

The Uncertainty of Faith
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Have you ever had a “mountaintop experience,” a time of great exhilaration and hope when things become so vivid and compelling...you could clearly see the road laid out before you, and its vista filled you with joy.

And then Monday came back around...

Sometimes those mountaintop experiences come from literally climbing a mountain, like for Peter and James and John when they climbed up what we believe was Mt. Tabor in Galilee with Jesus. There, Jesus was revealed to them in his heavenly glory, transfigured in light from within, speaking with Moses and Elijah about the road ahead of him. And they hear God say, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!”

I can't imagine the feelings of awe, wonder and joy which must have permeated these three disciples. But I can imagine the very next day when they came down off the mountaintop into a very different experience: life as we know it; life here below; a world full of debate and confusion, dashed hopes and deep disappointments, a world where faith and doubt seem to be locked together in a grim struggle to see which one emerges victorious.

This world might not be quite as grim as Shakespeare's "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," but sometimes it gets pretty close.

Which brings us to our text for this morning.

After Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop, he and his closest disciples return to find a large crowd gathered near the mountain's foot, arguing with a bunch of scribes. Apparently, his other disciples had attempted to cure an epileptic boy – and failed. Jesus asks why everyone is arguing and the boy's father tells him all about his son's condition – and the failure of his followers to fix it. Jesus responds with exasperation, "You faithless people! How much longer must I put up with you! Bring the boy to me." But the boy just then has another seizure, and when Jesus asks how long this has been happening, the distraught man says, "since childhood...but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." "If I am able?" says Jesus. "All things can be done for those who believe."

And now we come to the heart of the story: the father's response. "I believe! Help my unbelief!"

I went over to Lake Forest Hospital last week to think about this father, along with every other father and mother and child and spouse who have ever struggled to hold onto their faith when bad things happen to the people they love. Our prayers become very focused and passionate, don't they, burning like candles in

a dark room – but the truth is, after all the tests have been carried out, the drugs administered, the treatment put into place, not everyone gets better. And that uncertainty can squeeze our hearts with hands like ice.

We want to believe that with God all things are possible. We believe – but we have our doubts as well. Doubts often driven by acts, or by what we believe the facts to mean. Doubts and fears, like shadows dancing across the walls of that dark room where our little candle is burning.

T.S. Eliot, the famous English poet, wrote a poem back in in 1925 called “The Hollow Men.” At the time, he was filled with doubt and discouragement about the human condition and the state of the world. This is what he had to say:

‘Between the idea and the reality; Between the motion and the act falls the Shadow...for Thine is the kingdom. Between the conception and the Creation; between the emotion and the response Falls the Shadow – life is very long.’

Eliot was speaking about all the ways life doesn’t work out the way we want it to, of how the shadows fall between our best intentions and the outcomes of those intentions; our highest hopes and the harsh realities which often follow.

Faith – and doubt. They are really to sides of the same coin aren’t they? And right between the flip and the tail is Eliot’s Shadow. I thought a lot about that, sitting there in the beautiful

blue Chapel at the hospital, thinking about the hundreds of people lying in hospital rooms above me, each one struggling to keep their candle burning. “I believe! Help my unbelief!”

Those words don’t usually get said aloud in church – but I believe every one of us have said them to ourselves at one time or another when faced with something too big to handle on our own. It’s one thing to be certain. But certainty isn’t faith. Faith has to do with our response to uncertainty. It’s what we decide to believe and do in the presence of our doubts, just as courage is how we conduct ourselves in the presence of our fears.

Magrey de Vega in his book “Embracing the Uncertain,” put it this way:

“Struggling with what we know and don’t know does not convey how weak we are but simply how human we are. Faith is not the absence of doubt but the embrace of it and ultimately the transformation of it.”

We can see the truth of what de Vega is saying by listening carefully to what the father says to Jesus in our text. “I believe – help my unbelief!” Can you see how he is giving BOTH his faith and his doubt to Jesus – crying out for help? This is his prayer...and he offers it despite the fact he’s not sure what he believes in. In all his vulnerability, he is asking Jesus to help him precisely where his belief and his unbelief intersect – in the place where Eliot’s Shadow falls – watching his son’s seizures and being helpless to do anything about them.

That is where this man encounters Jesus. And that is where we encounter Him still today, standing there between our faith on the one hand, and our doubt on the other – ready to embrace both. We don't earn a relationship with Jesus because we first believe. We find that relationship when we turn to him fully with our doubts, our fears, our sin. That's when we begin to change, even when life doesn't. We're not the same persons anymore: we find comfort in our sorrows, courage to face our fears, and faith that grows stronger than our doubts because we've found the way to embrace them – as Christ embraces us.

No one understood better than Thomas Merton, who wrote a prayer that de Vega refers to in his book:

“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 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, I will 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.”

Yes between our belief and our unbelief, between our faith and our doubts, Falls the Shadow...

But that is precisely where will find Him, our Good Shepherd.

Not just on the mountaintop, but there in the Valley, in the Valley of Shadow, there with his rod and staff, waiting to lead us into the Light.

“Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief!” Amen.