



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
March 11th, 2018
Sermon: "Moving Mountains"
Youth Sunday
Hannah Shealy & Sidney Shoop

Psalm 121
Matthew 17:14-20

HANNAH SHEALY'S SERMON

What is a demon? At first glance, you might picture a terrifying physical monster. Something dark inside of you, with horns, with a devilish grin leaving your body. But our demons may be events pressing into our everyday lives, holding us back from God.

In today's passage, the father took his son to Jesus, where he rebuked the demon from the boy. Whether this was a literal demon or a figurative one, we know that we all have demons of some sort. Maybe your demon is the pain of missing a loved one who has recently passed, or yet another anxiety attack, or you just found out that you were diagnosed with breast cancer, or maybe you failed that important test that you dedicated hours studying for.

As humans, we tend to turn away from God when these demons overtake our lives and become too much to bear. We may ask ourselves "why is this happening" and become angry and resentful towards God. In times of despair, many people tend to diverge from their faith and question it. But, I wonder... can demons actually bring us closer to God?

Getting help from God during these trying times may seem daunting or we may feel as though our problems are insignificant compared to those of our neighbors. Yet, the Bible tells us that all we must do is kneel before God and Christ will be able to overcome any demon. Doing such a seemingly small act will have a huge impact on our lives. God can make the impossible possible and move the mountains in our lives we can't even begin to tackle.

Scripture's message is clear, sometimes bad situations can lead us closer to God - strengthening our faith like never before. The father in our passage kneels before Jesus so that God can heal his son. Instead of diverting our eyes away from God in shame, we need to kneel before Jesus and ask for help. We need to trust our faith, even if it is merely the size of a mustard seed.

Earlier in the year, many of the youth in our congregation, myself included, went on the mission trip to Charleston. While there, we attended a service at Mother Emanuel

Church. On June 17th, 2015, a white young man entered a Bible study and shot 9 African American Church Members. It's hard to imagine the grief and the pain that congregation had to go through, yet somehow, somehow the families of the victims forgave that shooter! How did they do this? They must have knelt before Jesus. With the help of God, they were able to have the strength, they were able to let go, and they were able to show us what strong faith looks like.

When our youth group attended the Sunday morning worship service there, I didn't know what to expect, but I was shocked and changed by what I experienced: the whole congregation was incredibly welcoming. Warm smiles, handshakes, and hugs all around. People asked us where we were from, genuinely interested in our mission.

We were even invited to partake in communion there, where we literally knelt alongside the members in this church and shared in our faith. As I tasted the bread and heard the rustling around me, I cherished this moment of feeling united through God.

Friends, Jesus invites us to kneel before God, to lay our worries down, and to put our faith into knowing that God will be there for us. There are obstacles that we can encounter in our lives, obstacles that can feel like demons, big and small, but if we just have faith, simply faith, these monstrous setbacks will seem possible to overcome. We can't just work through our problems alone, or rely solely on those around us, we need to put all of our trust in God.

When we choose to kneel before God, amazing things can happen. God can heal us, transform us, bring us together in unexpected ways and empower us to reflect Christ's love. Small acts of kindness, such as giving your friend a hug or paying for a stranger's groceries can show God's message and overflowing love to one another.

In Charleston, I saw God at work when we spent time with youth members of James Island Presbyterian Church. We spent the evening doing a scavenger hunt and afterwards shared meals and activities together - we even knew the same energizer dances!

An onlooker might have assumed that we had all known each other for years, but really, we had only just met. We didn't know much about each other, but we knew we all shared a common link - our faith. That similarity may seem small, yet it bonded and connected us all together. God builds bridges between people and can do incredible things when we put our faith in Hi, and see the strength that She has.

So, can demons actually bring us closer to God? Jesus teaches us in this text that the burdens in our lives do not need to be what pulls us from God, but can actually be what guides us into a stronger faith relationship with Christ. Our all-powerful God can take something that has negatively drained us, and can transform it.

No matter our demons - big or small, no matter our faith - big or small, we need only kneel before God. That's it. And when we do, we will see God's incredible work. God will be able to do the impossible - even move mountains!

SIDNEY SHOOP'S SERMON

Jesus said to his disciples “if you had faith the size of this mustard seed, you would be able to look to this mountain and tell it to move from here to there.” Would the power of God fill them up and enable them to command the very earth that was beneath them to rise up and move from one place to another?

A mountain can be a lot of things, internal struggles, pain, sadness, fear. Jesus could also be referring to much more prominent conflicts. Things that affect much more than just ourselves as individuals. He calls us to address the things we fear the most, our demons. Jesus calls us to take a long look at ourselves and figure out what we can do better.

