

# “Down From the Mountain”

July 8, 2007

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:2-10

A month ago we started a series on Personal Breakthroughs. We've looked at the Favor of God, the Forgiveness of God and the Love of God. We've looked at faith from the viewpoint of how God's grace and mercy affects us. Last week the ending verse of our scripture reading was:

***And Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”***  
*(Luke 7:50 NIV)*

But there is another side of the coin. How do we react to God's love for us? I've found that one of the greatest personal breakthroughs is when our faith overcomes doubt and we start trusting God, when we start to become committed to Him. In the Gospel of Mark we are told of a man who says to Jesus:

I believe ... I trust ... I hope. Help my unbelief. (from *Mark 9:24 NIV*)

I believe and yet I don't. This is a remarkable statement to Jesus. Over the past couple of years I've learned a couple of lessons about the nature of faith.

The first is this:

**There are lots of ways to look at faith, but there is a fundamental and very important distinction between two aspects of faith that are quite different: Belief and Commitment.**

Belief is a statement about something I think to be true. I might be certain. I might be pretty sure. I might even be doubtful. But a belief is a product of the intellect—something that is decided in the mind.

Commitment, on the other hand, is a decision of the will. When I commit to something, I bind myself to it. I make a promise. I choose to devote myself to a friendship, or to a job, or to a marriage, or to God. Commitment is always an act of the will. It is a choice. I choose to commit.

It's very important to recognize that you cannot choose to believe something. Richard Swinburne, an English philosopher, has written some great stuff about faith. He writes:

**In general, a person cannot choose what to believe there and then. Belief is something that happens to a person, not something he or she does.**

Many folks, when they think of faith, think that it means choosing to believe when there is no good evidence. A lot of people writing from secular or atheistic viewpoints will treat belief as if it were “choosing to believe something when there is no evidence for it.” Mark Twain's definition of faith was:

***... trying to believe what you know ain't so.***

But you cannot make yourself believe something through will power. This is very important when it comes to faith, because many times people feel guilty that they don't believe with enough certainty. For instance, they respond by thinking:

I've got to try harder to believe that I'm going to get the answer that I want to my prayer.

And it doesn't work. Trying hard to believe is toxic. It is a dangerous practice. I can say:

I'll try to learn. I'll try to study. I'll try to grow. I'll try to know God better. I'll try to pray.

I can say these things, and belief may grow as a result of doing them. But you cannot conjure up belief by will power. This is a fundamental difference between belief and commitment. It's the difference between what your head "thinks" and what your heart "knows".

The second is this:

**Sometimes I will have to make a 100% commitment to something, even though I do not have 100% certainty in my beliefs about it.**

There are times when a decision will require commitment when I don't have total certainty. For the most important decisions in life, this is almost always the case. Let me give you an example:

There's always a doubt factor for us. Let's say that before I get married, I think, "I'm human. I have no guarantees here, but I know that I want to marry this person. I'm 95% certain. I have a very low doubt level. But I'm only human, and that doubt is still there."

Now imagine that when I was making my vows to Joan—making my commitment—that I had said, "Joan, I'm going to give you a good, solid 95% commitment in our marriage. I will be 95% faithful to you as we walk through life together." Do you think that would have flown with her? No way, game over, end of story.

When you stand on that platform ...when you make those vows ...what you say is, "All that I am, all that I have, I share with you. Better, worse, richer, poorer, sickness, health, love and cherish ...I'm all in." Key decisions and commitments in life generally require passion and engagement—100% commitment, even though we don't have 100% certainty.

Another thing I've learned is:

**I can expect the sense of certainty in my beliefs to ebb and flow, to go up and down. That's part of the human condition.**

Let me give you an example of this:

Once Joan and I had to take a connecting flight from Boston to Albany New York. We got to the gate and I couldn't see the plane there so we just sat down and waited. Then they called our flight. I looked around and still didn't see a plane. The flight attendant then led us and a few other people out to the runway and there sat a little two engine prop job. As we walked up to the plane, they were loading luggage into a front hatch of the plane. Just before we got onto the plane each of us was asked how much we weighed and that determined our seat assignment. It was a full flight – all eight of us.

