



Sermon Transcript February 25, 2018

Gospel of Mark: The Good News of Jesus

Jesus Can!
Mark 9:2-32

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on February 25, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

Mark 9:2-32

² And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” ⁸ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. ¹¹ And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹² And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³ But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

¹⁴ And when they 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! 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.”

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know,³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

Introduction

“This world is a mess!” How many times have you heard that? How many times have you felt that? Perhaps, you don’t have to go so big as “the world” for your frame of reference this morning. Our country is a mess. Our state is a mess. Our communities are a mess. Perhaps you are tempted to lean in and whisper, “Actually, pastor, my family is a mess.” And possibly, in a moment of vulnerability and transparency, you might even be willing to confess, “Truth be told, I’m a mess.”

When I share the gospel with someone and when I get to the point that we are all sinners, I like to say it this way. “We have all rejected God as the good ruler of our lives and we have tried to live life on our own without God. Consequently, we have made a mess. We made a mess of our world, our society and our lives.” It is hard to find anyone who argues against the reality that life is a mess.

The question that emerges from our text this morning is whether or not there is anyone who can do anything about this mess. This morning we find in our text a poor boy who is “a mess.” This boy is under the control of an evil spirit, and with a measure of desperation, the boy’s father turns to Jesus and says, “*But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*” Jesus turns to this man and says, “*If you can?*” The response of Jesus to this father implies that “Jesus can!” Jesus can take care of your mess. In fact, there is coming a day when the “mess of this world” will be no more. Paul summarizes the end result of the work of Jesus in Ephesians 1:10, “*as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and on earth.*” This is why we are commanded to pray, “*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” Jesus can!

This morning we are looking at the second of three conversations in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus has with his disciples about the cross. Last week, we heard them confess their belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But what they didn't yet understand was that Jesus came to die on the cross. They thought that when the Messiah came, he was going to just "clean up the mess" by getting rid of the wicked. The problem with that vision of the Messiah is that if he came to just wipe out the wicked, well, there would be no one left. Why is that? *"For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."* Or as Paul put it in Romans 3:9-10, *"What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one.'" In other words, we are all a mess. The cross of Jesus is essential to cleaning up the mess of our lives and our world.*

This morning, I want us to look square in the face of the mess. That means, we need to be willing to look in the mirror. We need to see our own mess. But then, we are going to look to Jesus. This story announces to us that Jesus can clean up the mess of your life. Jesus turned to the father of this boy and said, *"All things are possible for the one who believes."* So yes, I want to affirm this morning that Jesus can clean up your mess and he does so through the cross.

But I don't want to stop there. I also think this passage calls the church to consider our role in the context of the mess of this world. It is not lost on me that the father first brings his troubled boy to the disciples. When Jesus showed up, the father turned to Jesus and issued a complaint, *"Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 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."* The response of Jesus indicates some disappointment in the disciples. He says in verse 19, *"O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."* This failure of the disciples provides an insightful lesson for us, the church, as we live within the mess of this life and this world. It teaches us something about how we are to live as the presence of Christ in this world.

A Look at the Mess

We start this morning by looking at the mess. When you read this story, it is hard not to see the mess and the misery of this poor boy and the concern of his father. When they brought the boy to Jesus, it says that when the evil spirit saw Jesus, *"immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth."* And much like a conversation between a doctor and a parent of a sick child, *"Jesus asked*

his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him."

The misery of this boy, touches every facet of his life. Physically, he is unable to talk and he has no control of his body as this evil spirit takes over control. There is a spiritual component to his misery. This is not just an epileptic seizure that he has. There is an evil spirit that has control over him. And furthermore, his misery is compounded by the fact that no one seems able to help this poor boy. It is interesting that when Jesus shows up in verse 14, he walks right into an argument between the religious leaders and the disciples. I think the argument had to do with this boy. Perhaps the father tried everything. He brought the boy to the religious leaders and they weren't able to help. He brought the boy to Jesus, but Jesus wasn't there and so he turned to the disciples. But they weren't able to help. And so there is this utter sense of helplessness. And perhaps, most sobering of all, this boy was in the clutches of the evil one. And as we saw a few weeks ago, when Jesus encountered a man who was possessed by a legion of demons, Jesus gave permission to the demons to enter a herd of pigs. These demons drove the pigs off the cliff and into the water where they were drowned. This was a demonstration of what Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:8. *"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."* Clearly, that is at the root of this boy's misery.

