



QUESTIONING FAITH

Why DNA Isn't Enough

Text: Mark 9:14-32

All right, so the big question is this, how are your brackets doing? During the first service I made the mistake of saying I was in first place in our home pool. I don't want you to think I'm a gambler, this means nothing, but, but I was reminded from the front row that I'm actually in second place and that was very, very humbling.

You know, I started my ministry working in the Catholic Church, did you know that? Some of you knew that. And one of the first people that I met that really influenced me was a bishop up in Duluth, Minnesota by the name of Paul Anderson, just a godly man and he swore that this following story is true. In the Catholic Church they were, they were confirming children in the fifth grade and some bishops had a kind of a certain notoriety that they would ask particularly tough questions. They would walk the aisle way trying to put little fifth graders on the spot and if they missed a question out the door that they would go. And this one bishop really had quite a reputation as really wanting the right answers in the right way and they always seemed to pick on kids that just didn't want to answer. And he says on this particular night there was a little boy hugging one of the pillars and the bishop kind of zeroed in on him with a hard question, he said what is the Holy Trinity? And this little boy kind of looked at him and he just mumbled because he was so afraid and he said it's the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. And the bishop said I don't understand what is the Holy Trinity? And he says the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The bishop says I still don't understand, what is the Holy Trinity? And the kid just kept on saying, mumbling, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And the bishop would say I still don't understand you and finally the bishop said what is the Holy Trinity? And the kid said it's Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The bishop says I still don't understand and in righteous indignation this fifth grader stood up and said you're not supposed to, it's a mystery.

In our world of faith that sometimes want nothing but certainty there is a stage of faith that is dominated it seems much more by questions than answers and requires us to embrace the mystery and uncertainty of faith. Consider what Quaker writer Parker Palmer says, he says a contradiction in paradox and the tension of opposites have always been at the heart of my experience. I seem tugged in one direction and then another. I had thought that living spiritually required a resolution of all contradictions and tensions before one could as it were gain one's wings. Perhaps on the other hand contradictions and paradoxes are not impediments to our spiritual life, but an integral part of it.

Will you read with me from Mark IX and I will take the even numbers, I will start. And when they came to the other disciples they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.

What are you arguing with them about he asked?



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Whenever it seizes him it throws him to the ground, he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid and I asked your disciples to drive the spirit out, but they could not.

So they brought him and when the spirit saw Jesus it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground, rolled around foaming at the mouth.

It is often thrown him into fire or water to kill him, but if you can do anything take pity on us and help us.

Immediately the boy's father explained, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. Let me just stop right there just for a second. How many of you have ever uttered something like this? Oh Lord, I do believe, but help me in the midst of my unbelief, would you just signify? Yeah, very common, let's go on.

And the spirit shriek, convulsed and violently and came out and the boy -- the boy looked so much like a corpse that many said he's dead.

After Jesus had gone indoors his disciples asked him privately why couldn't we drive it out?

This is the word of the Lord. What an interesting gospel account isn't it? I think if Al Michaels the sports commentator had been there he might oppose to the question, the question to the man seeking healing for his son. Sir, do you believe in miracles? And the answer would've been if the scripture is correct and I believe it is right, the man would've said well yes, no, maybe, I want to, I went to the disciples and they couldn't do anything and now I'm coming to Jesus. I don't know. You see this is about my son. Yes, I do believe, but my yes it's just filled with doubt so I'll say yes, but in the middle of my yes is a firm maybe. Been there.

You know, sometimes in the journey of faith we run across people who are certain about everything and anything. You might know someone like that. I know for sure that some of you are married to someone like that. You might be that person. And they think that God wants nothing, but this certainty and yet in the scripture Jesus heals even in the midst of a man's uncertainty. And you know what I'm glad this is in the scripture. I thank God for that for there are times my certainty is uncertain. For those who always have a ready bible, verse an answer to every question, who live in the light of their knowledge, who know exactly what needs to be said and thought at any given moment, this questioning stage of faith necessitates more questions than answers. And that means walking with what we don't understand and, and, and for certain types of people this is very problematic. And the truth is we might have the finest spiritual pedigree, the best of Christian educations, a life filled with blessings and



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then one day something happens like that and we find that our spiritual DNA isn't enough for that particular moment in time.

