were not able to drive it out. No one in that generation it would seem – could drive out the evil afflicting this boy.

But Jesus could. Jesus could deliver the boy. Jesus reveals himself here to have power like no one else – to be the One who could command evil away when no one else could.

And reflecting on that dynamic makes me think of one of my favorite characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. Specifically, it makes me think of a section of the novel that the movies skipped, as the four hobbits traveled through the Old Forest, just outside the Shire.

And in this fantasy novel, the Old Forest is dominated by a malevolent spirit.

As the hobbits travel deeper into the forest, Tolkien writes, “they all got an uncomfortable feeling that they were being watched with disapproval, deepening to dislike and even enmity. The feeling steadily grew, until they found themselves looking up quickly, or glancing back over their shoulders, as if they expected a sudden blow.”

But it's not just a general sense of enmity. It soon becomes clear that the trees themselves oppose the hobbits, blocking and redirecting the path the hobbits wanted to take out of the forest, and instead directing them deeper into the malevolent heart of the forest.

And as the hobbits trudge on, the trees seem to close in, oppressive and imposing all around them. And then ... something begins to work an evil spell over them ... and they all become incredibly sleepy.

Soon they can't hold back the sleepiness, and they stop walking. Two of them rest against an old willow tree and begin to drift off to sleep ... and that's when the attack comes.

Two clefts in the willow's tree trunk, which two of the hobbits had been resting in, snap shut, trapping them inside.

The other two hobbits try to rescue their friends ... but to no avail. They are seriously outmatched.

They beat the trunk of the malevolent, enchanted tree, but with no results. They try to pull the clefts holding their friends back open, but with no success. They kick the tree, and hurt only their own feet. They start a little fire to threaten the tree, but in response, the willow just squeezes the two trapped hobbits even tighter, threatening to crush them, until they put the fire out.

Finally, as they come to the end of their own strength and ability, in a moment of despair, one of the hobbits, named Frodo, "without any clear idea of why he did so, or what he hoped for" just started running up and down the path they had been on, crying "*help! help! help!*" as loudly as he could.

And then ... he heard an answer. He heard someone singing a song. And soon, in response to his call, someone who looked like a man came hopping and bounding towards them, in bright yellow boots, a blue jacket, and a long brown beard. His face "was red as a ripe apple, but creased into a hundred wrinkles of laughter." And his name was Tom Bombadil.

Now, who is this character, Tom Bombadil?

Well, there's all kinds of debate between Tolkien fans about it ... but when I was at NYU I wrote a research paper on Tom Bombadil (yes ... you heard that sentence right), and one of my conclusions was that Tom was most likely one of the Maiar – a class of angels, who had helped create the world. In Tolkien's world of Middle Earth, God had sung the world into existence, and he'd done it in part through the Valar and Maiar – two classes of angels. And Tom Bombadil was likely one of them. Which would mean that he had a role in helping to sing the world into existence – and not just the world in general, but perhaps the Old Forest in particular.

Tom is the master of the forest because he is, at least in part, its maker. And so he fears nothing in the forest.

As the hobbits explain to Tom what happened, he identifies the malevolent tree as Old Man Willow. "That can soon be mended," he tells them. "I know the tune for him. Old grey Willow-man. I'll freeze his marrow cold, if he don't behave himself. I'll sing his roots off."

And with that, Tom sings a tune into the tree that had captured the hobbits. Because just as he had helped sing the world into existence, Tom is now able to sing the world back to the way it was supposed to be.

And after the song, he concludes with a command: "Old Man Willow! [...] What be you a-thinking of? You should not be waking. Eat earth! Dig deep! Drink water! Go to sleep! Bombadil is talking!" And with that, the two hobbits are thrown from the clutches of the tree, and restored to their friends.

Now ... why do I tell that story?

Well ... when the hobbits entered the Old Forest ... when they were attacked by Old Man Willow ... they were severely outmatched.

Their own efforts were laughably inadequate. And there was no scenario in which they would become strong enough to face this enemy.

They needed the help of someone else ... someone who was master over the Old Forest – who had helped to make the Old Forest – who could drive out the evil present in the Old Forest.

And when Frodo cried out for help, that master came. And he drove away the forces of evil and rescued the hobbits.

And that's a bit like what we see happening here in our text.

Jesus arrives on the scene ... not as a mere man ... but as the Son of God. Jesus was not just present at creation, but, as the Bible tells us, “by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him.” [Colossians 1:16]

True, some aspects of creation had rebelled, and evil had entered the world. But Jesus remained the master. He knew the song for them. He could sing their roots off. And with a word, he could command them to leave. And they would.

And so, Jesus, in verse 25, rebukes the evil spirit – commanding it to leave and never return. And the boy is healed. And with that healing, the lives of this boy, and his father, and his family, and his community were transformed.

Only Jesus could have done that because only Jesus is this world's true Master.

Which is why we need Jesus. When faced with evil that is stronger than we are, what we most need is not a new technique, or a new spiritual fitness program, or new hidden knowledge ... what we need is One who is stronger than we are – who is stronger than the strongest forms of evil ... who can come and drive out the evil that we cannot.

And that's who Jesus is. He is the Maker. He is the Master.

We live in a world that is dominated by evil ... and only Jesus can drive it out.

That's what we see here in our text.

Therefore We Should Be People of Prayer

But there's more.

Because the third thing we see is that because all of this is true, we should be people of prayer.

We live in a world that's dominated by evil ... and only Jesus can drive it out ... therefore we should be people of prayer.

Now ... we need to be careful not to mis-hear what that means.

Because we can sometimes turn that concept back into a statement about our power and strength.

A key point of this passage is that we are too weak to drive out the forces of evil ourselves. Only Jesus can do it.

