

Have you ever experienced a moment of great faith and great doubt at the same time? Maybe it was a national crisis. A natural disaster, like Hurricane Florence. An act of violence, like the terrorist attacks on 9-11. Maybe it was a time of personal crisis. A health problem. An injury. A broken relationship. A tragic death.

It's at those moments that we are often overwhelmed by both great faith and great doubt. Great faith because we believe in a God who loves us. Who cares for us. Who hears our needs. Who answers our prayers.

But we are also filled with great doubt. Because, somehow, simultaneously, at that moment when God is so near, God also feels so far away. And we can't help but begin to wonder... Does he not care? Does he not want to help me? Is he not able to help me? Is he there at all? Am I just praying to the wind?

Great faith and great doubt. Filling our hearts and minds. At the exact same time. Coexisting inside us in a paradox that sends our heads spinning. If you have ever felt that way, you are not alone. I have felt that way. Plenty of people I've known have felt that way. Countless people throughout history have felt that way.

Even King David himself felt that way. Read through the Psalms and you'll see it over and over again. "God, why have you abandoned me." And then just a few verses later: "God, I know you are with me." David went through that too.

And that's really how I think a lot of people felt in our Gospel lesson today. But for very different reasons. The disciples felt that way. Back in Mark 6, Jesus gave the disciples a very important task. He sent them out two by two to the towns around them to preach his message and to cast out demons. And to the disciples' surprise, it works. They come back and report with amazement how successful they were at casting out unclean spirits.

Fast-forward a few chapters and we're at our passage for today. Jesus leaves his disciples for a short period of time. Takes Peter, James, and John up onto a mountain, where he is transfigured before them. In the mean time, a man arrives begging the other 9 disciples for help. His son has been possessed by a demon.

So they say to him, "Sure we can help. We've done this lots. We're pros. No problem." Except that there's a big problem. The demon won't leave. And the disciples are frustrated. Because they have been thoroughly embarrassed. Embarrassed, worst of all, in front of the scribes. In front of their enemies.

And this has become a crisis of faith for them. They believe in Jesus. They have seen what he can do. They have done amazing things at his command and in his name. So why can't they do this? When they need God's power most, why has God left them? They are filled with great faith and great doubt.

And, I think, their faith and doubt rubs off on the the father who brought his son in the first place. I mean, you've gotta give the guy credit. He came in faith. He came to find Jesus believing that there was a chance that Jesus could help his son when no one else could. He wouldn't have come at all if there wasn't some faith there.

But he's also a man who feels awfully abandoned by God. I mean, think about it. You have a child. A young boy. Happy. Healthy. Playful. He is the joy of your life.

And then one day, he falls to the ground. Writhing uncontrollably. Spittle begin to foam at his mouth. He's gritting his teeth as if it's the most painful thing in the world. Day after day this happens. You do everything you can to help. You go to the best doctors. The wisest rabbis.

And it only gets worse. Now he's not just thrown to the ground. He lurches into the cooking fire of your home and gets covered in burns. He tosses himself into the lake by your home and nearly drowns. And there's nothing you can do for him.

And so you go to Jesus. And you think maybe he can do something. But his disciples are no more successful than the other doctors and rabbis you've seen. You came to Jesus in great faith that he could help you. But you're ready to leave feeling abandoned by God and begin to doubt.

Great faith and great doubt. Side-by-side. It's part of our sinful human condition. As Martin Luther would say, we are simultaneously saints and sinners. Simultaneously people of faith and people of doubt.

And just as it occurs in many different people in many different circumstances, it also can produce in us many different responses. We can deal with that great faith and that great doubt in many different ways. Some of them bad. Some of them good.

Among the responses we should avoid is the reaction of the disciples. The disciples knew where Jesus was. They knew he was just a short walk away. This father had come to them in desperation, pleading for compassion. And when they failed to help him, they could have easily run to Jesus and asked for his help.

But no, they have their pride to think about. The scribes are watching after all. They need to put on a good show. And when that fails, they begin to argue with them. What they argued about, we don't know. Does it really matter? Is arguing with the scribes going to help this father? Is it going to heal this child? I don't think so.

It's no wonder Jesus calls them a faithless generation. They have been given an opportunity to share mercy and peace. And they've turned it into a time of pride and discord. You will never come closer to God by staying away from Jesus.

But then we also have this father. This poor man at the end of his rope. Jesus at first chastises him for his doubt. *"If you can? All things are possible for the one who believes."* Make no mistake about it. Doubt is doubt. Doubt is sin. And Jesus is never one to gloss over sin, even when he wants to eventually help someone.

The father in this story speaks first from a place of sinful doubt. But then a moment later, he speaks not in doubt, but in faith. *"I believe. Help my unbelief!"* And finally Jesus hears exactly what he had been waiting for this entire time.

A prayer. That's what the father has said. A prayer to Jesus. Jesus spells it out later. *"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."* Where is that prayer? Did the disciples pray? No. Did Jesus pray? No. The boy's father prayed. *"I believe. Help my unbelief!"*

And so Jesus helps his unbelief. He helps his unbelief by healing his son. By showing him that God had not abandoned him after all. By showing him that God was standing right in front of him.

The man may not have even realized it, but in that moment, he had prayed for the healing that his son received. Not by praying for the temporary health of his son. But by praying for faith and healing of a soul sick with doubt.

And that is what we so often miss in times of crisis and grief and tragedy. We pray for health. We pray for an end to pain. We pray for life. These are all good prayers.

But the place we start. The prayer that's most important. The prayer that can cast out demons and raise the dead. Is the prayer to heal our doubt. The prayer to help our unbelief.

When we start there, then whether the healing comes or not. Whether the pain ends. Whether there's life or death. We know that through it all, God is near. That he has stood right in front of us. Stood in our place. Filled with pain and grief and sorrow.

That he is standing there now, with marks in his hands and feet. Offering to us this day his very body and blood as proof of his great compassion for us. That we may kneel before this altar and pray, "I believe. Help my unbelief."

Kneel and pray and know that the same power that cast out sin, death, and the devil from that young boy has also cast out sin, death, and the devil from us. The same power that came with a simple prayer then comes with a simple prayer today. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead raises us from the dead as well.

"I believe. Help my unbelief." It is a prayer of contrition and repentance. A prayer of faith and hope. A prayer we pray to the Lord who has not abandoned us. But comes in Word and Sacrament as often as we do this in remembrance of him. In remembrance of the prayer he has already answered and the healing he has already given. The healing of our souls. Amen.