

Sermon – Mark 9:38-50; Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
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“Are We There Yet?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Anyone who has ever spent time in a car with children knows the refrain: Are we there yet? It's a simple enough question; just four little words. But while it may begin as honest curiosity, it quickly morphs into something else: Complaint. And honestly, if you're travelling by car from, say, South Carolina to Minnesota, there's no good reason to ask when you only pulled out of the driveway five minutes ago. Are we there yet? *Are you crazy?* No, we're not there yet! Yet the question will persist from the backseat, as both children and parents begin to wonder why they're even making the journey at all. No matter how excited children or parents are about the particular *there* to which they're travelling, complaining on the way is seemingly unavoidable. We want to be there *now*. We want to get there on our terms.
2. In the epic road trip that is the Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, the pattern of complaint holds true. Having been graciously rescued and redeemed from bondage and slavery, the Israelites spent nearly a year at Mount Sinai. Close to God's presence, they received the gift of the Law that would guide their living in their new home. The time comes to depart, and the people get back on the road. Within five minutes of pulling out of Sinai's driveway, however, the complaining begins. Apparently, journeying another 200 miles without meat was just too much to bear. The rabble begin to complain, wishing that they could turn around and go back whence they

came. Slavery wasn't *that* bad, after all, right? Remember? We had all the free melons and cucumbers we could eat. And the garlic! The fish! Mmm, we should totally go back. Slavery *wasn't* that bad. The Lord is literally giving the people a new land, replete with freedom and blessed by covenant and Law, and these ingrates want to go back to Egypt! Up in the front seat, Moses and the Lord become frustrated. Well, God is just plain mad, and I can't say I can blame God. Really, the Lord must be thinking? I give you freedom and you complain about the menu? Moses, however, has a bit of a "Whose kids are these, anyway?" moment. He turns to the Lord, exasperated: "Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them?" Moses is, for all intents and purposes, telling God that he, Moses, is not their mother but that God is. God gave birth to this great people, working new life in spite of the age and barrenness of Abraham and Sarah. God birthed them. Will God no longer care for them? The Lord remembers the promise and, instead of turning this car around right now, provides for Moses and the people by raising up seventy elders, plus Eldad and Medad to boot. Left to their own devices, mired in their pointless complaints, the people would have ended up nowhere good. But God won't let things turn out that way; God relents from punishing and instead provides for the needs of the people, however ungrateful they are. God doesn't let the people go where they want. God insists on getting them where they need to go. The Lord will not let their complaining derail the journey to the Promised Land.

3. 1,300 years down the road, things haven't really improved. The people, despite Jesus' presence with them, continue to complain. Just last week we heard of how the disciples were arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest. Today, John gets a bee in his bonnet because someone he doesn't know is doing works of power and mercy in the name of Jesus. He's not one of us, John protests! He and the other disciples just cannot accept that the journey is unfolding according to Jesus' plan, not theirs. Just as Moses told Joshua to welcome the spiritual ministry of Eldad and Medad, so

does Jesus tell John that this other man's ministry is welcome. Is it not better to have more people working for the sake of the Kingdom?

4. While John is busy trying to keep the Kingdom small enough for him to comprehend, Jesus insists on bringing the disciples back to the point at hand. Throughout this section of Mark, Jesus keeps returning to the theme of welcome; he is particularly passionate about welcoming little ones, children and the like. In a bid to get his friends to finally listen, Jesus offers a scandalous teaching: Anyone who keeps a little one from Jesus or in any other way stumbles or causes offense would be better off tying a millstone around their neck and jumping in a lake; such people should start cutting off their hands and feet, plucking out their eyes when they sin, for such a fate is better than ending up in the worm-ridden, ever-burning fires of hell. The language is so salty it must be hyperbolic. Jesus, I'm sure, does not desire a world filled with half-blind, self-maimed people. But just because he's being hyperbolic doesn't mean he's not serious, and deadly so. Jesus needs to grab their attention. As Flannery O'Connor wrote, "To the hard of hearing, you shout and, for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures." Jesus is not so much suggesting that we should become half-blind; he is offering the stark diagnosis that we already are. So focused are we on who's in and who's out, on where we rank, that we ignore the basic call of Jesus: to follow him and welcome others in his name, not on our terms.

5. In our failure, we create the hell which Jesus describes. The word in the Scriptures is not hell but Gehenna, and it was an actual place outside the city walls of Jerusalem. In past centuries it was where the worst of the kings of Judah had practiced child sacrifice by fire. In their idolatry, their turning away from the Lord, they had embraced the worst of humanity; perhaps they had lost their humanity altogether. Jesus wants his followers to understand that failing to welcome children, and all others who are lost, least, or littlest, is to become worthy of the fate deserved by those who once practiced

- infanticide. Blind to others, with hands of sin, we have stumbled and caused others to do likewise. We give ourselves back into bondage in so many ways. Whatever hell may exist on the other side of death, it exists also in this world. Not because God wills it, but because we have created it.
6. Jesus' diagnosis of our problem is stark, startling. But even more surprising is the cure. Instead of demanding that we reap the consequences of sin, Jesus goes to the cross for us. Rather than asking us to cut off our hands, Jesus allows himself to be cut off from the land of the living. Rather than allowing us to limit who is inside, Jesus goes outside the city gates and dies with arms open, embracing all. Rather than leaving us in or sending us to hell, Jesus descends into both the hells we create and the devil's own domain to save and redeem us from such places that we need not live in fear of them. Rather than subjecting us to fires that consume, Jesus pours out upon us the fire that refines, the very Holy Spirit whose coming sets us alight with God's power and salts us for mission in the world. And Jesus does all of this, *all of this*, to create a Kingdom in which the last are first, the littlest are loved, and no one needs to worry about being left out because everyone begins to think of others instead of themselves. Are we there yet? Finally, here is a *there* to yearn for, to pray for, to work on reaching as soon as possible. Hyperbole aside, Jesus is in earnest when he speaks to us, calling us to remove all obstacles that would hinder even the littlest from coming to him. Prepare the way of the Lord, as the prophets proclaimed.
 7. You, friends, have been saved from yourselves. We have been rescued from the power of sin and set on a journey that moves in the direction Jesus would have us go. Set aside your complaints, your pettiness, your need to say who does or doesn't belong, your desire to take a position of pride. Set it all aside. Cut off these things and cast them into the fire, for you have been redeemed. Find joy in the journey, and the grace to know that Jesus has done all that is needed to get us there. And while we have a way to go in many regards, the

next time a little one wonders, "Are we there yet?" just tell them yes. We're already there, safely arrived in the life-giving promise of our crucified and risen Lord. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.