

THREE-PART STEWARDSHIP SERMON SERIES (1st of 3): *What are we asking?*

Great is Thy Faithfulness: The Impossible Promise of Abundance

Psalm 91:9-16 ~ Mark 10:35-45

22nd Sunday after Pentecost ~ Service of Healing & Wholeness ~ October 20, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture:

The best way into our gospel lesson this morning is to hear the three verses, that come right before it, Mark 10:32-34. (They are not in your bulletin that begins at v. 35.) They are the three verses that come between last week's story and today's. I will read them in a few moments to you because they help us imagine what might have sparked James and John's request of Jesus. What they asked Jesus to do for them. But before we get to that, we actually need to recall last week's story.

This was the one where the rich man ran up and knelt before Jesus and asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' disciples were "perplexed" and "greatly astounded" by Jesus' conversation with the rich man that made it seem impossible for anyone to "get in" so to speak. This exchange culminated in their asking Jesus, "*Then who can be saved?*" Mark tells us what happened next, "Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, But not for God, for God all things are possible." (Mark 10:27) I invite you now to hold onto that phrase, "*For God, all things are possible.*" A truth that has power to frame and reframe that path we are walking along in our lives this day. Let's try that right now. Let Jesus speak through you to the person sitting next or near you. Simply look at them and say, "*For God, all things are possible.*" Find your person. And when I say "go" look at them and say, "*For God, all things are possible.*" And then let the other person say it to you. GO!

This truth from Jesus' lips and eyes, into your ears and eyes, is the basis for the title of this three-part stewardship sermon series: We will be considering three aspects of the impossible promises made possible only by God. Yes, friends. When we turn our eyes upon Jesus, we feel seen and heard and understood. And in that gaze of unconditional love and acceptance we are freed and at the same time we are challenged to see our whole selves in a different and reorienting light. A light that alters how we view our time, our talent, our treasure, and our place in God's world. We'll get to that.

Now we are ready to hear those three verses that bridge last week's lesson into today's. Picture a large band of followers now walking along the dusty road with Jesus as he and his disciples continue their inexorable journey to Jerusalem. The tension, fear and confusion among the disciples continued to build with every step. Perhaps escalating as they hear him again predict his passion that awaits them in Jerusalem. Now, for the third time.

Let us listen for the whisper of the Spirit through the word, beginning with those 3 verses, Mark 10:32-34: "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they

will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." Now we pick up at v. 35 which is where it begins in your bulletins.

Sermon:

When was the last time you took a spill? Maybe you tripped and fell. Perhaps it was an unexpected curb, uneven ground, or an object on your path that you didn't see. It's so easy to do. Tripping hazards abound throughout our biped lives. As soon as we take our first wobbly steps and begin to morph from infant to waddler to toddler, bruises and bumps abound. Falling and getting up again is how we learn to walk. And if we are blessed to live into our 70's and beyond, the threat of falling down while walking looms larger with every decade. Yes? Only at the "golden" stage of life, we don't bounce quite as well as our little toddler selves did. Let's take just 120 seconds to turn to someone near you in the pews and share a time that you (or someone you love) took a tumble or fall.

In our First Lesson, Psalm 91:12, we heard Graeme read, "On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." Or more literally in the Hebrew, "bump against" a stone. Psalm 91 was probably written about 400 years before Christ was born, and long before the Roman Empire had built its amazing system of roads, the most famous of which was the Appian Way. Which was built 15 feet wide with 350 miles of smooth paving stones; some of which can still be seen today, 2,400 years later! But at the time the Psalms were written, way before the rise of the Roman Empire, what passed for roads at the time were notoriously rocky, bumpy, rutted. Yes: *extremely* hazardous. You can imagine why the idea of God or God's angels raising us above all that roughness, flying free of the rocky roads would have been compelling, comforting, spirit-strengthening. Even more so considering the historical context God's chosen were experiencing at the time: the extreme peril and trauma brought on by their Exile, and displacement.

If only we could also have angels to help us navigate the ruts and ridges in our thinking that trip us up, before we know it sometimes before we know it. Just like those falls that lay us flat. They happen so fast. I saw a bumper sticker on a car just yesterday that said, "Don't believe everything you think." That might have been a good piece of advice for James and John to take before making their audacious ask of Jesus, at such a cringy moment. Their minds were likely racing, "Okay, so if this is how it's going to go down---better get our reservations NOW for a seat at the Captains Table on the Jesus Glory cruise."