Have you ever been there? Wanting to believe, but struggling to believe or believing well until something hits you or happens to you that runs straight into what you thought was a rock solid faith and a collision occurs and your world gets shattered. And people start looking at you differently. You start looking at yourself differently and people start saying whatever happened to good old Harry or Mary, they're from such good Christian stock. After all they're Dutch -- or Irish. Their faith was so real, what, what's happened to them? And, and, and their faith gets a little shaken when they see that happening to somebody they believe has a rich faith and they, and they say this because at, at a time in their life, at, in life when we're supposed to have it all together or at least look like we're supposed to have together we melt down. And the question do you believe? It's just really hard to answer.

We are then in a stage of the faith journey that we're calling the questioning stage. It doesn't feel very intentional at all. Actually we'd like to avoid it if we could. It's bewildering and perplexing and if we can, and we can if we're not careful find ourselves packing it all in, going our merry way, you know, abandoning of the faith that nurtured us. And we're not sure if we're trying to recover something that looks lost or are we looking for something entirely new to replace it? And, and we sense a shift in the firm foundation of what we knew, what we felt, what we experienced to be true and the faith that felt so secure and offered such joy and freedom is now shrouded in something heavier and it's weightier, it's, it's filled with shadow. And it's a bewildering time. We see it all throughout the annals of Christendom. Some people go thing, do something called the dark knight of the soul, some speculate that Mother Theresa in most of her adult life experienced more of the absence of God than his presence, did you know that? Elijah went from a great victory take on, taking on the prophets of Bale to shattering in a cave depressed not sure of the protection of, of this great God of ours.

And this questioning stage of faith then is not uncommon, but it's not always welcomed, but here's the truth, it has to be dealt with. It has to be experienced. And this journey into this questioning usually has a trigger and maybe that trigger is an illness, a death, maybe it's a wayward child, a divorce or perhaps some intellectual pursuit that has us pick up a book that says something different from what it is we believe, that moves us away from the construct, the biblical construct that we have and, and it makes some sense and then all of a sudden our faith paradigm and our world begins to change a bit.

Here at the church we're in the midst of a Divorce Recovery Program and the people who attend our program know much about life altering experiences. The pain at the



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end of their marriage hurts like mad. They have to face some pretty deep questions. They have to ask why would someone choose not to spend the rest of their life with me, why doesn't somebody else see me as being desirable? Is there something wrong with me, don't I have what it takes? And in the process of asking those kind of questions, staring down the truth about themselves possibly, about their past, people often get incredibly angry at God or have to deal with God at a whole different kind of level. And this is a real battle. It's a battle for relational health, for emotional stability, for practical helps and for spiritual understanding and sometimes when you're in the midst of this questioning stage like this and you enter into the spiritual realm the questions get very earthy. They're not the questions of the gentile faithful and they sound like this, hey God what did I do to deserve this? God, you who are so loving and generous who told me that you have a plan and a future for my life that's good, hey Lord, right now I'm not feeling the love. What's going on? I'm hurting. God, where are you in the midst of my pain? And the problem is, is the pad answer, the scripture verse remedy, the comfort of prayer, the call to confession can just be met with a cold stare and a glaze over the eyes because when your reality changes sometimes the faith that you had just isn't up to the task for the healing and maturing that needs to take place.

Our faith needs to ask questions for the questions provide the grist for the mill of growth. And in the questioning stage of the faith journey what happens is you're being asked to embrace mystery and it feels a little bit like embracing fog. And we have to do something with this fog because we realize it's a constant companion. A companion that God can use, wants to use, will use to bring us to new understandings, but in the middle of the journey sometimes it feels like it's the scariest place on earth and the theological word I use for it is yucky.

How many of you know what yucky means? And the truth is and I know, I know this to be true we like to have a faith that has answers. We like to have a faith that has an answer for everything and a faith that only makes us feel good not uncomfortable.