But when Jesus says, in verse 29, that we should be a people of prayer, our sinful hearts, so slow to rightly believe, often turn this back into another claim that if our faith was strong enough, so that our prayers were powerful enough, then we would be able to drive out the evil we face in this world. In other words, we make it about us again. But the text is so clear that it's not about us.

And it makes that clear by clarifying several things.

The Nature of Faith

First, this text gives us a remarkable picture of the nature of faith.

Who is the model of faith here? In a generation of unbelief, who is the paradigm of belief in this story?

It's not the crowd. It's not the disciples.

It's the father. It's the father, who after being rebuked by Jesus, cries out: "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Which reminds us that our doubt – our lack of faith – is not some special form of evil we need to take care of ourselves before we come to Jesus. But it too is an evil we must ask Jesus to overcome and drive out for us – just as the man does here.

What makes faith work is not the strength of the faith ... but the strength of that faith's object. No matter how much faith Frodo had in his foot, his kicks wouldn't have overpowered Old Man Willow. But just a mustard seed of faith to ask Tom Bombadil for help was enough to rescue his friends.

True faith recognizes that even our faith is flawed and imperfect. True faith recognizes that the power that saves us lies not in our faith itself, but in the One we call on for help.

That is the nature of true faith, as it plays out in this text.

The Nature of Prayer

And that leads us to the true nature of prayer.

Prayer for deliverance, at root, is incredibly simple.

We see it here. What is commendable in the man's prayer to Jesus in verse 22 is so simple: "Have compassion on us and help us." That is the kind of prayer we are called to.

We may use many words to get there, but the core is still that simple. And we don't need to use many words.

As I've shared before, the Desert Fathers of the early church were radical in their discipleship. These were men who sold all their possessions and gave the proceeds to the poor, who left the world behind, who chose to dwell in the desert, and live simple lives, focused on prayer, discipleship, and spiritual battle with the forces of evil.

And yet the mark of their prayers, so often, was simplicity.

Key among them, as John Cassian reports, was Psalm 70:1: "O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me."

Thomas Merton, notes their frequent use of the simple prayer: "Lord, have mercy." [Merton, 20]

We might think as well of Psalm 119:94 "Lord, I am yours, save me."

These are simple prayers for deliverance ... just as we see in our text.

They are the spiritual equivalent of that moment when "Frodo, without any clear idea [of] [...] what he hoped for" simply started crying out "*help! help! help!*" [Tolkien, 118]

The prayer we are called to when faced with evil is so simple.

And yet so often ... we are prayerless. We don't call on God for help.

That's the shocking dimension of our text, as several commentators note that one implication of verse 29 seems to be that when faced with the demon afflicting this boy, the disciples apparently did not pray. [Keller, 131-132; Ferguson, 145; Horne, 138]

Which is crazy. But maybe not surprising. Because we do it all the time. When we're faced with evil ... so often we don't pray either. We don't call on God to help us.

Prayer is calling on Jesus – calling on God. And when we are outmatched – when we are outgunned – we need to call on the One who is able to fight the forces of evil we face – the One who can drive them out, who can "sing their roots off" so to speak. And that's what prayer for deliverance is – it is simply calling on God for help.

That's what we see here about the nature of prayer.

The Nature of Answered Prayer

Finally, we should note what this text tells us about the nature of answered prayer.

When we have faith like this ... when we pray like this ... what kind of answer should we expect?

And the answer this text gives us might be a little shocking.

Because when Jesus acts here ... things get worse before they get better.

We read in verses 25-27 that Jesus “rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.’ And 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 arose.”

The boy is healed. But before that happens, he, and his father, and the crowd, are put through an even worse fright than they had experienced so far – so that by the time it’s over, they think the boy must be dead.

The first result of Jesus’s work is not peace, but conflict. As one commentator points out, this text reminds us that sometimes when God is present, a “storm” and a great distress comes “before anything constructive is accomplished.” [Edward Schweizer, quoted in Edwards, 279]

Sometimes, when we call on Jesus to drive out evil – to deliver or heal us or others – sometimes that deliverance comes quickly. And that is a great blessing.

Other times, such deliverance comes in this life ... but it takes a while ... and there may be additional, or even worse trials that unfold before our prayer is answered.

But still other times ... Jesus brings deliverance and healing ... but not in this life. He brings it instead in the life to come. In fact, in how he tells this story, Mark may be highlighting this very possibility, as he uses the language of death and resurrection in verses 26 and 27. [Ferguson, 144; Wright, 120]

But whatever the details, in each case, Jesus delivers his people. But sometimes suffering and distress come between our prayer and his deliverance, as they did for this man and his son.

We don’t know why that is. We don’t know why Jesus brings deliverance swiftly in one case, and why others must wait – maybe even until the resurrection. But we do know, that even when we are confused, as the Apostle Paul tells us, in every situation, God is always working all things together for the good of his people. [Romans 8:28]

And we also know that whether swiftly, or after further trials ... whether in this life, or the next one ... Jesus always delivers his people – in the end, he always rescues those who call out to him in faith.

This is the promise our text holds out, as it reminds us that the world is dominated by evil that only Jesus can drive out, and so we should be people of prayer.

Conclusion

And so, brothers and sisters ... as we face evil, let us see it for what it is, and not get lost in avoidance, or scapegoating, or arguments.

And as we see this evil, let us remember that where we cannot drive out such forces, Jesus can. He is the Maker. He is the Master. And he can deliver his people from any evil force in this world.

And so, let us cry out to him in prayer. Let us, like Frodo, look up to heaven, and shout out “Help! Help! Help!”

And then let us trust him to drive out the forces of evil, not just in this life ... but for eternity.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
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- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004 revised text one-volume 50th anniversary edition.
- Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.