What do you think happened to my sense of certainty as I moved from the safety of terra firma as we got on the plane? My sense of certainty as we looked into the cockpit, seeing the pilots reading a manual and Joan says "Do you think their reading the instruction book?" Do you think my sense of certainty and safety went up or down? It went way down. My mind was suddenly flooded with doubts. Will this thing get off the ground; what if the wings failed; what if there were a rogue tornado, what if we were attacked by a large bird. I saw my body splattered down there on the ground. I imagined my kids without a father, if Joan survived she'd be without a husband ... dating other men ... wealthy and attractive men I did not approve of.

Nothing had changed from the boarding area to the runway. I had received no new evidence that would incline me rationally to think that flying on this small plane was less safe than a large jumbo jet. There was no new information, and yet my mind was suddenly flooded with doubt. This is the way that our minds work. Sometimes, something strikes our imagination, our mood, our emotions, and we find the train of our thoughts running towards doubt. I had a choice to make. You don't "partly" get into an airplane. Either you're all in, or you're not.

This is sometimes called "the leap of faith." If you want to fly, if you ever want to soar, then you have to take that leap. Your mind might have all kinds of fears and doubts running through it, but if you want to fly, then you've got to take the leap. And I did. And it was fun. I've never be in a small plane like that again, but it was pretty cool.

Now, a word about this "leap of faith." Sometimes people talk about it as if that is the "leap" where you ignore evidence, give up on reason and just make a blind choice. This is not accurate. The "leap of faith" is a "leap," because it involves making a total commitment for good reasons—for reasons that I have thought about quite carefully—in spite of my fears and doubts, because there is no other way to soar, no other way to fly.

There are certain basic decisions in life that require 100% commitment. Faith is often spoken of as a "passion." There are decisions that require that kind of commitment: to live by certain values, to get married, to raise kids (There are no guarantees that it's not going to break my heart.), to have friends, to follow God. There are decisions, generally the most important ones; that require 100% commitment, but do not give 100% guarantees.

Our scripture reading today begins up on a mountain. Jesus took his friends up there one day to give them a gift. In the Scriptures, if there is an appearance of God, where God is going to reveal His presence, it often happens on a mountain. A mountain, if you stop and think about it, is where Heaven and Earth come closest to each other, and there's something inspirational about a mountain. It gives us a kind of vision, a kind of perspective, and often that's where people would come to discover God is real. We all like mountains. We are mountain climbers. We are mountain seekers.

In Ezekiel, the prophet says that the Garden of Eden was set on a mountain.  
(Chapter 28)

God met Abraham on Mount Moriah. (Genesis 22)

God spoke to Moses in a burning bush on Mount Horeb. (Exodus 3)

God spoke to Elijah in a "still small voice" on a mountain. (I Kings 19)

God meets people on the mountaintops, and that's glory. But He never lets them stay there. He always asks them to leave ... to trust Him and leave the mountain and go to do some difficult thing down below:

"Abraham, leave your home."

"Moses, confront Pharaoh."

"Elijah, stand up to Jezebel."

He takes them up to the mountain, but they don't get to stay on the mountain. They have to go back to the valley below.

The main appearance, on a mountain, of God in the Old Testament ... the one the Jewish people always came back to ... the original one that shaped them into a people of God ... was God appearing to Moses on Mount Sinai. (Exodus 19)

That's where the Ten Commandments are given. There's a very striking passage:

***When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it . And the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days, the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day, the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. (Exodus 24: 15-16 NIV)***

Now this language is quite deliberate. Six days of preparation, and then the seventh day, that's God's day. Does that ring any bells with anyone? That's the language of Creation. The Creator is up to something. The One who created the Earth is up to something new.

***When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he was not aware that his face was radiant, because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. (Exodus 34:29-30 NIV)***

The Presence of God is real, and when Moses was on the mountaintop, Moses knew. There was glory, and there was radiance. That's a mountaintop experience.

Now in the New Testament, Jesus would often go to the mountains to be with His Father ... to pray. So Peter, James and John were not really surprised when Jesus took them with Him one day up to a mountain. The mountain is sometimes called the Mount of Transfiguration, and it is a hinge-point in the New Testament, the story of Jesus.

