

“Faith in the Fog”

Faith is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen.

It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see (Hebrews 11:1).

Mark 9:14-29 ¹

Jill and I are very fond of the Blue Ridge Mountains. We’ve vacationed there for over forty years, and if you count our house in Virginia rather than my condo here, we’ve lived in the Blue Ridge for nearly twenty years. We’ve traveled the length of Skyline Drive several times, and we’ve traveled the Blue Ridge Parkway from end to end more times than I can count.

Some years ago, we were traveling the Parkway in the evening on our way home from somewhere, and the fog became so impenetrable that we had to get off the road until morning. Happily, we found a small hotel in which we could camp for the night.

Pursuing the fog idea, I’ve been at sea in fog so heavy that we couldn’t see the main deck from the bridge, much less the bow of the ship. Happily, radar made it possible to see what was around us, a blessing denied to mariners in earlier times, and contributing to the presence of a great many ships at the bottom of the sea. All this is to say that fog can be quite beautiful, so long as you don’t have to travel in it.

Using the idea of fog metaphorically, there are many times in life when we essentially have to travel in a fog, unable to see clearly either where we are, our destination, or the dangers around us in the mist. It is these situations that engage our consideration this morning.

Last Sunday, we heard Peter proclaim that Jesus was in fact God’s promised Messiah. Jesus responded by talking about self-denial and cross-carrying as we follow Him. Not long after that, Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus’ glory as He was transfigured on the mountain; and in today’s text, the four have come down from the mountain to discover the other disciples in a condition of considerable embarrassment over their inability to exorcize a demon from a boy.

The disciples have previously been both authorized and able to exorcize demons (Mark 6:7, 13; Luke 10:17), so they were mystified about their inability in this situation. Now while the exorcizing of demonic powers is an important subject, it is not our focus this morning. Let us simply notice that Jesus did not invoke incantations, spells, or any other artifice in this exercise. Jesus simply commanded the demon to come out, and out it came.

Our own ability to command the powers of Darkness rests entirely on our relationship with Jesus, not with incantations or spells, and that’s what Jesus meant when He told the disciples: *“This kind can come out by nothing but prayer”* (9:29).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 1, 2018. Parallel passages are Matthew 17:14-23 and Luke 9:37-45.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

Prayer is relationship; and the disciples' error most likely was similar to Moses' fatal flaw in the wilderness: Moses and the disciples all attempted to take credit themselves for what only God could do (cp. Numbers 20:10-11). A basic biblical principle that applies here is that *there is no limit to what God can accomplish through our lives, so long as we do not touch the glory*. There are plenty of examples of this principle, both positive and negative, throughout the Bible.

Let me say this again: **there is no limit to what God can accomplish through our lives, so long as we do not touch the glory**. You should write that down.

It's perhaps worth noting in passing that a few ancient manuscripts—not the best ones—include the words “and fasting” to Jesus' statement about the necessity for a prayer-full relationship with God. Scholars are generally agreed that the reference to fasting was a later addition to the text, representing conditions in the church several generations later. The fact of the matter is that Jesus had already dismissed fasting as inappropriate for the disciples “*until the bridegroom is taken away*” (2:18-20), and it hardly seems likely that He would now fault them for not fasting.

In fact, the addition of fasting would have turned Jesus' command into something resembling an incantation, suggesting that particular actions—essentially the casting of spells—would coerce God to act. That was not Jesus' point at all. Jesus' point was that only personal relationship with God creates the channel through which divine power can flow.

Our focus this morning is not on demons or on fasting, but on verses 22-24 of our text: “*If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us,*” the anguished father pleaded.

Jesus said to him, “If you can? Everything is possible for the one who believes.”

Immediately the father of the boy cried out, “I do believe; help my unbelief!”

I suspect that many of us understand this father's plea. We ourselves have watched helplessly as physical disease, mental illness, pathological relationships and addiction have attacked our children, and nothing we have attempted has seemed to help at all.