Jesus frequently raised the idea that people of faith often believe that they do all the right things. He called out those who seemingly followed all of the religious laws that they were supposed to. Jesus demanded that his followers move the most challenging mountain of all, the one that was inside of them. The one that was preventing them from being the best people they could be.

Even today, years after Jesus’ teachings, we still want to assume that there is no way that we could be the type of disciples Jesus was speaking to. We assume that we are always the good ones, the loving servants who carry out God’s law flawlessly.

Too often people read the Bible and believe that it doesn't apply to them. We instinctively associate ourselves with the right side of things when all too often we are in the wrong. It is so important to understand that Jesus was not just speaking to one group or even to one time period. Jesus’ message of transformation carries across all generations and effects people of all kinds.

Too often, we simply claim to be Christians. We come to church on Sunday, tell our friends we “believe” in God, put a Bible verse in our Instagram bio, and think that is enough. We think we have fulfilled our obligation as a believer and go on with our daily lives. This is empty faith, it is devoid of any substance, of any emotion, of any challenge.

God calls us to do much more than simply profess our belief, we are called to go into the world, and spread God’s love everywhere. Regardless of how dangerous it may be or how uncomfortable it may make us.

When we are in the face of tragedy, as we currently are in this country, we offer our “thoughts and prayers” to victims and do nothing to actually aid them. We hide behind the curtain of our faith, instead of using it as a means to go and actually change the hatred that we see.

The book of James says, “For the body without spirit is dead so faith without works is dead also.” Our thoughts and prayers will bring no change unless we get up and go out

into the world and work for the transformation that we we pray for. This is living faith, to ask God for strength. To go. To work. To trust he will provide it.

Look at the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida. In the face of terrorism, in the face of hatred and fear and death, they do not hide. They rise up. They are, as Mahatma Gandhi said, “the change they want to see in the world.” We must do the same as Christians. We must follow the lead of active faith, of faith that strives to make the world a better and more loving place.

There are examples of this radical faith everywhere. My freshman year of high school, my English class took a field trip to the Eva Kor museum in Terre Haute Indiana. Eva Kor and her husband Mickey were both Holocaust survivors. Eva and her sister Miriam were in Auschwitz and were part of the Mengele twin experiment. They were subjected to horrific tests that were meant to kill them. Two girls, under the age of ten, going through a literal hell on earth with no end in sight.

It is impossible to understand the suffering they endured. Ms. Kor spoke to our group of wide eyed students, she spoke with such a love and passion that I will never forget her words. She said,

“One night, I went up to my room and got out a dictionary. I opened it up and proceeded to call Doctor Mengele every dirty and foul word I could find. I absolutely yelled and screamed at him even though he was not in the room. But then, after I had done this...I forgave him.”

Eva Cor found it in her heart to forgive an evil man, a man who had killed her sister and nearly killed her. A man who may have never felt a lick of remorse about it. Eva even went so far as to send a letter to doctor Hans Munch, the last free and living Nazi doctor, forgiving him for his atrocities.

Her message is one that challenges us as Christians. The most difficult mountain for us to move is that of forgiveness. Human beings experience a block when they are asked not to hold a grudge, we are all too ready to clutch our anger and hatred close to our hearts.

Eva told us that forgiveness had set her free. It had taken all of the power that the evil of Doctor Mengele had over her away. She was finally able to love and live and be happy. If Eva could move such a treacherous mountain, then what is holding us back?

“Faith without works is dead.” Never has a statement rang with more urgency. Our “thoughts and prayers” cannot stop another tragedy from happening. What they can do is give us the strength, the very same strength Jesus speaks of in Matthew, to look at hatred and violence and tell it to get out.

Following Jesus must give us the strength to put our lives to work making God’s kingdom the place of love that it is supposed to be. Living out our faith cannot simply be sending our thoughts and prayers to one another, it cannot be a simple facebook post

stating we agree with a social justice movement, it cannot be just handing a dollar to a person living on the streets of our city, it cannot be us merely saying that we will “vote for someone better next time.”

Our thoughts and prayers, our posts, our generosity, our hopes must all translate into faith that is full of love and action. This action cannot be quiet, it cannot be comfortable, it must be radical. As radical as the forgiveness that Eva Kor demonstrated. As radical as the students of Stoneman Douglas standing up and demanding change. As radical as Jesus’ love for humanity.

We must go out into the world with faith that is meaningful. We must love radically regardless of the consequences. If we live with even an ounce of this, it is worth so much more than overflowing amounts of empty faith. If we live this way, then nothing, not even moving mountains, is impossible.