***After six days, Jesus took Peter James and John with Him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There He was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. (Mark 9:2-3 NIV)***

Here the language is telling us something. Peter, James and John, as good young Jewish men, would immediately remember another mountain and another leader of Israel becoming radiant with the presence of God. In fact, they see two figures to whom God had appeared: one was Elijah the prophet and the other was Moses the lawgiver. Moses and Elijah were privileged to receive God's revelation and now they are conversing with the One who is God's Revelation in person. Moses and Elijah are announcing the end of the OT, which is being fulfilled by Jesus. A passing of the guard is taking place.

Then we're told:

***Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud "This is My Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" (Mark 9:7 NIV)***

What God did on Mount Sinai ... revealing Himself ...He is doing one more time. This time He's doing it in Jesus.

One other detail: Does anybody remember how many days had passed when Jesus took Peter, James and John up to the mountain. Six days. On the seventh day, that's God's day. There is something very deep going on here, and this is fundamental to the possibility of God's self-revelation and fundamental to the possibility of miracles ... of the supernatural on earth.

How do you respond to that? They didn't know how to respond.

***Peter said to Jesus "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for You, and one for Elijah, one for Moses. (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)" (Mark 9: 5-6 NIV)***

Here's a good idea: When you don't know what to say, what do you say? Nothing! But true to form, Peter responded impulsively. His words show he was excited by the experience, but

he did not understand it. He wanted to prolong it by erecting three shelters. He had to say something:

Let's just stay here. We're on the mountain. Let's just stay here on the mountain.

A mountaintop experience is that moment when you suddenly find yourself able to believe. You just see it. You hear an inspirational talk. You watch the birth of a child. You get an answer to a prayer. Sometimes it's beauty that pierces your heart ... a note in a song ... a phrase in a book ... and you know that God is there.

A couple of weeks ago Joan and I took three of our granddaughters to Red Rock Camp for the first time. We didn't know what to expect but it was like going to the mountain. We saw kids running to worship, teenagers praying with each other, people of different races accepting and helping each other, wonderful talks and food. I heard kids asking for prayers, not for themselves, but for others they cared about.

On the last day, while we were at the last worship service I looked out the side window of the tabernacle and saw empty grounds. Then I started to think "How come I can't just stay on the mountain. How come God doesn't always make it easy for me to believe." You start asking yourself the question

*"Since God loves us so much, why doesn't He make us happy all the time?"*

Do you know what the answer to that question is; "I don't know." Maybe it's because as important as happiness is, there are other things that must happen, like becoming good, like having Christ formed in you so that happiness doesn't become the wrong kind of "god." Maybe there's a danger that if I spend too much time on the mountain, I will come to worship the mountain where I met God instead of worshipping God. I'll just want the experience ... the feeling.

What I do know is that Jesus always says the same thing:

"Time to leave the mountain now. Time to go down below. Time to go back to the valley."

He says to Peter, James and John – and to us also:

***...the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected ... (Mark 9:12 NIV)***

and "you'll have to walk through it with Me. You will have to go through confusion and doubt; you will have to ask questions and struggle. There will be a crucifixion. Then there will be a resurrection, and on the other side, the day is coming when you are going to soar, but not yet. Not today. Today, you've got to trust Me. We're going to have to go down off the mountain."

They go down below, and things are not going so well down there. There is a father who is desperate for help. His son is tormented by a demon, suffers convulsions and self-destructive behavior.

There's a crowd of people who are watching. Some of them are religious leaders who don't believe in Jesus and who don't follow Him. They watch the disciples fail and they say things like, "Apparently this Jesus stuff is not so hot." The disciples are embarrassed by their failure, because it is public.

Jesus walks up and looks around. He asks what is going on. The father says, "My son is in torment, and I brought him hoping You could help, but You were gone, so I asked Your disciples to help me. I must have gotten some of the disciples in the remedial class, because they haven't been able to do a thing."

The disciples are looking at their feet. This is not a shining moment for them. They lack spiritual power. They've failed to help someone in need.

Sometimes one of the biggest obstacles to faith in Jesus is the incompetence, complacency and arrogance of His followers ... followers like me.

Jesus says, in what appears to be frustration:

***Oh unbelieving generation. How long shall I stay with you. (Mark 9:19 NIV)***

Mostly, he's talking about His disciples ... so little time. He says to the father, "Bring me your boy." The father does. The boy goes into violent convulsions. He's rolling around on the floor, foaming at the mouth. Everybody is real quiet now. Jesus asks, "How long has he been like this." The dad says, "A long time ... from childhood ... a lot of times he's nearly died. I've tried all the other rabbi's, tried other prophets, been to the Mayo Clinic. Nothing, nobodies been able to help, and then I heard about you."

