

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale  
Sunday, September 28, 2025

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Let us pray.

Gracious and mighty God, you speak words across centuries. Words that comfort and challenge, words that convict us and words that guide us and uplift us. Open our hearts and minds today that we may hear you speaking and that the meditation, the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts today may be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Our scripture this morning comes from the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. So I invite you to hear these words from the early church.

*When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw Jesus, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son. He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak. And when it seizes him, it dashes him down. And he foams at the mouth and he grinds his teeth and he becomes rigid. And I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." Jesus answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to Jesus. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And the father said, "From childhood, it has often cast him into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if you are able to do anything, help us. Have compassion on us." Jesus said to the father, "If you are able, all things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father cried out, "I believe, Lord. Help my unbelief." When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.*

This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

For those of you who like lectionary, like following the lectionary, it might have occurred to you that David and I are going a little willy-nilly in the month of September. We have not been following any particular lectionary. We have rather been choosing texts as they reflect and meet on the need of our...on the theme of our worship, the need of our community, the need of our congregation. So this text is not found in any lectionary. But this text from Mark or this story from Mark appears in all three synoptic gospels. So it shows up in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

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This Mark version is the longest, which is unusual, because in most of the stories that appear in all three of those synoptic gospels, Mark's is very...it's the shortest and most concise in them. Mark is the shortest gospel. Mark is always moving to something else. It appears, this chapter nine is a section of Mark between the beginning where he is preaching and teaching and healing and immediately after this or in the next chapter and a half begins the passion narrative from Mark's perspective. So we have a little window here in this chapter and a half that is about the disciples actually and about what it means to follow Jesus. Immediately before this text the Transfiguration has taken place. That means when the text says when they came to the disciples, that means that Jesus and James and John and Peter are coming down the mountain after Jesus has been transformed before their eyes. After they heard the word of God say, "This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him." After that mountaintop experience, they quite literally descend down back into the muck and chaos of their daily lives where the disciples that did not go up there with them are arguing with some scribes or maybe some crowds. It helps set the tone for what's happening.

Now, I said this is not a lectionary text and it's really no wonder why. This text is complicated. Who's arguing with who? Are the scribes arguing with the disciples or the crowd or what is Jesus walking into as he comes down the mountain? Why are the disciples casting out demons? Also, Jesus is a little too direct. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is more direct than in many of the other gospels because, as I said, it's moving quickly. They have places to be and things to do. And maybe it's just my modern ears, but I read Jesus as a little bit snarky. He's like, "How long do I have to deal with you?" Sounds quite a bit like a mom in the kitchen. It's like me, sounds kind of like me in the kitchen trying to get dinner on the table. Like, "Will you guys just stop?" And he's kind of rude to the dad. The dad comes to him desperate and asks for help. And Jesus says, "If you're able, anything is possible for those who believe." So, I can see why maybe this didn't make our comforting idea of Jesus who heals and welcomes. But the father of this boy is at his wits end. Which is why it bothers me the way Jesus speaks to him, honestly. Like, he describes in the text a life filled with worry and fear and exhaustion. Like, his son's life is in constant danger and he's desperate. As I was reflecting on this text, I was sitting a bit with how this father must have felt. the immense weight of his son's condition, the cultural shame that came along with it. Because remember, this is a time when illness and physical deformities and maladies were all considered punishment for something someone had done, whether you or your parents or your grandparents. Culturally, they considered it a punishment from God. There is chaos all around him as the text described. There are disciples and crowds and scribes, and everyone's all rolling about and hollering and running, and he must have felt like it was all closing in, that there was very little hope in sight. And he shows a remarkable measure of faith. No matter what Jesus

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retorts to him, he has brought his son to Jesus to be healed. He's making a desperate plea for help.

This text came to me immediately last week when David shared that Deuteronomy 6:10-12 that he preached on last week was one of the texts that has shaped and framed his faith journey and his understanding of life. And as he said that, this text popped immediately into my head, because it has had a central place in my own faith journey. I had a bulletin board at my first church, at First Presbyterian Church in Kinston, North Carolina. I had a bulletin board that I decorated with things that reminded me of home or things that uplifted me. This was the first time I had left home knowing I wasn't going to come back. I had graduated grad school. I had passed my ordination exams. I had gotten married, and I had started a new call in a 4 month period. I don't advise that kind of life change crammed into one for anybody. But when I got there, I felt a little bit like an impostor in that office. And so I used this bulletin board to put things up that gave me comfort. It had pictures of home, things that I...pictures of places I had been, like pictures of blue bonnets and fields that I grew up around. Quotes from musicians and artists. So, like there were things from Eric Clapton and Outcast and Jerry Jeff Walker and all of these like different things up there that (I did tell you guys I was from Texas) that makes you feel like, made me feel like home. There were only two scripture texts on that giant bulletin board. One was Jeremiah 8:11. "They treat the wound of my people lightly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace." And this text from the Gospel of Mark, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

Because, see, when I arrived at First Presbyterian Church, Kinston, North Carolina, I wasn't sure about ministry. I'm going to be honest. I never imagined that this was where God was calling me. And so I believed, I did, and I took all the steps and I followed where God was calling, but there was a whole lot of unbelief mixed in there, because I wasn't sure and I didn't know. And so having that text on that bulletin board means that every day I looked up and I was reminded that God wasn't asking me to have all the answers. God wanted me to be open to the movement of the spirit. "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." They went hand in hand. They still go hand in hand for me, truthfully. This last Wednesday at Woven Wednesdays, we talked about how we understand a world that is full of suffering, full of things people call evil, while we believe wholeheartedly with our whole chest in a God of love.

