

022121 Mark 9:14-29
Reality Road series “Conquer Despair”

“Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.”
Albert Einstein

“Reality leaves a lot to the imagination.” John Lennon

“Reality is a lovely place, but I wouldn’t want to live there.”
Adam Young

“Humankind cannot bear very much reality.” T.S. Eliot

We may learn a thing or two about reality from quotes like these. But no one was ever more in tune with reality – no one ever faced up to more of the bleak realities of life – than Jesus, our Lord. During these days of Lent we’re going to walk with Jesus, here at Hope, as he travels the road toward the cross. We’ll talk about some of the disturbing realities Jesus confronts. We’ll grapple with the sorry reality of our own sinful condition. Together we’ll learn that walking with Jesus – a lifetime of walking humbly, walking faithfully with Jesus – is the very best way for us to travel our own reality roads.

Today’s Bible story is a tale of despair, on many levels. And despair is a concrete reality that many of us struggle with, too. Sometimes, on the roads we travel, we go through seasons of suffering that seem interminable, never-ending; and despair creeps in. Or we try and try and try to make things better in our relationships, in our vocations, in our families, and we just keep striking out; and despair grabs hold. Sometimes we look around at the state of the world around us, and the endless evils and painful problems out there are just overwhelming; and despair engulfs us.

Despair is everywhere in today's Bible story. Let's look closer at how Jesus helps real-life people to conquer the reality of despair.

First, the disciples. Three of the twelve disciples were up on the mountain with Jesus. We heard last week about what they saw: Jesus transfigured, shining with the light of heaven. But the other nine disciples are left behind in a village. A man comes up, looking for Jesus to cast out a demon from his son. In the Lord's absence, these nine disciples give it a try; but it's a spectacular fail.

When Jesus and the other three disciples come down from the mountain, there's a big argument going on. The nine disciples are being criticized and mocked by the religious leaders for their demon-casting failure, and a whole crowd of people is gathering around them. The disciples are embarrassed, humiliated, powerless. They wanted to help this poor suffering boy, and Jesus had given them the power to cast out demons. They'd been successful before; but this time they bombed. Despair was a reality, for those nine ineffective disciples.

And what about the despair Jesus felt? He comes down from the mountain – a glorious experience, a strong affirmation that the Messianic work he's set out to do is truly God's plan – but immediately he's plunged back into a chaotic mess. Christ is confronted with the twin realities of evil and suffering, in this poor boy's condition. But he faces a third troubling reality, as well. His beloved disciples, after he's spent three years teaching, encouraging, and empowering them, are coming up short once again. Jesus walks into town and sees them, defeated, confused, helpless. Apparently Jesus feels a touch of despair. "O faithless generation," he exclaims. "How long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" Jesus is trying to turn

these men of the world into men of God; but, time and again, they're letting him down.

Finally, what about the despair that this heartsick father must have felt? For years, he's watched his boy suffer. The Bible describes epileptic seizures, which are terrible enough. But we read that a vicious demon is also seizing this boy, and constantly putting him into danger. So the father brings his boy to find Jesus, the healer; but Jesus is absent, up on a mountain. The followers of Jesus, these nine disciples, think they can help. But the father's hopes are dashed when they fail, and he watches despairingly as the demon continues to assault his son.

Like I said, despair is everywhere in this Bible story. And maybe we can relate, in some way. Perhaps, like the disciples, you've desperately wished you could help someone who's hurting and suffering, a person crying out for help, but you end up despairing that you just can't pull it off. Maybe, like Jesus, you've tried and tried to bring about change in another person, or in some life situation, and you've despaired because all your efforts are in vain. Maybe, like the boy's father in the story, your heart and soul are sore and tired, from years of praying and pleading for an end to suffering, and it just doesn't come.

Despair, for many of us, is a reality we face. When we come to the end of our rope, when we don't know where to turn, when we just don't have the answers, we, too, may know despair.

But we also know Jesus. And the best way for us to conquer despair is to turn to Jesus, to walk with Jesus. We don't have all the resources. We don't have the power, or the answers, or the wisdom we need to get through all of the hard, cold realities of life. But Jesus does. Jesus conquers despair.

In our story, Jesus reminds his ineffective disciples that only through prayer – only by living close to God, only by talking trustingly and listening humbly to God – could they effectively do their work, and end their despair. They had been equipped with power, but they needed prayer to maintain it. So do we.

And Jesus himself, feeling that twinge moment of despair, immediately counters it by stepping into action. He laments the low faith of his disciples for a moment, but then right away he commands, “Bring the boy to me.” Jesus offers us a wonderful model for our times of despair. Often it’s vital to just get on with the present task, instead of bemoaning the future.

And, finally, for the heartsick father, Jesus takes away his despair by healing his son. With his divine authority over the forces of evil, Christ casts out that nasty demon. Jesus restores the man’s son, but, as he does it, he calls the father to faith. “All things are possible for one who believes,” the Lord promises – words that challenge one needy father, but words intended to embolden you and me, too, to deepen our reliance on the power and compassion of Christ. When despair grips us, when hope seems far and distant, let Jesus’ words, let Jesus’ authority, let Jesus’ ultimate control over all that happens in this world, be your living hope.

Wednesday night, and then again next weekend, we’ll keep walking the reality road with Jesus. For today, on this first Sunday in Lent, we rejoice, for our Lord helps us conquer despair. Amen.