As we read this story from Mark’s gospel today, I wonder: does it make you uncomfortable? Mark says that Jesus “could do no deed of power there,” in Nazareth. How does that square with your image of Jesus? Does it change how you think about him?

If it does make you uncomfortable, I think that’s okay. It sure made Matthew uncomfortable. Matthew read Mark’s gospel before writing his own, using it as a kind of a template. When Matthew tells this same story, he changes it slightly, saying Jesus “*did not do many* deeds of power there,” but leaving it open as to whether or not he was able.

Whenever scripture makes us uncomfortable, I find it is interesting to ask why. Why does Jesus' inability to do deeds of power make us uncomfortable? Is it because, as God’s Son, the story challenges our idea of God’s “almightiness?” Is it because the unbelief of the people in Jesus’ hometown seems to be so potent? Maybe this story makes us worry about our own unbelief, or about God’s ability to work in our own lives.

What I find fascinating about this text is that it so often compels us to do just what Matthew did: to defend Jesus. We so dislike the idea of Jesus’ inability to act that we start to explain it away or try to deny it somehow. It reminds me of the scene in C.S. Lewis’ The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe” when Lucy and Susan come approach the lifeless Aslan bound upon the stone table. In their grief they pity poor Aslan and try to remove his restraints even though he is dead. They cannot, just as they cannot do the one thing they wish most, which is to bring Aslan back to life. They walk away despondent.

We don’t like to think of God as weak, as ineffectual, as helpless. Our God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving. God can do anything God wants. So why is Jesus helpless in Nazareth? We may try to remove his bonds like the girls trying to unbind the lion, to rationalize and theologize, but still the truth is left lying on the table: *Jesus can do no deeds of power there*. In that moment, at that place and time, Jesus is weak.

Mark’s story confronts us with this weakness of Jesus, but he doesn’t present this weakness as a failure. I learned something this week that I found very interesting. First of all, the word “hometown” in Greek can mean anything from “hometown” to “homeland;” in other words, it might not refer just to Nazareth, but to the whole area around it. Second, Jesus’ neighbors call him a carpenter. The Greek word means “craftsman” or “builder;” it’s a step above an unskilled day-laborer, but still a low-status job. These “carpenters” were often itinerant, meaning they lived with their family in one place but would have traveled around looking for work. That means that throughout the rest of the countryside, in all the surrounding villages of Jesus’ “homeland,” all those people would have probably known him almost as well as the people in Nazareth (at least by reputation), and they would have had the same reaction as the Nazoreans. He would not have been able to do any deeds of power in any of those villages, either, because of their unbelief.

According to Mark, when Jesus realizes that he can’t do anything more himself, he turns to the disciples. I’ll just remind you that these are the same disciples he was berating scarcely a chapter ago for their own lack of faith in the boat after the storm. At this point in Mark’s story, they still don’t know who Jesus really is; and as we’ll soon see, even when they do know, they still don’t get what that means.

In spite of this, Jesus gives them the same authority he has—to cast out unclean spirits—and sends them to proclaim the same message he proclaims: to repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. What’s more, they are successful! As unskilled, unprepared, and unworthy as these disciples are, they are able to do deeds of power that Jesus cannot. Jesus’ weakness in this story functions less like a shortcoming and more like an asset as the disciples—and we readers—begin to understand that this story isn’t just about Jesus, it’s also about them.

So, if this story is about you, where does it apply to what’s happening in your life? Where are you feeling weak and overwhelmed, unable to do what you feel called to? Or who do you have around you, helping you do the work that you couldn’t on your own?

As I think about the answer to this question for myself, the first thing on my mind is our upcoming shift to hybrid worship. Many of us in this congregation remember the frustration of the shift to online worship with its long-running hardware problems and technical glitches. I have to confess that I’m worried about those problems returning. People think I’m some sort of computer wizard, but I’m not: the truth is that I know enough to get myself into trouble, but not enough to always get myself out. I’m worried that problems will arise that I don’t feel equipped to solve, and that those of you who choose to continue worshiping online will feel disconnected and frustrated all over again. I feel a bit like Jesus in Nazareth, unable to live up to everyone’s expectations.

But this story reminds me that worship—even hybrid worship—is not *my* thing, it’s *our* thing. I am not called to do this alone; even Jesus needed help. In fact, we might say, needing help wasn’t a bug, but a feature. It shows us that even though Jesus is the central player in the gospel story, he’s not meant to be the only one. The kindom of God is not something created by or for the most pious or most impressive or most saintly people, but something that we experience most fully in relationship and cooperation and participation.

That’s why God has called us together and why we have found ways to stay together, even when we couldn’t gather physically. We are a team; and no matter how unskilled, unprepared, or unworthy we may feel, each of us is called to contribute to God’s kindom. That is why Paul says that if he’s going to boast, he’s going to boast in his weakness: because his weakness—and our weakness—shows God’s weakness; and as Paul reminds us elsewhere, God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

In God’s foolishness, our weaknesses are not things to be avoided or hidden or ashamed of; instead, even they are resources for the benefit of God’s work. As disciples of Christ, we can claim and even boast about our shortcomings because we know that those shortcomings are opportunities for the goodness of God to be made manifest. In my story, my own inability to make hybrid worship happen on my own is a reminder to me and to all of us that worship is not something we consume for enjoyment, but a work in which we all participate to build up the body of Christ. I’m grateful for this reminder that this isn’t “The Seth Show,” because who would want to watch that? Instead, this is the means by which we all—physically or digitally—remain connected to one another and to the story of Jesus.

That’s my story, but what’s yours? Where have your shortcomings made space for new and greater things to blossom? How has God used your weakness to bless you or others? What people has God called into your life to walk alongside you in working for something bigger than yourselves?

If we truly believe that we have been made in God’s image, that includes even our weaknesses and shortfalls. In Lewis’ story, Aslan may have died in defeat, but only because he entrusted himself to a deeper, older magic. Even Jesus, enduring the taunts and jeers from the crowd to come down from the cross, testifies to the source of our help.

The various thorns we carry in our flesh can show us how God intends for us to need one another, to need God. We are at our best when we are together, whether that together is physical, digital, or even spiritual, as when we are gathered at the table with the communion of saints across space and time. The place where I fall short is the same place where you begin to shine. I can’t help but see the goodness of God in that.

*Questions: Where have your shortcomings made space for new and greater things to blossom? How has God used your weakness to bless you or others? What people has God called into your life to walk alongside you in working for something bigger than yourselves?*