That's one of those, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." because there are no easy answers. Like how we understand and live in the world is messy. It's not clear. And if it was, then as I shared with Woven Wednesday people, I would be a multi-millionaire and everyone would want to hear me speak if I could explain how we reconcile the pain of the world with a God who loves. But

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that seems even more important to me now, wrestling with that, because large parts of our world demand certainty, particularly in relationship to faith. Our culture rewards certainty and punishes hesitation or misgiving. How many times have we heard a politician or a leader be labeled a flip-flopper because their position on an issue changed? Because a position on the issue evolved in five, 10, 20 years of public service. I want my positions to change and evolve. I mean, there was once a point in time where I believed that wind chill was a myth. I mean, I grew up in southeast Texas and I said, "If it's...I know the scientists talk about it, but if it is six degrees outside, it is six degrees outside." And then I moved to Kansas, and I will tell you it is not a myth. And that's...that's a joking story, but like as we continue to grow, what we think and what we know and how we experience the world is supposed to grow. We've seen it in famous people like Rob Bell or Jen Hatmaker, who were talking publicly about their faith and how they were wrestling with parts of their faith and what they felt like they needed to do to understand their faith in a new context. And because of their openness that they were wrestling and uncertain, they were vilified by people who claimed to be friends and supporters of them. We wouldn't be standing here as Presbyterians if Martin Luther hadn't been, if he hadn't been hesitant. If he hadn't been wrestling with what he knew to be true in his heart, and he heard in scripture and it being different from what he was being told. He did not write 95 theses because he wanted to destroy the Catholic Church. He wrote those things down because he had questions, and he wanted to have conversations about them. Without him, we wouldn't be here. And yet, I think we all know that people, including us, we prefer and seek comfort in certainty. We like certainty over messiness. We don't like holding things in tension because it requires a lot of us. It requires a lot of us intellectually. It requires a lot of us emotionally to hold two things to be true and to not be able to reconcile them. We like things clearly divided rather than intertwined. We don't particularly like the hard work of having to discern what's next. We want clear decisions that don't require that much of us. And I want that a lot of times, too.

So, I'm not blaming people, but we need to know that about ourselves so that then we can wrestle with who it is God has called us to be and to do. Because over and over and over again, our scriptures witness to the reality that a living faith is not built on fast, clear answers. Our own lives and our own journeys of faith, the journeys of faith of the people who built this church and who continue to nurture it were not journeys built on easy, clearcut things. They wrestled, we wrestle with God's spirit at work in our lives and with how we are called to live and to be in the world. Soren Kierkegaard describes it as rather than a leap of faith, we leap into faith. Faith isn't what gives us the courage to leap. We step out in trust toward faith that then shapes our lives.

Now, in just a few moments, we are going to have the wonderful opportunity to ordain and install three more officers here at Idlewild. Farley and Steve and Chalmers have been elected by

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you. Not because they were certain of every question that would ever be asked of them, but because you trusted that they could wrestle with God's call to love and to serve, and they would help discern the work of the Holy Spirit that is calling us all. David and I and all of the other pastors that have served this congregation, we did not stand up here because we have all the answers and all the certainty. We are here because we've said yes to God in the midst of our questions. Faith is not certainty in the face of conflict. It's not intellectual ascent to a set of particulars. It's a journey. And we say that a lot. Faith is a journey. But that means that it's two steps forward, one step back. It's messy and it's desperate and it's full and it's uncertain. It's hard and rewarding and complex. And faith grows and shifts and expands as our understanding of the Holy One does. This text is a perfect example to me of the reality that faith is not a human achievement. Faith is not something we do. Faith is a gift of God's grace. Faith is received. It is not something that we are able to create on our own. I have recently come to understand that the word *credo*, when we say I believe as we say with the Apostles' Creed and in many other places, I believe roughly translates to 'I give my heart to.' *Credo*, not simply intellectual ascent but our heart, trust, loyalty, vision. We give our whole heart. So what do we give our hearts to? In whom do we trust is the question. What are we loyal to? Are we loyal to comfort sometimes? Is the bedrock of our lives the divisions of the world? Divisions that we have shorn up and maintained in ways large and small?

Do we invest our time and our talent and our energy in projections of worldly power that provide transient safety? Do we invest in conflict and violence and guns and soldiers? Or do we trust in the creator of all things who is in all and through all? The creator who has led us this far. Are we loyal to the vision of the one who makes a way when we can see no way? Who leads us through fire and water?

In this time of uncertainty in our lives, in our community, and in our world, I think it is even more important that we hear the cry of this father, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." because it is a deeply faithful cry to turn to God in our exhaustion, in our fear, in our desperation, and in our hope. Trusting that the maker of all things holds us in the palm of his hand, even when we cannot understand it.

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief.

Amen.