

The Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity 2024
20 October, Anno Domini 2024
St. John 4:46-54

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior,
Jesus Christ.

Saints of God,

I imagine that all of us, hearing Jesus' response to this desperate father were a bit taken aback. This man had just traveled from his home in Capernaum to Cana, a distance of about 20 miles, because he believed that Jesus would be able to spare his dear son from death. This in itself was an act of some faith. I would find it very difficult to leave the side of Adeline or John if I believed at all that either of them was on the verge of dying. Admittedly, it could have been out of sheer desperation that the man left for what would have been at least a couple of day's journey. But even in that instance, I would have to have a compelling reason to believe that some otherwise random guy in Cana would be able to miraculously heal my child before I left for even a moment.

Clearly, this man did have a compelling reason for leaving his child behind and seeking out Jesus. He had faith of some kind, even if it wasn't a fully informed and rooted faith. At the very least this man had heard reports of Jesus. And I think it's more than a little likely that this man was rather familiar with Jesus as Jesus had made Capernaum his hometown.

And yet Jesus chastises him along with the crowds. "Unless you all see signs and wonders, you will not believe." It sounds harsh but it exposes a reality within each of our hearts that we need to see and repent of and fight against. The man wanted Jesus to travel back to Capernaum and perform some kind of ceremony to heal his son. He wanted Jesus to be there in person. He thought that it had to be that way. The man's understanding of Jesus and therefore his trust was wrong. The man could only believe that Jesus' bodily presence could help. He didn't believe that Jesus' Word was authoritative and carried the power to help. This is in contrast to the centurion who came to Jesus under similar circumstances but didn't count himself worthy of Jesus' presence and understood that Jesus' Word itself was powerful, sufficient to heal his beloved servant. The man from Capernaum thought of Jesus more like a talisman or good luck charm than the Almighty God whose word called all things into existence from nothing.

How often we treat God's Word with the same low regard. We marvel at so-called

miracles (the birth of a child or sudden deliverance from danger) and act as though they vindicated our belief in God. But such a faith can't stand when the miracle doesn't come, when our child dies or the cancer returns or the job doesn't materialize. With that kind of faith we begin to lose hope and fall into despair. We begin to doubt the promises God has made because we are not seeing the evidence. The only thing we are seeing is struggle and failure and sickness and loss.

Jesus knew that the father's faith was not a right faith, not one that could endure to the end because it was clinging to two wrong things, two idols. The first idol was the earthly life of his son. He could imagine no higher good for his son than that he remain in this life. It was not bad that the father desired healing for his son but that was the only thing he desired. He did not yet want the highest good for his son - eternal life which comes alone through the promise of forgiveness. Jesus wanted him, and He wants us, to have our hearts and minds fixed upon things above not things below. The father was willing to make such great effort to bring Jesus to his son to heal his son's body which would only be good for a time. Why wasn't such great effort made to bring his son to Jesus that Jesus might heal his soul and give to him everlasting life? Why do we expend such great money and time and effort to make sure that our children attend the best schools, have the most fun, wear the coolest clothes, have the latest tech, be the best at sports or music or academics and not expend at least that much effort praying with and for them, reading the Bible with them daily, filling their hearts with hymns and the chief parts of the catechism, protecting their hearts, ears, eyes, and minds from false teachers, from immodesty, from the world's deceitful pleasures? Do we even do that for ourselves or do we confuse health, wealth, and pleasure with what is good?

The second idol the father has set in his heart is the work of Jesus he can see. He was not content for Jesus to speak. That simply couldn't be enough. He needed a sign. He needed proof. He needed Jesus to be standing right there in front of him. This is always the problem for us. We are never truly content with what God speaks. God gives us the Ten Commandments but we live as though He doesn't really expect us to fight against temptation and live according to them at all times. God Almighty tells us that He hates sin and that He will punish those who do not repent and turn from their sin but we continue to indulge the desires of our flesh because nothing has really happened to us yet. God tells us that He will never leave us or forsake us, but at the first sign of trouble our hearts whither and we believe God has abandoned us. Time and again we betray the truth that our hearts are not content with what God has said. We demand proof. We demand that God demonstrate the truthfulness of His Word.

I am reminded of Noah and his family from the time God announced His plan to destroy

the earth by the Flood and the year that Noah and his family spent on the ark. For one hundred twenty years, Noah had no proof that the flood was actually going to happen. Only God's Word that it would. Noah continued on, certain that God would do as He had warned. That certainty also drove Noah to a new fervency in his preaching to the world, calling it to repentance, though none would listen and all would mock him as a fool and a heretic. At last, God spoke again warning that in only seven more days the flood would break forth on the earth to wipe out everything that lived on the land that was not on the ark. Noah believed and did all that God commanded him. It was God's Word. That was enough.

