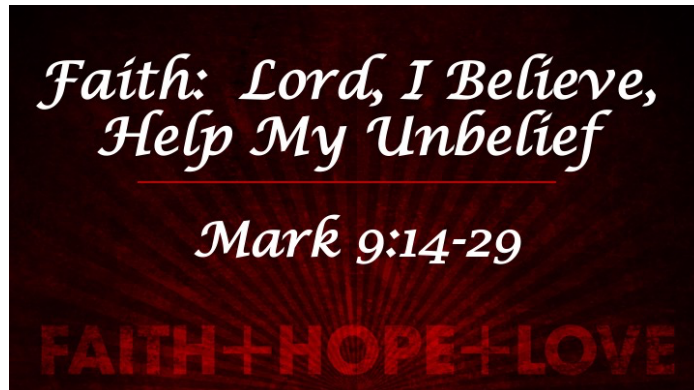


January 8, 2023
Mark 9:14-29



Last week I began the series of messages *Faith, Hope and Love*. I said that I would offer several messages on each of those three words, and this morning is the second message on *faith*.

I'm going to make what I think is a very safe assumption – as you are here, I assume you believe in God. Seems a safe enough assumption, doesn't it? But I'm going to make a second assumption as well, and it is this – your belief, your faith, has probably changed over time. And, perhaps, your faith has wavered a bit at times. Maybe it has wavered a lot at times. Maybe it has endured some doubts and questions; perhaps a lot of them. Perhaps a tragedy in your life, a job loss, a serious illness, or the loss of a close friend or loved one created a question or a doubt that chipped away at the foundation of your faith to the point that you wondered if you could hold on to it. If so, I have what I believe is some very good news for you this morning. Let's read our Scripture text for today, which tells the story of a father who had faith, and yet that faith wavered as his son faced a very difficult situation.

The passage is Mark 9:14-29, which contains one of my favorite stories in the gospels. There are so many fascinating elements in the story, and we'll cover what we can. Follow along with me as I read Mark 9:14-29 –

¹⁴ *When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around*

- them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.*
- ¹⁵ *As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.*
- ¹⁶ *“What are you arguing with them about?” he asked.*
- ¹⁷ *A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.*
- ¹⁸ *Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”*
- ¹⁹ *“You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”*
- ²⁰ *So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.*
- ²¹ *Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”*
“From childhood,” he answered.
- ²² *“It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”*
- ²³ *“‘If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”*
- ²⁴ *Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”*
- ²⁵ *When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”*
- ²⁶ *The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.”*
- ²⁷ *But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.*
- ²⁸ *After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”*
- ²⁹ *He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”*

What a story, right? An amazing story! And there is so much to say about the story, and where I want to begin is with this statement –

1. Doubt often comes out of hardship.

If ever there is anything that will put a crack of doubt in the foundation of faith it is watching our children suffer, and the helpless feeling that accompanies it.

The father in this story, understandably, is desperate to find healing for his son. What parent would not be? This is a father willing to go anywhere or do anything in order to find healing for his son. I wonder what their journey was like, as they found their way to Jesus. How far did they have to travel? What was on the father's mind as they traveled? How difficult was their journey? What was it like for him when they arrived, only to find that Jesus was not there, because he was up on the mountain with Peter, James, and John? Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John up on the mountain where he was transfigured before them. Peter, overwhelmed with the experience, suggested that they build some shelters and stay there for a while. Who wouldn't want to stay there, enjoying a literal mountaintop experience? But just as quickly as that experience had come, it ended, and Jesus was leading them down from the mountaintop and into the chaotic scene below. It is a reminder that as much as we love our mountaintop experiences, we do not get to stay there long, nor should we stay there long. There is far too much work to be done in the valleys below, because that is where people live and where real life takes place.

And this scene is real life at its most difficult and overwhelming.

After all the father and his son had been through, when Jesus does arrive on the scene and asks what was going on, the father comes to Jesus and simply asks *if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us*. Personally, I think that father is remarkably restrained at that point. If you're a parent, have you ever grieved over what your child has experienced, or is experiencing? Have you lost sleep because of worry? Have you been awake in the middle of the night pleading with God, praying for their health and their welfare? Have you ever felt your heart

breaking in two over what your child is going through? Have you ever experienced the sense of helplessness that comes when it seems you have no control over what is happening to your child? Have you ever had that moment where you were willing to say anything, to do anything, to go anywhere, or to give anything to help your child? If you have kids, of course you have. This father, I think, is very restrained and polite, considering the circumstances, as he explains to Jesus what is happening with his son. And perhaps that is because of the calm of Jesus. Jesus is remarkably calm in this moment. The son is on the ground, convulsing, rolling around, and foaming at the mouth. And very calmly, Jesus asks the father, *how long has he been like this?* It's almost like he's asking about the weather! Which seems to bring some measure of calm to the father, who simply asks, *if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.* Is it just me, or would you be a bit more dramatic if that was your child? Who wouldn't get down on their hands and knees and beg on behalf of your child? Forget politeness and social graces! Wouldn't you shout *I'll do anything Jesus! I'll give everything I have! And not only will I give everything I have, I'll give everything my neighbors have, if you'll just help us!* Maybe the father is just worn out. Maybe he's cried so many tears, he has no tears left. Sometimes, our worries and our struggles exhaust us so that we have nothing left.