Not long ago, I talked to an old friend of mine who has three children. On that particular afternoon, one of his sons was in jail halfway across the country. His other son was decompensating with mental illness several states away, and he had just learned that his daughter had filed for divorce that very day. Many of us in this room know similar pain.

Sadly, our pain is sometimes made worse by focusing on Jesus' statement, “*Everything is possible for the one who believes*” rather than on the father's response, “*I do believe, help my unbelief!*” And though we mean well, we sometimes rub salt into one another's wounds by shaming doubters by quoting James 1:5-7:

Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord, being double-minded in all his ways.

The problem in both cases is that we confuse the starting point with the destination. Remember that James was the half-brother of Jesus. While James ended up as a prayer warrior, as the leader of the Jerusalem church and as one of the first martyrs, that's not where he began. Like the rest of Jesus' brothers, James started out by mocking Jesus when He began His public ministry. James began his journey of faith as a First-Class Doubter, and it was only over a period of years that he became a First-Class Believer. It is crucial that we remind ourselves about the process of growth that took place between those two points.

Many would agree that John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, was a wonderful example of courageous and fearless faith. Jesus even told the crowds that "*among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared*" (Matthew 11:11). But it's easy for us to forget that Jesus offered this accolade to John right after John had sent messengers to ask Him, "*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*" (Matthew 11:3).

This was the same John who had earlier said of Jesus, "*Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). But now, John was in prison, soon to be executed, and his world had been overcome by fog. John the Baptizer had become John the Doubter.

Jesus didn't berate John for his lack of faith. Jesus didn't tell John to "buck up." Jesus told the crowd that John was the greatest prophet of all time! "Get in line, Moses! Get in line, Isaiah! Get in line, Jeremiah! John is first in this line." How amazing is that?

And John the Baptist was not the first Giant of Faith who doubted God in the fog. Not by a long shot. You have an insert in your order of worship that lists "A Brief Catalogue of Doubters," and I encourage you to read that carefully and thoughtfully. The fact of the matter is that most, if not all, of the major characters of the Bible struggled with doubt about who God is and about what it is that God is really doing in the world.

Jesus was quoting David in Psalm 22 when He cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46), and Psalm 22 goes on to ask, "*Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest*" (Psalm 22:1b-2). Another psalmist (Heman) wrote despairingly, "*You have taken from me friend and neighbor—darkness is my closest friend*" (Psalm 88:18).

To tell the truth, I think you'd have a hard time finding anyone whom we generally think of as a biblical "giant of faith" whose journey did not include seasons of fog and doubt. Each of *them*—and probably most of *us*—could say with this morning's anguished father, "*I do believe. Help my unbelief!*"

Our question this morning, then, is **how do we maintain faith when life has become so foggy that we can't see our hands in front of our faces? What do we do with our doubt?**

A famous preacher once lamented that he did not grow up in a religious community that understood the relation between doubt and faith. He said, "I remember gingerly trying to discuss this matter with a few of the adults who went to our church, but all I got was an avalanche of condemnation. When I asked my Sunday School teacher how one could know that the Bible was true and the Koran false, she turned red in the face and said, 'The idea—your asking questions like that with the kind of mother you have!' Of course, this response had nothing to do with my question. I did not need condemnation. I needed evidence."

Unfortunately, that teacher's response was not unusual. When others ask such fundamental questions, if we ourselves haven't asked these questions and struggled honestly with them, our defenses go sky high. We unconsciously perceive that if we don't know why the Bible is true and the Koran is false, then the Bible may not be true, and the entire superstructure of our faith is in imminent danger of collapse.

In such situations, we tend to do what that teacher did—we hit the questioner solidly and angrily over the head with the "party line," the "canned response" that represents the "true faith once for all delivered to the saints." To this point, someone has said that persons

who have **accepted** their beliefs rather than having **chosen** them are more inclined to **defend** them than to **discuss** them, and that seems true to what I've observed over the years.