Then the father asks:

***... But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. (Mark 9:22 NIV)***

What's the word that indicates that the father's belief is not real strong. **if**. Jesus picks up on this word "if you can," and we read this amazing statement that gives us hope and then slays us:

***Everything is possible for him who believes. (Mark 9: 23 NIV)***

Everything is possible, there's a power in faith, in interacting with the reality of the kingdom. Jesus believes this.

At this point, if I had been the father, I'd have been tempted to come up with some certainty or to fake it ... "Yes, I believe. I know. I'm with you. I'm counting on you."

But he doesn't do that. When Jesus makes that statement, there's a response that comes out of the father's mouth so fast it's like an eruption, because this is exactly his quandary. This is precisely his problem.

***Immediately, the boy's father exclaimed "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24 NIV)***

I believe and I doubt.  
I hope and I fear.  
I pray and I waver.  
I ask and I worry.

***I believe; help my unbelief.***

I get that prayer. I don't know about you. Maybe belief comes quite easily to you. When it comes to commitment, I am seeking to be as committed to God as I am capable of. The only alternatives to Jesus that I can see are illusion and despair. I know of no other hope worthy of committing a life to.

But I get that prayer: ***I believe; help my unbelief.***

Now this is not exactly a ringing endorsement of Jesus, and you wonder, "How's He going to respond." Jesus doesn't walk away. He speaks to the boy. The text says He rebukes the evil spirit.

The boy is healed. The boy will live. He will grow up. He will work along side his dad. He will make friends. He will learn the Torah. He will get married someday, maybe. He will grow to be an old, old man, and he will remember the day when he was a boy and when a young rabbi did what nobody else could do. He will remember it ... the day when he stood alone with Jesus on a mountain.

Now the question is: How about us. How about you? Do you think this story really happened? Maybe you have doubts. Maybe you wonder if miracles are really possible. Well, Jesus can handle that. The dad in this story had at least as much doubt as you do ... at least that much doubt.

I will tell you this, and I believe this to the core of my being to be true:  
Part of why you and I are here this weekend ... part of why you are sitting here ... is because there is something inside you that cannot quit hoping.

- Something inside you keeps drawing you back to this Rabbi.
- Something about His life,
- Something about His words,
- Something about His faith,
- Something about His belief that the universe is run by the kind of Father Jesus described and loved,
- Something about His power,
- Something about His peace that draws us to Him as it has drawn people all over the world to Him for 2000 years and draws them still.
- Something deep inside tells you that you are standing alone on the runway of an airport, and the only alternative to Jesus is illusion or despair.

We can't see and know everything about it now, but one day we will. One day we will. Maybe it's like this. Here's a little story written by Bruce Thielemann, a Presbyterian minister:

Imagine a colony of grubs living on the bottom of a swamp. And every once in a while, one of the grubs is inclined to climb a leaf stem to the surface. Then he disappears above the surface and never returns. All the grubs wonder why this is so and what it must be like up there, so they counsel among themselves and agree that the next one who goes up will come back and tell the others. Is there life beyond the swamp?

Not long after that, one of the grubs feels the urge and climbs that leaf stem and goes out above the surface onto a lily pad. And there in the warmth of the sun, he falls asleep. While he sleeps, the cocoon of the tiny creature breaks open, and miracle of miracles, out of the inside the grub becomes a magnificent dragonfly with beautiful, wide, rainbow-hued, iridescent wings. And he spreads those wings and flies, soaring above the waters. But then he remembers the commitment he has made to those behind, yet now he knows he cannot return. They would not recognize him if he did, and beyond that, he could not live again in such a place. But one thought is his that takes away all the distress: they, too, will climb the stem, and they, too, will know the glory.

Maybe you're here wondering right now, "Can I entrust myself to Him. Can I commit myself even though I doubt. If I take a leap, will He catch me."

It really does not matter what I say, because no one can or should try to talk anyone else into this. What I do know is this:

If we never take that leap of faith,  
If we never believe,

If we never hope,  
If we never trust,  
We will never know.

We will live and grow old and end up on that swamp — all alone.