Here's the irony: Their question to Jesus indicates that James and John get it! They have realized Jesus *is* the real deal. They have struck gold, sort of. They are hanging with the Messiah, The Savior, the King of Kings, but they want to turn it to their advantage. They are grasping for elite participation in his forthcoming glory which they had glimpsed on the mountain of Transfiguration. It's not surprising that this ask would come those two. Of all the twelve disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee have given up the most in terms of rank, wealth, class. Their dad, Zebedee, was the owner of a successful fishing enterprise, you could say they were the two "elite" among the twelve. They had not only left their family, but also a lucrative fishing

business. They were more experienced with the economic power and status angle than the others. And they were ready to leverage their ability to work the system, now in this context, with Jesus. Plan ahead, stay ahead: strategize.

Did you notice how Jesus does not rebuke them, nor judge them for their cringy ask. They angered their fellow disciples by asking. But not Jesus. He looks at James and John and tells them simply, they don't know what they are asking. Then he asks them a question: Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? In just a few days later, at the Garden of Gethsemane moments before his arrest, Jesus would say what I just had you all say to one another, through his tears and sweat: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible." And from there comes Jesus' ask and resolve, "Remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want." (Mark 10:36). Ironically, James did end up literally "drinking the cup" of martyrdom that was Jesus' destiny. Jesus predicts that they will share his suffering – and indeed Acts 12:2 informs us that James was martyred in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa in about 44 CE. The end of John's life is less certain, but indications are that he too suffered a martyr's death.

Beloved Community, we have so many ways of walking and thinking that can trip us up. Or lead us way off the path that Jesus walked. And like James and John, our trips and falls (literal and metaphorical) are not the end of the story. In God's hands, our trips and falls will become catalysts for greater growth in the Spirit. Falls can fuel faith and light the path! Fueled with power and purpose that comes from above and leads us to a different definition of success and glory. The path which is ours if we are to be Christ's hands and feet in this world. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book titled, *God in Pain*, puts it like this:

"Somewhere in the dark tunnels of our minds we turn God's power to save us into our own power to prosper and a sly kind of triumphalism slips into our theology. We look to numbers and dollars for signs of our success instead of to the holiness of our life together... If we are not careful, we may start to sound like spiritual big shots, who speak of God's power as if it were the power to make us healthy, wealthy, and wise when of course it is nothing of the sort. The power of God is now and has always been the power to raise us from the dead. Period. It is not about us. It is about God."ⁱ

What are you, what are we asking of Jesus? Let us listen to what we are asking: is it "What can Jesus do for me?" Or is it: How can I serve Jesus? How can I, how can we be used to further the work of God's kingdom on earth to God's glory. This is a different question. One that can save your life, and our lives together. As Brian D. McLaren has written in his book, *Naked Spirituality*, "Most wonderful of all, if we dare venture into the new creation, you and I will behold God in a new way. We used to encounter God from our self-serving vantage point—for what God could do for us, advancing our agenda, coddling our insecurities, fulfilling our desires, reinforcing our prejudices. But now, even God shines in a new light."ⁱⁱ

I am excited to share with you that we have 9, yes, 9 youths, (8th and 9th graders) in our FPC church community who are starting on their Confirmation Commissioning journey today at FPC. Nince young people along with their mentors will start down this stretch of their faith

journey after worship. They will be encouraged to ask out loud any and all questions, and we look forward to all that we will learn together. Carmen Lawler is the Lead Teacher, assisted by Dan Crump and me. Pray for them and for us and this path upon which we are embarking. We will be commissioning them in worship in two weeks, with prayers and blessings, and the stoles that you are helping to create today after worship.

Friends, let us be healed of all that stands between our small possible and God's saving impossible. Let us remember that every one of Jesus' passion predictions was also a resurrection prediction and promise. Impossible to us, but not for God. Hallelujah! Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1998), p.134.

ⁱⁱ Brian D. McLaren, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words*, (HarperOne: New York, NY, 2011), p.195.