In the face of such a hostile onslaught, the questioner may very naturally fall silent, and the doubt denier may suppose that the problem has been solved. But the doubt, the honest question, the very real struggle has not been dealt with, though the anxiety of having to deal with it may have been temporarily avoided.

And that church then goes on being a pretentious place where nobody ever hurts, nobody ever doubts, nobody ever sins, and nobody is ever "real." You may know that one central reason why so many young adults turn away from faith when they go off to the military, or to college, or to work, is that they begin to hear questions they were never allowed to consider or to wrestle in the church, and they become bitter that they have been given no ammunition for the battle.

Somehow, we who follow Jesus must find a middle way between being uncritical lovers of the Faith and unloving critics of the Faith. We must create a place together in which we can be honest about our struggles.

Indeed, if we pay attention as we read the Bible, we'll notice that God never forbids us to speak our sorrows, our questions, or our despair. And if we're honest with ourselves, we'll have to admit that it's just as normal to experience anger, doubt, and frustration toward God as it is to experience wonder, adoration, and praise. Seasons of doubt and faith come each in their turn, and I think the books of Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes are in the Bible in order to give us permission to offer the full range of our experience to God.

My friends, **having faith doesn't mean never having any doubt.** Having faith doesn't mean having all the answers. And having faith doesn't mean believing things that are not true. Having faith means having had sufficient *personal experience* with the *Living God* that we have become persuaded that God is trustworthy, and we are therefore willing to trust God and to obey God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend.

Let me say that again. **Having faith means having had sufficient *personal experience with the Living God* that we have become persuaded that God is trustworthy, and we are therefore willing to trust God and to obey God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend.** The Bible tells us that faith "*is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see*" (Hebrews 11:1).

This means that **faith involves making a complete commitment based on incomplete information.**² If our information was complete, we would have *knowledge*, not *faith*. The time will surely come when our faith will become sight, and we will know fully, even as we are fully known, but that's not where we are right now (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Faith is not some substance, the more of which we have, the more we can accomplish. Faith is not some magical gift that can be manipulated at will. Faith is confidence that God will do what God has promised to do, and we will be able to do what God calls us to do, because God will make us able to do it.

It's crucial to remember that the fruit God produces through our lives—the fruit GOD PRODUCES through our lives—is for *God's* glory, not for our own (John 15:5). And we need to remember that it's possible for persons to do miracles and to cast out demons by means of

² Indeed, most of the decisions we ever make, including marriage, taking a job, etc., involve making commitments beyond our information.

powers that are not divine (Matthew 7:21-23). Finally, even if we do deploy God's power for good and for God's glory, if we do not act fully and completely out of love, all we do counts for nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

When Jesus told the disciples that "*This kind [of evil spirit] can come out by nothing but prayer,*" the prayer He had in mind was not some perfunctory ritual or some magical incantation. He was not even talking about a prescribed number of minutes of prayer every day. Jesus was talking about a life lived in complete dependence on God, a life that could be accurately described as "*praying without ceasing*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

If we live in such a way, then when the time for action comes, we will be usable, and we will be effective. That's what Peter was talking about when he told us to "*make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 1:5-8).

My friends, our journey with God is one of "counter-terrorism" in the spiritual sphere, and that means that the life of faith is not all "peaches and cream." Once Jesus left the glory of Transfiguration and came down the mountain to cast out this recalcitrant spirit, He continued on to Jerusalem, and then to the cross. Sometimes you and I are called to journeys include struggle and suffering, too.

Let me say again that **having faith means having had sufficient personal experience with the Living God that we have become persuaded that God is trustworthy, and we are therefore willing to trust God and to obey God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend.** And so, when our paths lead through darkness, doubt, and fog, we continue to follow the last guidance we received from God until new guidance comes.

The great preacher, Dwight L. Moody, often noted that there are three kinds of faith. The first kind of faith is "**struggling faith,**" like a swimmer in deep water desperately trying to make it to a life raft or floatation device. That's where the anguished father in our text was when he came to Jesus.