This boy is hard to look at. You can't help but wince when you take a good look at him. But we must look at him. And furthermore, we must come to the realization that we are him. This is how Paul describes the basic human condition in Ephesians 2:1-3. *"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature, children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."* This passage paints a picture of our misery. We are all born in this bondage to sin. No one had to teach you how to do wrong. Since childhood, we naturally follow the course of this world. Or as David put it in that psalm of confession, Psalm 51:5, *"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."* We are just as miserable as this boy. We are just as helpless as this boy. We are just as much of a mess as this boy.

This week I was driving to New Hampshire and I was listening to *Morning Edition* on NPR. Laura Sydell was telling the story of Vint Cerf. He is considered by many to be "the father of the Internet." In the early 1970's and 1980's, he led a team of scientists

supported by research from the Defense Department. Their initial goal was to create an Internet through which academics and scientists from around the world could readily share data and research. It wasn't until 1988, when he was at a conference for commercial vendors, that he realized that the Internet could expand to the general populace. He was excited about that, though his colleagues thought he was nuts. They said to him, "Why would you let the unwashed masses get access to the Internet?" Well, frankly, he thought everyone should be able to benefit from its capability.

At the same time, there was a young inspiring science fiction writer by the name of William Gibson. He had some friends in the tech industry who told him about computers and the Internet. He was trying to come up with a new arena where science fiction could be staged. He came up with: cyberspace. In 1984, he wrote a novel called *Necromancer*. "A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system." In other words, he was able to imagine the potential of these computers connected together. In the novel, "the Internet has become dominated by huge multinational corporations fighting off hackers. The main character is a washed-up criminal hacker who goes to work for an ex-military officer to regain his glory. And get this: The ex-military guy is deeply involved in cyber-espionage between the U.S. and Russia." Here we are thirty-four years later, living in a "science-fiction novel."

The point of the story on NPR was that the inventor tends to see the optimistic opportunities that come with invention. But it is the artist, the novelist, who imagines how the invention will change us and anticipates what human nature will do with each invention. In fact, this story ends with this poignant conclusion. "The artists are the ones who recognize a fundamental truth: Human nature hasn't changed much since Shakespeare's time, no matter what fancy new tools you give us."¹ My jaw dropped when I heard that concluding thought, because it was a secular testament to the misery we find in our passage. I wanted more. I wanted the program to go on and define human nature. And I wanted to ask, "why stop at Shakespeare?" This "human nature" has been around longer than that. Did they realize what they were saying when they said, "Human nature hasn't changed much since Shakespeare's time, no matter what fancy new tools you give us." I don't think so—but it was a profound admission.

Don't you see the reality of "human nature" in every corner of society? And what is the result of this basic human nature? It separates us from God and it brings more misery and pain into the world. Like many of you, I am sure, I was watching a tribute this week to Billy Graham, who died this week at the age of 99. In this tribute by ABC News, they showed a clip of one of Graham's crusades where he said, "The greatest need in the

world today is the transformation of human nature, to make us love instead of hate.”² Like this father, we stand helpless and powerless to fix human nature. And so, we turn to Jesus and we also plead, “*But if you can, have compassion on us and help us.*” The message of Mark 9 is that Jesus can. Jesus is the answer to our broken human nature.

Jesus Can

On either side of this story about this boy, we find an image of Jesus. These two images of Jesus are very different, but they go together. Before we meet this boy, we see a wonderful image of Jesus in his transcendent glory on the top of what we call the Mount of Transfiguration. Then, following the story of this boy, we find Jesus again, telling the disciples that he must go to the cross. He says in verse 31, “*The Son of Man is going to be delivered over into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.*” So we see the glory of Jesus and the cross of Jesus surrounding the misery of this boy. It is a perfect picture as to why Jesus responds to the father of the boy by saying, “*If you can! All things are possible for the one who believes.*”

First of all, we find ourselves at the top of a mountain. Jesus took with him three of his disciples: Peter, James and John. It says in verses 2-3 that “*he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.*” What a gift this was for Peter, James and John. Clearly this experience was not lost on Peter. He writes about it later in 2 Peter 1. Here he says, “*but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was born to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’, we ourselves heard this very voice from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.*” They were “*eyewitnesses of his majesty*” and they saw Jesus in his heavenly glory.