I've had lots of people come to me in my ministry career and say I don't like the way you preach. And what they mean by that when I press them is they say I didn't like that particular message because I want a message, a religion that makes me feel good. I don't want one that makes me think or causes me to pray, I want a faith that can get me through the week, but doesn't alter my life. And I understand that. If I have a choice I'd only want to hear good news, things that made me feel up. When I open up my 401K envelope what I want to discover is my investment group and Dan, you know what I feel in this because you open the same envelop I do, I want to open an envelope and found out that the group that the church chose found a way to make us 25% more not 40% less.



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But sometimes life isn't about good news and faith is about trusting God in the times when trust just doesn't come easy. And sometimes our journey brings us to a place where we couldn't find an answer if we ran smack dab into it and yet God will meet us in this place because there's something he can do us -- with us in the midst of it and it might not be easy. And for those of us who want just a feel good kind of faith this is going to be extremely problematic. And what happens is people who don't want to deal with all the questions and the absence of answers sometimes what they do is they drop out, they drip, drift to a health and wealth, name it and claim pop psychology meets spirituality nether land where in all honesty if that's you you're not going to find what you're looking for, for the God of this age only wants to rob you of what is real. And there's plenty out there folks that isn't real. It's not even close to being real.

Now some people might say hey I have this question thing down. I always have questions. This is where I live. I am the questioning stage of life. I embody it. Now that's not you. You see you've got to be careful. There's some of us who ask questions because our questions make us look like intellectual hotshots. Some people ask questions because it's just a bullying technique. Others ask questions because they really truly want to know some things, but this questioning phase isn't about acquiring knowledge or being an intellectual bully, this is different. It's deeper. There's a great sadness that comes along with it often times. There's a fundamental humility that accompanies this stage. This is not about being puffed up, it's about being stripped down and reformed. Our brokenness being placed into the hand of the master potter so something new emerges for we are always being created in God's image. We are God's masterpiece being created anew.

And so what is God up to in this stage of the journey? What's he trying to show us? I think he uses these times if we let him to mature our faith by helping us to confront all that is false about our lives and Dan will be talking more about that and more in depth. Helping us to give up control, helping us to really do what the scripture asks us to do and that's to surrender.

And so if you're in this stage of the faith journey I urge you to embrace the place that God has you in. He will use your present circumstances as a means to do what he needs to do in your life as he always does, but we have to intentionally and this is so counterintuitive; intentionally embrace the pain of it all for time doesn't heal this. This is a journey and the only way through is in the intentionality of our engagement. God wants to teach us that it's all about him and not about us. Those who have walked this road will say that God will use it to strip us of pretense and ego, to have us face the shadow side of power and pride and possessions and relationships and personality because the goal in life is to become more like him. We already know how to be more like ourselves. That's stripping part of ego. I don't know if I like that a whole lot. I, I was it -- I was here in the church one evening before a higher ground meeting, that's



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one our singles groups and I was in here praying because the talk wasn't coming together in my head and I just didn't feel a sense of peace about it and I came in, it was right after the, the stained glass window went in and it was a beautiful time. There were no lights on although my lawyer says there should've been and, and, and I came in here and I remember thinking as I was standing up here going this whole stage, this whole up here has been, you know, reconfigured and so be careful when you walk down. I remember thinking that. But it had been reconfigured so radically that it didn't register in my brain and I got on the top stairs and I ended up falling. And, and, and I fell to the front pew and honestly and I'm a little overdramatic sometimes, but I thought I was dying. I really did. I, I, I was feeling for things. There's things that were hurting. I fell heavily on that. And, and in the midst of that I remember thinking okay if I die I can't die in, heaped up, you know, in a ball. I've got to figure out another way to die. Seriously this went through my head; I'm not lying to you. And I said I've got to figure out a way to roll over on my stomach, have my head face the table and put my arms prostrated out like this so that when people came and saw me dead they would go oh my gosh Mike is a holy man.

It's interesting that when I was thinking and I was thinking about how, how I was going to look. How I would be perceived. And God wants to change that in me and you. You see what he wants to do is he wants me not to care about that. He wants to infuse me with his purpose and his character. If you find yourself in this questioning stage of faith I urge you to do this, don't forget those things that can anchor you. In this stage of the journey the old rituals, creeds and confessions sometimes don't have as much meaning, but they are anchors that remind us of what was and is still meaningful and truthful and potentially life giving. And many people try to jettison such things because when you're in the dumps and in the questioning stage people go into the dumps. What we're looking for is short term relief not necessarily for the things that will really aid us in this long journey.