But we still hear the desperation in the father's voice, as we hear something else as well; we hear a measure of hesitancy, as though he is fearful to allow his hopes to rise too far. It would be easy, after so much disappointment, to think, *I dare not believe that any good can come. I cannot allow myself to believe that Jesus can heal my child.*

And so the father says, *I do believe; help my unbelief.*

Secondly, I will say that –

2. *Doubt is not a sign of a faith that is failing, but of a faith that is growing.*

I do believe; help my unbelief. What an amazing declaration the father makes. Does that sound like a contradiction to you? How can

one declare their *belief* while simultaneously asking for help to overcome their *disbelief*? Can doubt and faith coexist in one person?

Yes. Absolutely. Without a doubt, so to speak.

Faith and doubt coexist in all of us. There was a struggle in the heart and soul of this father to find certainty of faith, and yet there was the ever-present companions of doubt, uncertainty, and unbelief. The father had not done anything wrong by expressing doubt. He was merely expressing his humanity, and in being human he struggled to have the certainty of faith he desired to have.

The response of Jesus – *if you can* – has a tone of exasperation, doesn't it? *If you can?!* It's not unlike a parent encouraging a child who has a doubt. Perhaps the child is uncertain they can do what has been asked of them. Perhaps the child doubts their own abilities to accomplish a task. In those moments, a parent expresses their own confidence in the child – *you can do this! All you have to do is believe in yourself!* This is what Jesus is doing with the father – *you can believe!*

There are plenty of people who would make the claim that faith must be absolute, that is, that there can be no measure of doubt involved, but I think that is erroneous. Faith and doubt live in all of us, to some measure, and rather than demonstrating weakness, I believe it is actually a sign of a strong and mature faith. It is not wrong to live with questions about God and our faith. It is in our questions that we wrestle with some of the great questions of life, and it is the struggle to grapple with those questions that brings an extra measure of strength to our faith. Asking questions and struggling with our faith actually creates a stronger and more durable faith, I believe. Our doubts are actually part of the process of spiritual growth.

Over the years of my ministry, I have had many people ask me to re-baptize them. I always tell them I am happy to do so, but I also ask what it is that has brought them to the point of wishing to be re-baptized. It is almost always the same answer – *I was baptized when I was young, and I really did not have a good understanding of what I was doing. Now that I am older, I understand more about my faith and I want to affirm*

that in a public way. I affirm that response as one that is a sign of their spiritual growth, which is exactly what should take place in our lives. I affirm also their desire to make a public declaration of their spiritual growth, and I am grateful to help facilitate that decision.

Spiritual growth, however, does not always come easy. When I was in seminary, one of my roommates one day came out of class very upset. I asked him what was troubling him, and he said – *I came here so someone would tell me what I'm supposed to believe. But they're not telling me! They're making me question my faith!* Well, that was exactly what our professors were supposed to be doing, in my opinion. It was not easy, having to put your faith under a microscope and take it apart, examining and question every aspect of it. It was often difficult and often painful to me as well, but I am grateful I was pushed through that process. In the end, I believe the questions I had to ask made my faith stronger, and the strengthening of my faith has carried me through the challenges and the difficulties I have experienced in life.

To me, this father becomes a template for all of us, as we too, at some point, can make that declaration of *I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.* There is a belief – a very erroneous belief, in my opinion – that if faith entertains any level of questioning or doubt, it is not real faith. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth! Doubt, and its attendant questions, often lives around the edges of our faith and life, and it is that combination of doubt and questions that can push us to deeper and more meaningful levels of faith. Personally, I have found that so many of my questions and doubts weren't related so much to faith itself, but to the “package” of faith I was given – a “package” of particular interpretations and doctrines and viewpoints and opinions I was given and told that those interpretations, doctrines, and viewpoints and opinions were essential to faith. Take any of those away, it was implied – or outright said – and the entire package would come tumbling down and must be discarded. When I began to question or doubt some of that “package,” it seemed that it might all come tumbling down, and I feared I might be losing faith, when in reality I learned that I wasn't losing faith as much as I was learning the need for, and importance of,

reformulating my faith into something that has been much more healthy and much more durable. It is not wrong – it’s not even unusual – for faith and doubt to exist in the same person. It doesn’t need to be seen as a threat, especially when it just might be a wonderful growth opportunity.