The second kind of faith is "**clinging faith,**" which is how that same swimmer responds in desperation once he or she reaches the raft. That's how we're responding when we hold on to the last guidance God gave us until new guidance comes.

And the third kind of faith is "**resting faith,**" which is how we are able to respond once we're safely within a rescue vessel and can reach out to help others get in. That's the kind of faith that James described earlier in the first chapter of his letter. It's where he ended up, but it's not where he began. And it's not where we begin, either.

Another great preacher, A.W. Tozer, once wrote that "Those who know Christ at all well come to give him a blind trust. They do not know what he will feel it right to do, nor what they themselves ought to ask from him; but they are entirely sure of his interest in them, and his compassion toward them, and his power to carry through what no one else could do for them. And they leave it at that, with the inner peace that only he can give."³

My friends, when foggy times come, we need to remember that our enemy, Satan, is a master of deceit and discouragement, and we do well not to doubt in the darkness what God has told us in the light. We may not have answers to all of our questions, but we continue

³ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 1948; latest edition 1982.

moving in the direction toward which the evidence points. As we act in faith, God validates our faith; and the farther we follow the pathway that opens up before us, the more certain we become that the path is taking us Home.

The prayer that has most often sustained me in the darkness and the fog was written by Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk. I have it in the front of nearly every one of my Bibles, and you have it in your order of worship. Our Catholic friends call it “The Prayer of Desolation.” This is another way to say, “*I believe. Help my unbelief.*” I invite you to read it with me:

The Prayer of Desolation

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
 I do not see the road ahead of me.
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.
 Nor do I really know myself,
 And the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean
 That I am actually doing so.
 But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
 And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
 I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
 And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road
 Though I may know nothing about it.
 Therefore will I trust you always
 Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
 And you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*
 (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1976), p. 83.

A Brief Catalogue of Doubters

1. Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:1-6)
2. Abram about the Land (Genesis 15:8)
3. Abram about a son (Genesis 17:17)
4. Sarah about a Son (Genesis 18:12-14)
5. Moses and his Call (Exodus 3:10-15, 4:1-13, 5:22-23, 6:12)
6. Israel and food in the Wilderness (Exodus 16:1-3)
7. Moses and food in the Wilderness (Numbers 11:21-22)
8. Gideon's Call (Judges 6:13-23)
9. Israel and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:24)
10. Elijah after Carmel (1 Kings 19:13-18)
11. Esther's Danger (Esther 4:10-11)
12. Job's Suffering (Job 3:1-26)
13. Job's Complaint (Job 30:20-21)
14. David's Laments (Psalm 13:1-6, 22:2)
15. Asaph's Lament (Psalm 77:7-9)
16. Israel's Lament (Isaiah 40:27-28)
17. Jeremiah's Laments (Jeremiah 15:10, 18)
18. The Bible's Longest Lament (Lamentations 1:1-5:22)
19. The Disciples fear the Storm (Matthew 8:23-27)
20. John the Baptist Doubts (Matthew 11:1-19)
21. Peter Sinks in the Sea (Matthew 14:29-31)
22. Jesus stills the Storm (Mark 4:35-41)
23. Zechariah's Temple Vision (Luke 1:18)
24. The Disciples doubt the Resurrection (Luke 24:36-49)
25. Jesus' brothers Mock Him (John 7:1-13)
26. Martha doubts Jesus (John 11:38-44)
27. Peter denies Jesus (John 18:15-18)
28. Thomas doubts the Resurrection (John 20:24-28)
29. Compassion for those who Doubt (Jude 1:22)



The Prayer of Desolation

My Lord God,
I have no idea
where I am going.
I do not see the road
ahead of me.
I cannot know

for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean That I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will
never do anything
apart from that desire.

And I know that
if I do this you will
lead me by the right road
Though I may know
nothing about it.

Therefore will I
trust you always
Though I may seem
to be lost and in
the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you
are ever with me,
And you will never
leave me to face
my perils alone.

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*
(New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1976), p. 83.