It was only six days prior to this that they had the first conversation about the cross. Up to this point, they were thinking of the kingdom of God coming in glory. And it is not to say that glorious day won’t come. In fact at the end of that first conversation that took place six days prior, Jesus spoke about the day we know as the second coming of Christ when *the Son of Man . . . comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*. But then he says in Mark 9:1 that some of them will not taste death before “*they see the kingdom of God after it has come in power.*” Jesus was referring to what they would experience on the top of this mountain. David Garland says that this “scene functions like a hologram . . . It serves to confirm that the suffering Jesus will endure is not incompatible with his glory.”³ Or as Paul says in Philippians 2, “*though he was in the*

form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing . . . becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.”

What a scene this must have been. Not only was Jesus transfigured, but there was Elijah and Moses standing on either side of Jesus. Because of how the Old Testament ended in Malachi 4, it was anticipated that Elijah would prepare the way for the Messiah and the coming day of the LORD. In fact, as they are coming down from the mountain, Jesus confirms that John the Baptist fulfilled this role. And Moses was the first to deliver Israel, and in many ways, Jesus was presented as someone greater than Moses because he brought about a greater exodus; a deliverance from sin and death. With Elijah and Moses flanking either side of Jesus, it was a message to the disciples that even though they were not anticipating the cross, the kingdom of God was indeed drawing near through Jesus. And so they hear the voice from heaven saying, *“This is my beloved Son, listen to him.”*

The famous painter, Rafael, painted this scene and the title of his painting is called *The Transfiguration*. The painting has three tiers to it. The upper tier is the picture of the Transfiguration. It is a picture of Jesus flanked on either side by Elijah and Moses. The second tier finds the three disciples lying prostrate on the ground. The text says that *“they were terrified.”* And then on the third tier, you have the scene at the foot of the mountain with the father bringing his son to the disciples. Rafael is communicating something through this painting. In the scene at the foot of the mountain, there is a man at the center of the painting and he is pointing right at the boy. The eye is naturally drawn to him and he serves as a starting point in the painting. And if you follow the direction where he is pointing in a clockwise fashion, your eyes move from the boy to the man on the left who is pointing to the top of the mountain. He is pointing to Jesus. What is the point? Well, first of all, Rafael is communicating that Jesus is the answer to the misery of this poor boy. But on a grander scale than that, he is telling us that Jesus left glory and stepped into the misery of this world, the mess, and that he is our only hope. Just as the disciples are pointing the boy to Jesus, Rafael is pointing us to Jesus.

So it is quite fitting to find Jesus talking once again about the cross. That is why he came down from glory and stepped into the mess of this world and the mess of our lives. At the beginning of his ministry, he went into the synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah. The passage was Isaiah 61 and it was a passage that spoke of the coming Messiah. Jesus read these words, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the*

year of the Lord's favor." In other words, he stepped into our mess. And it doesn't get any messier than the cross.

Why the cross? What is it about the cross that sets us free from our mess? Or as Billy Graham put it, what is it about the cross that transforms human nature from hate to love? The Bible describes the mess of this world, our sin, in terms of slavery. We are born enslaved to sin. Much like that boy was trapped, so are we. Martin Luther called it the "bondage of the will." This slavery leads to death, the curse of sin. If that is our bondage, then the price paid to redeem us and free us needs to be adequate. Peter talks about this in his first letter by saying silver and gold aren't adequate to redeem us from the curse of sin and death. Nor is there any payment you can offer that is adequate to set you free. Only death is the adequate cost to set us free. And so, Peter says, "*you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers . . . with the precious blood of Christ.*" Jesus can do this because Peter says, "*he is like a lamb without blemish or spot.*" Jesus is the holy Son of God.

Look at him at the top of the mountain. This is the one who stepped into our mess and died for you. Only Jesus can deliver you from the misery of your sin and free you from the fear of death. This transforms human nature because it is the love of God. He stepped down from glory. He didn't just step into the mess. He died. He tasted the mess. He became the mess. It says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" And so we read, "*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.'*" *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.*" Jesus can!

A Call for Prayer

The last thing for us to consider in the text is the conversation the disciples have with Jesus after the boy is set free by Jesus. The disciples are somewhat perplexed over the fact that they were unable to set this boy free when the father brought him to them. Remember, in Mark 6, Jesus sent them in groups of two on a mission trip and it says in Mark 6:13 that during this trip "*they cast out many demons.*" So they turn to Jesus and somewhat perplexed ask him, "*Why could we not cast it out?*"

Actually, I think their past success caused them to rely on their own strength. I think

when the father brought the boy to the disciples they thought, “We got this! We have done this before.” They were trusting in themselves and not in God. And so Jesus said, “*This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.*” David Garland suggests that “people come to us to get help from Jesus, not from us.”⁴ So one of the best things we can do for people enslaved in the mess and pain of this world is to pray for them.

