

## Facing Life's Uncertainties ~ The Uncertainty of Faith

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**MARK 9:14-29 (NRSV)** *When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. <sup>15</sup>When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. <sup>16</sup>He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" <sup>17</sup>Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; <sup>18</sup>and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." <sup>19</sup>He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." <sup>20</sup>And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. <sup>21</sup>Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And*

*he said, "From childhood. <sup>22</sup>It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." <sup>24</sup>Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" <sup>25</sup>When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" <sup>26</sup>After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." <sup>27</sup>But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. <sup>28</sup>When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" <sup>29</sup>He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer." ~ The Word of God for ...*

The story in Mark describes a Grand Mal Seizure. If you've ever seen a Grand Mal Seizure—ever held a man's head to keep it from banging on the pavement... It can be a frightening thing—demonic.

When I was a boy growing up in west Texas—8 or 9 years old—there was a woman in our town who suffered from St. Vitus Dance. I saw her once crossing the street with a bag of groceries. She stopped in the middle of the street and began to jerk violently, jumping from one foot to the other. I remember being amazed that she didn't fall down or drop her bag of groceries; and I remember being afraid. St. Vitus Dance—its medical name is Sydenham Chorea—a reaction of the nerves to a streptococcal infection; but a woman in my church, Lucy Elkins—Aunt Lucy, we kids called her—said she had a demon. So, when I saw her, I was afraid.

Aunt Lucy's pronouncement represents the leavings—the residue—of a world out of which our ancestors came. That world lingers today in some of our words, like "lunatic" (*smitten by the moon*); phrases like, "What got into him?"

In Jesus' world there was some of that kind of thinking; but it wasn't dominant. Jewish theologians talked about the transcendence of God—high in the heavens. And between God and us there were spirits, taking care of things. Some of them rebelled and came to be known as bad spirits—evil spirits—demons.

Influenced by surrounding pagan religions, some of the common folk believed some of these spirits lived in the abyss under the earth; some lived in the water, which gave baptism an added dimension. Some lived in the desert, and Jesus went out to meet them. He didn't go out there to contemplate his recent baptism and to think it over. He

went into that whistling, howling wilderness because *that's where the evil was*, and he went to meet it on its own turf.

And some of these spirits came to live in people: twisted bodies, distorted minds, curved spines, blind eyes, drooling chins, speechless throats... forces hostile to the love and work of God: twisting, distorting, disrupting, dividing, hurting.

So, some of that existed where Jesus lived; but not so much among the rabbis or the priests. Judaism is monotheistic: belief in only one God. And historically, wherever you find monotheism, you don't find a well-developed system of magic, superstition, demons.

If you want to find that, move out into the world of Paul, beyond the idea of one loving, caring God, out into the world of pagan gods and spirits and demons, where fears and superstitions run rampant without check or restraint.

New Testament scholar, Hans Jonas, describes life in that time like this: take a tiny child. Blindfold him and place him in the middle of the busiest intersection in downtown Chicago at rush hour. Take off the blindfold and leave him, all alone amid the whizzing, booming, thundering power all around.

The controlling obsession in Paul's world was, "How can I escape the demons today?" It was all around: over, under... "Who can help me?"<sup>i</sup>

But where Jesus lived, casting out demons was not a familiar thing. When Jesus cast a demon from a mute man in Matthew 9, the people said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel."

There are seven New Testament accounts of Jesus exorcising demons. It's such a strange thing that in three of the seven, the Pharisees say he's doing it by the power of Satan. They don't recognize God's power over demonic forces.

At least two of the exorcisms take place outside of Israel, and today's story takes place at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, which some scholars believe was Mount Hermon—in Syria.

It's possible this man was not from Israel. In any case, his situation is strange to the disciples; they don't know how to deal with it.

But the issue of demons may be a distraction, the heart of the text is about the exchange between Jesus and the father of the boy with epilepsy.

The father describes the boy's affliction, and when the boy is brought before Jesus, he immediately has a Grand Mal Seizure. The father says, "If you are able to do anything, please help us."

"If... you are able to do anything..." Thus begins a conversation about, and a demonstration of faith: "**If** you are able!" Jesus responds. "All things can be done for the one who believes."

The father cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And Jesus heals the boy.

It's odd in today's culture, to speak of faith in a way that allows for unbelief. The loudest and most frequently heard voices representing Christianity more likely will speak of faith in absolute terms. We live in a culture of binary absolutes. Everything is either/or—right or wrong—black or white with no shades of gray.

And yet this father's cry, his confession that "part of me doesn't believe!" is considered by Jesus as faith sufficient to heal the boy.

There always is some uncertainty in faith; otherwise, it's not faith. Faith is what takes over when knowledge ceases. If we have knowledge, we don't need faith. The opposite of faith is not doubt; it's knowledge. Faith is the willingness to live as if we truly believe what we say we believe, even if there is no data or evidence with which to convert that belief into knowledge. Faith is not Oral Roberts' "I know that I know that I know" so much as it is this father's cry, "Help my unbelief!"

You have doubts? Questions? Welcome to the club!

- Did Jesus' miracles really happen? If so, why don't we see miracles today?
- Why is the Bible full of contradictions?
- I prayed and nothing happened. Why aren't my prayers answered?
- How can God be love, yet send four billion people to hell, just because they don't believe? Just because they don't recite the sinner's prayer?
- Why are some Christians among the most judgmental people on the planet?

If we're honest, all of us have questions at some point in our lives; and because we have questions, we may be uncertain about our faith. The father of the boy with epilepsy had questions. "I believe! Help that part of me that doesn't believe!"

This desperate father was honest about his uncertainties, and he placed his trust, not in some absolute religious doctrine or creed or memorized prayers or verses of Scripture, but in the person of Jesus, through whom God finally and fully is revealed. His faith, and ours, is built upon the person of Jesus: meditating on his words, taking on his values and his vision of peace and wholeness, imitating his life, reading and studying the witness of Scripture through the lens of his life of self-denying love. Faith is a journey, not a destination—a process of growing into his likeness.

Are you there yet? No. Neither am I. And until we get there, we will encounter uncertainties; but Jesus goes ahead, calling us to follow him, and leading us through the uncertainties into a growing confidence that we are on the right path. [Prayer]

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<sup>i</sup> The preceding discussion is a reconstruction from my class notes of a lecture by Dr. Fred B. Craddock, given in class at The Graduate Seminary of Phillips University in March of 1971.