Then, the deeps burst forth, the windows of heaven opened, the torrential rain and powerful winds crashed all around them, and the terrible cries of those who had once mocked them now filled their ears, desperately seeking salvation from the waters. Day after day it continued. The boat lurching from side to side and enduring the crashing of the waves. And it began to enter their minds "Will it ever stop? Will the ark endure? Will the floods swallow us up? Has God forgotten us?" And in the midst of all this, what comfort did Noah and his family have? All they had to sustain them was a promise which God had made, that He would establish His covenant with Noah and save them. This is what they had to cling to as the world was being destroyed all around them. This is what sustained them in the midst of their terror and doubt. Noah continued to hold this promise before his family during the 150 days that the waters continued to cover even the highest mountain peaks and during the 150 days that the winds blew and the waters receded. God did not speak anymore to them during this time. What He had said was enough. It was still true. God would be faithful, even when it seemed as though He had long ago forgotten them. He would send them gentle reminders. The day the rains and the winds stopped and the sun broke through the clouds for the first time in forty days and forty nights. The day the drying east winds began to blow. The day ark stopped moving because it had grounded on Mt. Ararat. The raven. The dove. And then, finally, after over a year since they were sealed in the ark, God finally spoke to Noah and his family again and commanded them out of the ark to fill the earth once more and have dominion over it. God had indeed remembered His covenant though to those eight souls on the ark, it often seemed exactly the opposite.

It is important as God's people that the Word of the Lord, without any accompanying signs or miracles, is sufficient. This world is too filled with sin and the devil who wants you have and enjoy nothing good. Things, people, emotions, pleasures - these are all passing things. If our hope and confidence at all lie in them then our faith is built on shifting sand and will wither away when they are taken from us.

This is why the Word of God alone must be our treasure. It and nothing else endures forever. It remains unchanged even though the entire world is swept away by a flood or our health fails or our house is swept away in a hurricane or our loved one dies. Day after day and night after night, Noah preached the promise of God to his family so that their hearts would have something sure to rest upon. And you can be sure Noah needed to hear it as much as they did. He preached to them of the Promised Seed who would once and for all make payment for sin and crush the devil. If that is true, then the mighty flood waters were no more dangerous to them than a gently flowing mountain stream. No sign or miracle could make that more sure than the fact that God Himself had spoken it.

This is why each and every one of us needs to hear the Word of God every day. We are engulfed in temptation. We are weighed down by guilt. The world shouts that we are fools and heretics for believing that it is evil and that the Son of God will return and destroy them in the eternal fire of His wrath. But they can scream and rage all they want. God has spoken. It will happen exactly as He has promised. The Word of the Lord proves true. Hear the commands and the promises of God again and again so that you might not be led astray or fall into despair because you don't yet see the fulfillment. We gather here together every week as Noah and his family to be buoyed up and strengthened by God's Word because everything around us is collapsing. The world is sinking into greater and greater evil. The holy of ark of Christ's Church seems to be on the brink of being overwhelmed by the crashing waves of the devil's fury and sinking forever under the world's persecution. We NEED to hear again and again what God has promised because we are not yet living in its fulfillment. We need to hear again what God declares to be true so that the lies of the devil, the world, and our flesh don't deceive us. We need to hear again and again that the Lord Jesus HAS forgiven and continues to pour out His forgiveness upon us poor sinners so that our consciences are not lost in the despair of hopeless guilt. It is most certainly not enough that we hear it once because it is the devil's whole objective in life to call God's Word into question and rob us of our certainty in it. That is why God has appointed and gives His authority to preachers - to bind up the brokenhearted and to strengthen the weak, to call us to repentance when we have allowed ourselves to be led astray, and to illuminate our paths with the bright light of God's Word.

Dear children, the Word of your God and Father is a sure and eternal word. It is a powerful, life-giving word which He wants to fill your ears and hearts with so that you may be filled with hope and peace and joy in the midst of the sorrows and trials of this life. By this Word He has granted you far, far more than short-term gifts and temporary relief. He has opened heaven to you. He has taken away the guilt of your sin. He has made an iron-clad promise joined to water and bread and wine that so long as you cling

to Him you will pass through the tribulations of this life and be granted a share in the blessed around the marriage feast of Christ in His eternal kingdom. He has spoken. He will do it.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.