Before you get up from your seat and go into the world, Mark is saying this to us. If you want to enter the mess of this world and see people delivered from sin and death, then make sure you go forth with prayer. The enemy we face is strong. It is true that he was defeated at the cross, but he still has his clutches on people and he doesn’t want to let go. Prayer is the weapon God has given us to accomplish his task of delivering people from the misery of sin.

With this in mind, let me invite you to do three things with regards to prayer and then I want to let you know about an opportunity.

- On a regular basis, ask God to put the name of someone on your heart. I am amazed at how many times God puts someone on my heart, only to discover later that they were going through something. Then ask God what it is he would like you to do for that person. It could be a note of encouragement, a phone call or to meet some kind of need. I heard a great quote this week about what it means to do justice, that is to bring wholeness where often there is a mess. It is to willingly disadvantage yourself for the advantage of someone else. Isn’t that what we see here with Jesus in Mark 9. We went from glory to the cross so that we could be made whole.
- When someone shares a need with you, let them know you will be praying for them. And if the setting is right, ask them if you could pray for them right now. You would be surprised how many people have never had someone pray over them. We pray because Jesus said, “*All things are possible for those who believe.*” We pray because more than coming to us, they need to come to Jesus. God moves through prayer.
- Take steps to learn what it means to “strive in prayer.” Paul invites his readers in Romans 15:30 to “*strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.*” In the recent issue of *Christianity Today* there was an article on what it means to “travail” in prayer. We are far too casual in our prayer. No movement of God took place apart from striving prayer. Like exercise, start small. “*This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.*”

So what is the opportunity? On Saturday morning, March 10 from 9:00 - 10:30 we are going to gather as a church for prayer. The Executive Board will be there. We are going to gather quarterly as a congregation for the purpose of prayer. Why? Because we want WEFC to be the presence of Jesus in the mess of this world.

Conclusion

While this world may be a mess, it is not without hope. The glorious Son of God, stepped into this mess and through the cross has defeated sin and death. And we the church are his presence on earth. Like Jesus, we too are willing to disadvantage ourselves for the advantage of others. We firmly believe that Jesus can! We need to pray that God gives us big heart for this broken world and that he moves us to pray. We are not the answer. Jesus is the answer. I invite you to “strive together with me” in prayer.

¹Laura Sydell “The Father of the Internet Sees His Invention Reflected Back Through A ‘Black Mirror’ *Morning Edition* NPR Feb. 20, 2018 www.npr.org

²Dan Harris, ABC News Special Report “Evangelist Billy Graham Dies at 99” Nov. 21, 2018 <http://abcnews.go.com/US/video/evangelist-billy-graham-dies-99-53242197>

³David Garland *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 343

⁴*Ibid.*, 361

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share one or two ways you were made aware of the “mess of the world” this week.
2. Reflect on these two quotes from the sermon:
 Laura Sydell: “A fundamental truth: Human nature hasn’t changed much since Shakespeare’s time, no matter what fancy new tools you give us.”
 Billy Graham: “The greatest need in the world today is the transformation of human nature, to make us love instead of hate.”
3. What did you take from the sermon this week?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read [Mark 9:14-27](#). What do you observe about this boy? How does this boy become a picture of us? (Compare this story to [Ephesians 2:1-3](#)). How does this help us understand “human nature?”
5. Read [Mark 9:1-13](#). What does this passage tell us about Jesus? How does this passage give you confidence to point people to Jesus? See [2 Peter 1:17-21](#). What “more sure thing” do we have to point people to Jesus. Wow!!!
6. Read [Mark 9:30-32](#). How is the cross of Jesus the answer to the mess of this world? (See [1 Peter 1:18-19](#)) Taking the entire passage, describe how Jesus “disadvantages himself for the advantage of others.”
7. Read [Mark 9:28-29](#) and [Romans 15:30](#) and discuss what these verses teach us about prayer.

Taking It Home

8. Consider the suggestions about prayer at the end of the sermon. What is one step you would like to take in prayer this week?
9. Identify where God is calling you to “disadvantage yourself for the advantage of others?”