I know this in the midst of uncertainty and certainly great need the man in the scripture came with his unsure faith to Jesus, the one we call the author and perfecter of our faith. This man had heard and wondered about and now circumstance led him into the very presence of the one who became flesh. And he took what he knew of his faith and his predicament and what he knew about this Jesus from the Galilee and he went to him and he said help me. Help my son. And Jesus in a dramatic way met him at his point of need and in this case matched his expectation.

In our own intentionally journey of faith we sometimes come to a place where we take what we know of the faith that sustained us and our current circumstances and we take all that to what we know about this great God and sometimes in this questioning stage none of that might be much, but we take it to him and ask for help. And when you do that this great God of yours, ours might not meet us, you know, at our point of



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expectation. I think he will meet us at our point of need because in all honesty we live in a society that wants an instant miracle, wants things to happen fast and what God wants to do is continue a process of stripping us of ego and pride and pretension and take you to a place where all you really care about is what he cares about, what he does, what he thinks, what he wants and dreams of a six bedroom or a bigger family room, a better title, a longer vacation or being found dead prostrated before the altar. Just fade away because he wants to fill those ego-centered needs with himself and all of a sudden when that begins to happen you find yourself breaking free into a whole new dimension of the journey where you, what, where what you desire is more of Jesus, more of the Spirit, more of the Father and a desire to love in ways that you have never loved before. And more of a desire to make kingdom impact, not to climb the ladder of worldly success and a deeper yearning for what, to use whatever power and position you have to make a difference for the powerless.

But this can't happen unless you embrace the mystery and you will need help. People who understand and there are plenty that do, but getting to the other side demands a willingness to have God strip away anything that stands in the way of his best for you.

And here's the sad truth. There are a whole lot of people who will say this. They will say no way, I'd rather stay in the fog than get in on God's best because they're comfortable where they are and down deep they really don't want more of God and they'll deal with the fog of mystery in their own way and they'll say that because that they know that the desire of God, the desire to have more of God will disrupt the patterns of their life. And if that is you, I mean if there's any inkling of that in you pray for God to change your desire, to challenge your priorities, to make you uncomfortable in the midst of your cultural conformity. And pray that so you can properly engage the stage of the journey and allow God to make you more and more like him. If you don't let go and let God what you're holding onto of this world will not be enough to sustain you.

The man in the scripture, the man that took Jesus, took, who came to Jesus, took an intentional step, a healthy step. He didn't go to the Oprah of the day, he didn't just grab all the self-help books he could, he didn't dabble here and dabble there, it sounds like he had enough of a backdrop of faith in his life that he understood both faith and unbelief. He had been raised well and what I love about this man he said this I am hurting. My son is hurting. I don't know what to do, but I'm going to take as much as I have faith at this moment and unbelief and take it to the one who seems to have something going on with God. And so he brought his son first to the apostles who couldn't do anything and then to Jesus who like he always does senses faith wanting to come alive. He just senses that it's faith that wants to give birth to something new and Jesus healed.



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So for those of you who are questioning, who are up against the wall, who don't know where to go, whose faith might feel like it's faltering, but in fact it may be maturing, go to Jesus. As much of him as you can know and trust and tell him the truth about your present journey and tell him over and over again if you have to because he will listen. He loves you like crazy. The truth won't faze him and then listen for his guidance because he is a God who is alive and well and continues to speak and then walk. Walk this path of questioning faith. It's not the desired path perhaps, but it's a good path. For the shadow of the cross falls upon it and as difficult as it may be it always leads to the hope and promise of the resurrection. Let's pray.

Me to God thank you that in the midst of questions you are still going to be there, in the midst of walking away you're still going to be there. I mean there's nowhere we can go from your presence and Lord I just sense that there are people in this room that just are at a point where they don't, aren't sure what they should do next. And Lord I just pray that you meet them at their point of need.

Lord, each of us is on a different path. We take different steps, but Lord help us to just believe that the path that we're on now is the path that leads back to you. We pray this in your name in all God's people said amen.