Here’s an important reality – that doubt that may be nagging at you? Those questions that are tugging at you? That might actually be the process of your shedding a view that not only *is* being discarded; it might *need* to be discarded. There are times when some people mix elements into faith that ought not to be there, and they ought to be discarded. Some people want to mix in with faith the idea, for instance, that some people ought not to be loved and affirmed and accepted. Some people mix in with faith the idea that some people ought to be subjugated and treated less equally. Those kinds of beliefs certainly ought to be discarded, and don’t feel badly about discarding them!

Maybe you have no questions. Fine. Great. Maybe you have a lot of questions, questions that really worry you. We will help you with those questions, but in this church, we aren’t going to condemn you for having questions or for asking those questions. In fact, maybe I should stop in the middle of my messages occasionally and ask if anyone has any questions, except I’m afraid the questions I’ll get ask would be ones such as, *are you about finished?* I know that not giving a packaged set of answers is scary and hard for some people, and because that is how we operate as a church I understand that our church will not be for everyone. Some people want nothing but absolute certainty that leaves no room for questions. But I also know that life can be very hard and very difficult and when life gets very hard and very difficult, we have questions, and even doubts. It is in those moments that we must have something to hold on to that will carry us through not only those moments but all of the hard moments and all of the difficult moments, and that is a deep and abiding faith. And the only way to build such a faith, I believe, is to not be afraid or not be hesitant to ask questions – tough questions – and working to find answers to those questions. It is then we will find we have a faith that will carry us through to the very

end, and when that end comes it will carry us through that end to a new beginning in eternity.

3. “*Everything is possible for one who believes*” – verse 23.

A number of years ago, I was visiting with a person in the hospital. The person was facing a very serious health crisis, and at the end of the visit I asked if I could pray for them. As I prayed, I was a bit uncertain about what to say, because the person’s doctors had not given them any hope. I didn’t want to give false hope, so I was avoiding the word *healing* in my prayer. As soon as I said *amen*, the person scolded me because of the hesitancy that was obvious in my prayer. They said, *you know Dave, Jesus said, “everything is possible for one who believes.” Don’t be afraid to be bold in how you pray and what you ask of God.*

I agree. We need not be hesitant in being bold in our prayers. I think we all realize, however, that not every prayer for healing comes to be.

We all have questions about the role of faith in healing, whether it be healing for ourselves or for someone else. We wonder about the statement of Jesus in this story, where he plainly says in verse 23 that *everything is possible for one who believes*. Note, however, that Jesus says *possible*. He does not say that everything is *probable* or even *likely*. He does not say that everything is a *guarantee*.

I do not think Jesus is saying that a person’s faith will allow them to do anything they choose. There is great power in belief, but that does not mean that my faith turns me into some sort of superman who can do anything. In fact, I greatly object to the oft-repeated phrase in our society that *if you just believe, you can do or be anything*. Well, it doesn’t matter how hard I believe; I am never going to play guitar like Eddie Van Halen. It’s just not going to happen. What faith does, however, is to lead us to remove any limits we may place on what we believe God can do. I have no doubt that God can do whatever God chooses to do, including healing someone. I have seen what I would consider to be a miraculous healing happen more than a few times over the course of my ministry, and I have heard doctors say there is no explanation for a person’s healing other than to proclaim it was a

miracle. Whether it will happen and if it will happen, or why it will not happen, is a question I cannot answer, however.

In saying this, I am not at all doubting God's ability to heal as much as I am saying there is much mystery in how God operates. I have no doubt at all about God's power and that it is in infinite supply. I will, however, confess my total lack of knowledge and understanding about the ways in which God does or does not use that power. It is my assumption that we all hold to the belief that God *can* heal, but we don't always know if God *will* heal.

I think we can say that God has the power to heal and God does heal. We can also say that healing does not always come, at least not in this life. It is for that reason that I believe we need something to hold onto in this life. I believe we need something to hold onto as we pass from this life into the next, which is why as much as I love my family and my friends, I believe something further is still needed to carry me through not only the next life but will also bring about a transformation in this life and give me something to hold onto in the darkest, most difficult moments of this life.

I have looked down into the chasm of unbelief, and I have found it very much lacking. I have read many of the books from that point of view and I have thought long and hard about what I believe, and I continually come to the conclusion that faith is the foundation that I need for my life, and for the next life as well. Yes, I continue to have questions and there are times when I too say, *I believe, help my unbelief*, but I know that is not an expression of weakness, but of strength. I do not have to have an answer for every question because I know that ultimately, I have the answer that matters most, and that is Jesus.

When Jesus said to the father, *all things are possible to him who believes*, the crowd, I imagine, became very quiet and still. Jesus did heal the man's son, but he also offered his promise of being with them both. Jesus has shown up in the midst of the chaos and the struggles of life, and it is Jesus who brings a sense of peace.

And that's faith, and it's enough.