

“HOW MUCH LONGER?”

Psalm 13; Mark 9:14-29

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About the Psalm reading: Like many Psalms, this is a heartfelt prayer for help.

About the Mark reading: This Lent we're reading stories from Mark's gospel, chosen because they are stories wrapped around these questions that are penetrating, perceptive and pertinent even today. They are so ...Lenten! This one follows immediately after the Transfiguration, a kind of mystical mountaintop experience shared by Jesus and a couple of his disciples.

Psalm 13 is one of those Psalms that let us know the Bible isn't all sweet stories and wise advice and beautiful reassurance. It's also about real people's struggles with faith in the real world. "How long, O Lord?" Even if we haven't used those exact words, it is a prayer we all know.

How long?
How long will this pain go on?
How long until my broken heart heals?
How long will life continue to be so unfair?
How long do I have to keep worrying about how to pay the bills?
How long till the depression lifts?
How long will this estrangement last?
How long must we live in fear?
How long til we find a way out of the epidemic of gun violence?
How long until racism and sexism and the other -isms are things of the past?
How long until we feel hopeful again?
How long?

It's not evidence of lack of faith; bringing the question, along with all the pain and longing, to God is an act of faith, or at least an act of reaching toward faith in the midst of struggle. "How long" is a question that looks toward a future.

So it's really interesting to hear, from Jesus' lips in Mark's gospel, words that echo the words from the psalmist's prayer. But it's different. It's as if Jesus is turning the question around, directing it back at his disciples and his community ... and, I guess, at us, too.

"How long do I have to put up with you faithless people?"

It kind of sounds like Jesus might be whining a little bit, but that's not really what's going on. At this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus is preparing his disciples to be the ones who carry on his ministry and proclaim the reign of God when he is no longer walking right there beside them. He knows that time is coming. He knows – although they don't understand yet – that what's ahead is a hard road of suffering, leading to a cross. He knows that they will need a lot of faith to get through that. He knows that later, there will

be more unknowns and danger and risks as they follow their calling to take the Christian message far and wide into the world. He knows that, too, will require faith.

Yet here, when he comes down from the mountaintop and looks around, faith isn't what he sees.

There are religious leaders, doing what religious leaders often do: arguing.

There are crowds of people, eager to see him. But mostly they are just curious, excited to get close to someone who's become a celebrity of sorts. Maybe they're hoping to see another miracle like the loaves and fishes that fed a multitude.

There are his own friends, his disciples, who though, well-intentioned, apparently just couldn't see God's healing power doing anything for this boy and his family. Or maybe, as Jesus implies a little later, they somehow didn't understand that prayer was critical in this and in every circumstance.

So Jesus says, "how long must I put up with you?"

I don't know about you, but I can so clearly hear Jesus saying this to me, to us.

"How long must I put up with you?"

How long do I have to put up with you going through the motions of religion while living out a kind of practical atheism, as if you're not sure that faith is of any use in the real world?

How long do I have to hear you complain about the bad things that happen, while doing nothing to bring about change?

How long do I have to watch you coming to church but really worshipping things other than God?

How long do I have to hear you talk about loving your neighbor while you accept gross inequality and massive human suffering?

How long will you fail to make connections between the call of the gospel and the commitments of your life?

How long do I have to witness your blindness to the world's beauty or the grace that sustains you?

How long will you keep pursuing selfish individual agendas, when you could find such grace and strength in community?

How long will you live in denial of your brokenness?

How long will you keep God at a distance?

How long before you start to believe in the power of God's love and grace to bring healing and transformation into the places of pain and struggle in your life and in your world?

How long?

This is Jesus, disappointed at how quickly these folks have lost confidence in God's ability to bring hope and healing to a situation of need. This is Jesus, longing for the people he loves to trust in the love of God he has been showing to them. This is Jesus, wanting his friends to understand how important it is for them to stick close to God, so that in and through them, the transformative power of God's love can be made known in the world.

Now, we live in a skeptical age. We know healing comes in lots of ways – ways that can be explained and ways that can't, spiritual ways and physical ways – and we also know that sometimes it doesn't come in, at least in any way we can recognize. We also know that "thoughts and prayers" are no substitute for faithful action to help those in need and change what needs to be changed.

And yet, though we are distant from Mark's readers, who might have expected healings as part of a prophet's ministry and would not have had the questions we have about unexplained miracles ...there is no distance between us at all when it comes to questions of faith. Faith is – always has been – a challenge. Trusting God is something human beings have always found hard. But sooner or later we come up against the reality that our efforts and good intentions can't heal and fix and answer everything. Sooner or later the question of faith will arise, and that is really what this story is about.

Faith is not believing really hard that something we need or want will happen; it's not about visualization or magic or dreams coming true or getting the miracle you pray for. It's not about a particular outcome at all. Faith is trust that God is present and powerful in any situation, that God's love and grace are transformative.

New Testament scholar Brian Blount asserts that it is not about the miracle, about whether it happens or not, but about *the power of God*. "...Even if there is ultimately no miracle, God's power is not diminished." (p. 165) It's still there, still real, still sustaining and transformative. God's power is a given, as far as Mark is concerned. What's not a given is faith, and this story isn't as much about healing or miracles as it is about that question of faith. How long, Jesus wants to know, until we really and truly place our faith in God?

How do we get there? we might wonder. Clearly, it isn't easy. Clearly, sometimes what looks like faith falls short of the real thing.

The father in the story gives us a clue. His words to Jesus are as honest and human and heartfelt a prayer as the one we read from the Psalm. "I believe; help my unbelief!" It may not make logical sense but it's perfectly articulated. We know just what he means, don't we? For most of us, this is what the journey of faith is like – an incoherent vacillating between belief and skepticism.

“How long, O Lord?” we say.

“How long,” Jesus says, “until you trust me?”

“I believe; help my unbelief.” Those words shift the trajectory of the story. The surrender is palpable. You can almost hear the barriers fall and the flood of healing grace flowing in. “I believe; help my unbelief.” Maybe that is the prayer we need the most for this journey.

Here’s the thing: simply bringing that truthful and desperate prayer opens us up to the power and presence of God, that might do ... anything. There might be miracles we don’t expect, new directions we never dreamed of, transformations in spite of our inclination to resist. There certainly will be strength and courage for walking hard and painful roads. There will be healing of some sort or another. There will be grace and God’s presence to accompany us in our faith and in our doubt. And eventually, there will be Easter, God’s promise that no pain, sorrow, or separation will last forever.

Amen.

Resources:

Preaching Mark in Two Voices, by Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles