

Matthew 21:18-22

“I Tell You the Truth...

Faith Can Move Mountains”

1st Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2019

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Rev. Brent Hartwig

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen! Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

The Walmart parking lot was jammed full, bumper-to-bumper.

Increasingly frustrated because there wasn't a single, vacant parking spot,

John kept circling . . . and circling . . . and circling.

Just when he thought he found the perfect spot,

he realized it was filled with a motorcycle

Desperate to save his legs a long walk — in the cold,

John angrily uttered a prayer,

“Lord, if you give me a parking spot,

I'll donate an extra \$1000 to the church.”

Boom! Just like that, John saw the white reverse lights flick on to his right.

He slammed on the brakes,

rejoicing as he watched the Chevy Malibu back out in front of him,

John turned on his directional signal.

Inching into the spot,

John sighed, *“Forget it, Lord, I just found a space.”*

You may have heard a story like that before.

Our first reaction may be to laugh. But it's really no laughing matter.

As silly as it sounds, John's situation sheds insight on how we view prayer.

Prayer can be a last resort — when all else fails.

We so often fail to tap into prayer's power or trust its effectiveness.

Or when something does happen in our lives,

we chalk it up to coincidence instead of God's answer to our prayer.

Despite all of that, Christ says just a few short days before he died: *“I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt . . . you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”*

Wow, what a promise!

If you believe, you will receive!

If you don't doubt, it will be done!

Really? How could Jesus make such an outlandish statement?

Let's consider the context in which he said it.

It was the early in Holy Week.

After spending the night in rural Bethany,

Jesus and his disciples were heading west into the city of Jerusalem.

Along the path, they came across a fig tree in full bloom.

Typically, if a fig tree has leaves, it also has fruit,
as its fruit and foliage appear simultaneously.

But when Jesus went to pick breakfast from its branches that morning,
no fruit was to be found. It was empty.

It was a hypocrite—nice on the outside, worthless on the inside.

So Jesus said, "*May you never bear fruit again!*"

Boom! Immediately, the tree withered.

If you were Peter or Philip and you saw this fig tree wither simply because Jesus said so,
what would be your reaction?

Whoa! Déjà vu.

Whoa! Back to the boat when I heard this man still the storm with a simple,
"Silence!"

Whoa! Back to the shores where I picked up leftovers from a little boy's lunch
that fed thousands.

And now this!

These newly blackened fig leaves testify that this man I'm following
—I don't even know if there are words to describe him.

He takes a backseat to no one, not even nature.

His power is wondrous. His power is amazing.

[Taps into Jesus]

As you're staring at the fig tree with eyes wide open and contemplating what you just
witnessed, this same powerful Jesus redirects your eyes,

***"You think that's amazing. Look at those mountains. As tall as they are, as solid
and strong as they are, if you have faith, if you don't doubt, they can fall into that
sea 4,000 feet below and behind you."***

If you're Philip or Peter, do you believe him?

Absolutely. You don't doubt him for a second.

Why? Because you've seen what he can do. You've seen his power at work.

That's the key when it comes to unlocking the beauty and comfort
of Jesus' "I tell you the truth."

All too often we hear those words, if *you* have faith and if *you* believe,
and we emphasize the "you."

But what makes Jesus' statement the truth?

It's knowing the power of the One who makes the promise.

Jesus, the One who can wither a tree with his tongue, promises:

“I tell you the truth . . . faith can move mountains.”
His promise and his power make prayer effective.
His promise and his power make your faith powerful.

In other words, moving mountains does not depend on the one who has the faith,
but the One in whom you have faith.

[What Challenges Us]

That is so important to remember, especially in the season of Lent.

During this time of year in which our hymn tunes have turned to minor keys
and our “Alleluias” are temporarily missing,
we are led to contemplate the seriousness of our sin.

Words like *repentance* and *confession* dominate our services and devotionals.
While a season of confession is valuable,
there’s also a danger.

As we see our hands swinging the hammer to pound the nails,
as we hear our voices in the midst of the mocking crowds,
we can easily despair, “*What kind of a believer am I? What kind of a faith do I have?*”

Satan would want nothing less than to have us rest the validity of our faith
on our own actions and words.

Satan would want nothing less than to have us base the power of our faith
on how we’ve seen our prayers answered in the past.

“*I prayed that Grandpa would get well, but he didn’t. . . .*”

“*My faith must not be that good. I prayed that our marriage would survive,
but the divorce papers were signed. . . . I must have doubted God.*”

“*I believed I could get the job, but I didn’t receive the offer.*”

With our faith shaken, we start to wonder,

“Do I *really* believe?” Or, “Do I believe *enough* in Jesus?”

Or worse, we question,

“*Is Jesus worth believing in? Can we trust him when he says, ‘I tell you the truth . . .
faith can move mountains?’*” “*I’ve never seen a mountain fall into the sea. Have you?*”

But Jesus’ point is not whether or not he’s made the mountains fall into the sea.

His point is that he can. He is that powerful.

And the disciples, through prayer, could tap into that power.

In just a few days,

the disciples would see Jesus arrested, beaten, and crucified at the hands of ungodly men.

Undoubtedly, their faith would be shaken.

Yet they could go back to this tree,
they could replay this conversation,
and they could be reminded of Jesus' power.
They could be reminded that he didn't die out of weakness
or because he was outsmarted by his betrayer,
but that he died of his own accord.

As a result, they could have faith, mountain-moving faith.

Would they always remember that? No.

If they did, Peter wouldn't cower under the questioning of a servant girl.

They wouldn't huddle in a locked room afraid for their lives.

But no matter how they felt or how they acted, Jesus' statement remained,

"I tell you the truth, you tell this mountain to fall into the sea, and it will be done!"

[We Can Trust His Promises]

The same goes for us. In this season of Jesus' suffering, never mistake it for weakness.

Through the eyes of Scripture, we've seen Jesus do more than collapse a mountain into a sea or wither a tree.

- We have seen a Savior-God tempted by the devil himself, yet he remained without sin. That's power.
- In the weeks ahead, we'll see a Savior-God pick up a severed ear and put it back in its proper place. That's power.
- We'll see a Savior-God take mere bread and wine and in, with, and under it, give his disciples his body and his blood to eat and to drink. That's power.
- We'll see a Savior-God crush Satan's head as he cries from the cross, "It is finished!" That's power.
- We'll see a Savior declared with power to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead. That's power.
- We'll see a Savior-God ascend into heaven and take his position of power at the right hand of God. That's power.

And today, he invites us to tap into that power through prayer.

Not as a last resort or a desperate plea,

but as a primary blessing he's reserved for you and me.

No matter how weak-kneed you feel at time, the fact remains, ***"I tell you the truth . . .***

your faith can move mountains," because your faith depends on the One

who has tree-withering, death-defying, sin-erasing, Satan-squelching power.

Like the disciples, may that lead us to be amazed. May that lead us to pray. Amen.

REJOICE always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. AMEN! (1 Thess. 5:16–18)
