

**St. Andrew’s Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 9:14-29

**“No Ifs”**

Have you ever noticed that sometimes our Gospel readings pick up in the middle of something, or right after. I needed to find out what had happened prior and where they were coming from? My investigation was about the words in today’s Holy Gospel – *“when they came to the other disciples”* – well, who were they and where were they coming from? By reading earlier in Mark 9 – I found that Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, was coming back to join the others after the miraculous transfiguration, on a mountain in the northern part of Israel. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had told His disciples that it was time to take up the cross. His calling, along with the three Apostles’ awareness of it, had been confirmed by the heavenly voice that said, *“this is my beloved Son, listen to Him.”* (Mark 9:7) Now, the road leads to Jerusalem.

Jesus and the others were gathering together with the rest of the team and wherever Jesus went, He was approached by people for healing – physically, emotionally, and or spiritually – sometimes they just touch Him and are healed. Here is a parent who is desperate with anxiety over his child. Jesus and His apostles walked into a very tense situation. This father seems to be caught in the middle between faith and doubt, living in a world of half-belief - where he is never sure. After the rest of the disciples’ failure to heal his son, the man isn’t sure whether Jesus Himself will even be able to do it. He makes his request with what I perceive as a kind of shrug of uncertainty. He says to 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, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”* *“O unbelieving generation,”* Jesus replied, *“how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”* (Mark 9:17-19) Jesus was speaking to His disciples about the unbelief surrounding them. This father’s response to Jesus’ question about how long this boy has been like suffering with this is filled with doubt: *“From childhood,”* he answered. *“It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”* (Mark 9:21-22) Can you imagine this man’s doubt when he says to Jesus “if you can?” Jesus responds to the man’s doubtful question and plea by saying, *“If you can?”* *“Everything is possible for him who believes.”* (Mark 9:23) In essence, Jesus is telling the man to open his eyes, his heart, and his mind to who is standing right in front of him. “If you can?” – really? No more if’s!

The word “if” is a test – based on a condition. As a former computer programmer conditions stand in place when it says, ‘if this happens – do this’, then ‘if this happens – do this else if this happens – do this.’ It could be as simple as press 1 and do this, press 2 and do this.’ This test that the man was throwing at Jesus - is not at all like pleading “please heal my son.” “If you can” - then what? This father’s faith is severely lacking! Compare him with the woman who had a bleeding condition for twelve years. She had no money and had been declared unclean for all twelve years. She had nothing but faith. She knew, that if she just touched the hem of Jesus’ cloak that she would be healed – no question about it. She didn’t say ‘Jesus -if you will heal me then I will touch your cloak. She didn’t have to say a word. Her life would be restored to her.

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The IF is on her part – if she can touch His clothing – she would be healed. She asked for nothing – her faith was so strong that she believed IF she just touched His cloak her healing would be real. God does not want you to make conditions for Him. He makes conditions for us – read the Law of Moses: “if you do this – then this will happen.” The curses and the Law – the if’s are on us. She asked for nothing – her faith was so strong that she believed IF she just touched His cloak her healing would be real, and it would be immediate. It was. The condition was on her faith and her crawling to see her Savior. There is a huge difference between her faith and the “*if you can*” of the boy’s father.

Jesus put this father on the spot, saying, “*Everything is possible for him who believes.*” *Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, He rebuked the evil spirit. “*You deaf and mute spirit,*” He said, “*I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.*” (Mark 9:23-25) Jesus told this man – have faith, if YOU can. Just believe and it will happen! The man’s response was shouted out to Jesus saying that he does believe – but he asks the Lord to help him to get rid of any doubt in his spirit. As the Gospel says, Jesus addressed the demon by name and told it to never return to the boy – with the authority that comes from God Himself, freeing him from this “hell on earth that bound him.” Mark tells us, which is really from the eyewitness viewpoint of the Apostle Peter: “*The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead."*” (Mark 9:26) What happens next is very, very important. Mark writes: “*But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.*” The Greek word ἥγειρεν *hegeiron* – which actually means ‘raises him up’ and then ἀνέστη *anestay* – he arose. These were resurrection words. Jesus had taken this young man who had been steeped in darkness – and drove the darkness out of him and lifted him to new life – a life in the light of Christ.

Remember, that after this, Jesus and His apostles were headed toward Jerusalem. Here is Jesus, God’s beloved son, on His way to His own death and resurrection, rebuking this evil spirit; it leaves the boy apparently dead, but Jesus ‘raises him up, and he arises.’ The Gospel tell us that the apostles needed to get Jesus alone to find out some more. They got Jesus aside and He explained it to them. “*Why couldn't we drive it out?*” He replied, “*This kind can come out only by prayer.*” (Mark 9:28-29) Isn’t that interesting – “*this kind*” – so there is more than one kind? You mean there is more than one kind of evil spirit? And that means that there is more than one kind of demon as well. Jesus gave us the example of calling it out – He identified the spirit and called it, “*You deaf and mute spirit,*” He spoke to a deaf and mute spirit that was inside the boy, causing him this great, great pain. More faith and more power was what the apostles needed from God Himself – through prayer.

When we are faced with a crisis, we need to ask God to strengthen our faith – and ask Him to carry us through. There are so many things in this world that we cannot accomplish – we are only empowered to do so many things. And so what do we do when we cannot do things? We come to the Lord and we ask God to give us the strength, the wisdom, and the courage to do

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things, to carry us, to guide us, and protect us. There are so many things going around called Covid, and we do what we can to protect ourselves – but we have to come to Him! We have to come to Him to advise us what to do, to give us the courage for each new day. I think these words from the Apostle Peter puts this all into perspective: *“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.”* (1 Peter 5:10-11) You know what - there can be no if’s!