

## When Jesus Gets Mad

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Luke 9:37-45

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So. Angry Jesus. Angry Jesus who yells at sick kids and scared parents. Angry Jesus who's tired of being around other humans. Angry Jesus who's clearly using his outside voice. Awesome. I'm glad I put on a tie for this.

I suspect we've all had teachers who said something that has stayed with us forever. Somewhere along the way, there was a thing one of them taught you that changed the way you think for good. A thing that got under your skin. A thing that you're going over in your head right now. One of mine came from Beth Johnson, a Professor of New Testament who just retired, but while she taught was tough as nails, taking nothing from nobody. I don't remember the exact Biblical passage that precipitated her comment, but she dropped this into my head, where it has been ever since. "You have to love the hardest texts the most. You won't always like them, but you have to love them, because they're in the Bible and they demand your attention." End quote. You have to love the hardest texts the most. We have to love the hardest texts the most, my friends, because we don't always like them, but they're somehow holy and from God nonetheless. That's the value we ascribe to the Bible. We can't just steer clear of them. The same is true for people, by the way. We have to love the hardest ones the most. We can't just steer clear of them. So, how do you love an angry, parent-berating Jesus?

Well, let's take a walk. Let's meander through time and space, across continents and back through the generations, before cell phones or electricity or the printed word or even paper. Let's shake off the dust of history and trade it for the dust that always seems to be everywhere in the Biblical story. Let's amble up to Jesus and the crowd and the disciples and the dad and the son. Let's walk right in like we've been there all along, even though this is one of those stories we usually hurry past like someone with poison ivy. And let's listen.

"You faithless and perverse generation," we hear, but as we do, we notice the lines on Jesus' face. He looks more tired than we usually imagine him, but of course, he has just come down the mountain after the transfiguration. That kind of light burst will add years to human skin in an instant. And it is human skin, of course, despite all of the healings and miracles, the skin of a 33-year-old, but an old 33, worn down by sun and ocean spray and the hope of a nation. He looks exhausted, and he's still got 15 chapters to go. It must be hard being Jesus.

"You faithless and perverse generation," we hear, and we notice he's not looking at dad. He's not looking at the boy, either. They're over here, but he's looking over there. He's looking at the disciples, especially those 9 who stayed down the mountain while he and Peter and James and John went up it. He's looking at the disciples to whom he explicitly gave power and authority over all demons and the power to cure diseases less than a week ago, in the same chapter. "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" he asks. And then, then he turns back over here to look back at the child and his dad, and Jesus sighs, "Bring your son here." The change in tone is striking as we watch the boy drag himself over to Jesus despite the demonic convulsions. We cringe with every step he takes. We can't quite make out what Jesus says to the demon and the child, but before we know it, the healing and the restoration and the future are complete. All is well. Thanks be to God. And even Jesus looks a little brighter and more like himself. Thanks be to God.

Last week, our preacher, Brent Curtis, talked about why we come to church on Sunday mornings. I suspect we're all here with a sick child of one kind or another. Maybe it really is your own sweet baby, the one named after your grandmother, who just isn't getting better in body or in soul, and you've tried everywhere else. So you're here because even though Jesus' healings are weird and prescientific and vague, you'd like one very much, please. For your child, certainly, but also for the pain you feel as a parent. But maybe the sick child you are bringing is your own heartache or uncertainty about the future or grief. Maybe your sick child is the way the world is, the politics of our country or the ticking environmental time bomb we're all sitting on or wars and rumors of wars. Or maybe your sick child is something too deep for words, a feeling, a memory, a part of your soul that is tormenting you so much that demons aren't out of the question. All of us are that parent. And all of us are that child.

And I am here in this pulpit today to tell you that Jesus is not yelling at you. You are not faithless. You are not perverse. You have done nothing wrong. You are not being punished. The undeniable good news in today's passage – the passage we are loving because we don't necessarily like it – is that there will be healing. There will be wholeness. It will get better. I cannot say how or where or when, but the central truth behind today's tough story, and this entire book, is God's love for humanity and for you. Whoever you are, the son or the father, it will get better. God loves you.

But of course, we are not just parents and children. We are the church. We are the people who wake up on Sunday mornings to go downtown in the middle of June and maybe even put on ties. We are the body of Christ in the world. We are Jesus' disciples. And in that way, he is looking right at us when he talks. "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" We have to love the hardest texts the most. We have to love the hardest messiahs the most. We have to love the whole Jesus, because we will not always like all of him, yet all of him is holy, just like all of him is human. We don't get to pick and choose our god. Indeed, our God picks and chooses us. We have to love Jesus, because deep down, he's right. We can be faithless. We can be perverse. We can be exasperating. Let the one who is not cast the first stone.

"Yes, but how?" we want to ask Jesus, standing there, inserting ourselves into the conversation at the foot of the mountain. We care about the homeless, the poor and the justice-involved. Our building hosts any and every non-profit and community group Durham has to offer. We spend a good portion of our church budget on others. And we've done all of this for years. We are the church that stayed. Covered in dust and stepping in front of the father and son, we ask the capital-S Son to explain himself, in part so we can learn what else we must do and in part so we can defend our record. We are almost offended, and it is now our voices that are raised, demanding things from God. And just at this moment, the once-angry Jesus is silent.

So let us turn to a different voice. Theologian and pastor James Sledge is one of the few who dares tackle this passage in print, and here's what he says: "Sometimes I feel like I belong to the Church of the Holy Hand-Wringing. We can drone on and on, making endless statements about the need for this measure or that. We are well-versed in passing resolutions that almost no one pays any attention to, but we're not much on telling mountains to move. We're far too rational and timid ever to say, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you..." I'm far too rational and timid."<sup>1</sup> End quote. I, too, am far too rational and timid. Perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> James Sledge, *Thoughts and prayers, hand-wringing, and faithlessness*, The Christian Century, June 13, 2016

you are as well. Stories of healings make me nervous. I do not always ask God for what I need or the world needs, for fear of being disappointed. I have never commanded a demon to come out of anyone, which is much less about whether or not demons exist and much more about my ideas on commanding. I am more comfortable exercising my own power and control, because I can handle them, mostly. Perhaps, you are as well.

And that's exactly what's perverse and faithless. Trusting our own power and control when the truth of the matter is that God is in control. The truth of the matter is that Jesus shines like the sun on top of that mountain, flanked by Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets. The truth of the matter is that Jesus has never met a demon who didn't instantly know who he was or wasn't sent packing by Christ just as instantly. The truth of the matter is that One who separated the waters and the land and flung the stars into their places loves this unnamed boy and his unnamed dad enough to change their lives for good. Our timidity, yours, mine and James Sledge's, is not the truth of the matter. Indeed, sometimes our rationality isn't even the truth of the matter. Our Triune God's power always is. God is in control. And commandingly so.

Siblings in Christ, if you have come here looking for healing, for comfort, for wholeness, hear the good news of the Gospel. Jesus can do that. Jesus is doing that. Bring your son here. Healing is coming as surely as Christ died on the cross. But siblings in Christ, do not leave without hearing the rest of what Jesus has to tell us. Let the words sink into our ears. God is in control. It is faithless and perverse and exasperating to God to pretend otherwise. Let us not rely on our own control and power. Let us not be timid. Instead, let us do the hard and faithful work of loving, loving irrationally, loving especially the things and the texts and people we do not like. It's just that easy, and it's just that hard. Amen.