

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
September 24 & 25, 2011  
John Crosby  
Faith That Blinks  
Judges 6; Mark 9:23-25**

The children and the choir have given you a taste or a hint of the direction we are going this morning. We said at the beginning of the autumn that we wanted to talk about the things that matter most when everything else is gone. When everything else is finished, what is left? We looked at the apostle Paul saying that in the end, only three things remain: faith and hope and love. We said we wanted to try to maybe rub some of the dust off of those overused words and spend some time talking about faith that moves us, hope that helps us endure, and love that shows up.

Last week we started our exploration of faith that moves. We said we find faith in unusual places, but the place we find it most often is in the Bible. The stories of the Bible are rooted in faith. Faith is always there, but it is sometimes elusive so it requires a treasure map. **The Bible story is like a treasure map, and faith is a treasure that we want to find and hold on to.** Walking by faith means leaving this place and following the map on a narrow road that Jesus will lead us on. The road is often in contrast to a culture that only sees this world. That is why we need the treasure map.

I would ask all of you grab one of the Bibles that are in the pews in front of you because if the Bible story is like a treasure map, you need to see the dimensions of the map. You need to get to know the treasure map a little. I'm sorry I did not grow up in a church, and one of the things I missed was the competition that happened in Sunday school when they had what was called a "Sword Drill". The Bible is sometimes called the sword of God. They would have a sword drill to learn to find different places in the Bible. Now what I would like you to do this morning is participate in a sword drill with me. There will be a spectacular prize for the winner. No, really. Really! The young man who is up here, our director of student ministries, Cory Gregory, has volunteered that if anybody can find this verse in less than eleven seconds, which is what it took last night's crowd, if they can beat that eleven-second mark, they can be the first ones to use this scissors and shave his head, okay? Now let's just keep this between us. Cory doesn't know about this yet, but I'm sure he will go for it. All right. Are you ready? You are going to try to find Jude 22. I will give you a hint. Jude is toward the end. Turn to Jude 22 in your Bibles and as soon as you find it, just raise your hand. I will try to keep an eye on the clock. Go! We got one over here in 9.8 seconds. Okay!

We will get to Jude 22 in just a second, but what I really want you to turn to now is Mark, chapter 9. Don't race to it. I don't want anybody getting hurt. Mark, chapter 9. Today we want to explore what happens when something goes wrong with this faith stuff, when our faith blinks. If faith is a journey toward the treasure, what happens when you get stuck? What happens if on the journey of faith, you come to a fork in the road and you don't know which way to go? Or if you come to a

sign on the map that says, "Here be dragons." What happens if you get afraid of going forward? What happens in your life when you get to the edge of the map or get lost? *Then* you have a faith that blinks. Some of us give the impression that our faith never blinks, that everything is always fine. It's always you and Jesus walking together, and it's just better every day. Others of us have different experiences. Are we going to be the kind of community that acknowledges our fears and doubts as much as we acknowledge our faith? Are we going to talk about those times where faith is not apparent in our lives, or are we just going to be the kind of community that fakes it and says, "Trust me, don't tell anybody"?

Jude 1:22 says,

<sup>22</sup> Be merciful to those who doubt;

Show mercy to those who doubt. That is the kind of community we need to be, but so often we make people feel as though they have to pretend to have faith to really be faithful church people. I've gotten a lot of inspiration in the last year or two from a book by John Ortberg called *Faith & Doubt*. Actually, the book been renamed and now it is called *Know Doubt*. K-N-O-W Doubt. Fabulous book. He talks about the pressure to be a faithful person. He tells the story of Agnes. From the time she was a little girl, Agnes believed; not just believed, she was on fire. She wanted to do great things for God. She wanted to love Jesus as He had never been loved before because she knew Jesus was with her. She had an undeniable sense of God calling her and wrote in her journal, "My soul is in perfect peace and joy now." She experienced a union with God so deep and continued that it was rapturous for her.

Agnes left home and became a missionary. She gave God everything, but then God left, or at least that was the way it felt to her. "Where is my faith?" she wondered. She writes in her journal, "Even deep down there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. My God, how painful. I have no faith." She tried to pray but says, "My prayer of union is not there any more. I struggle to pray." On the outside she worked and served and smiled, but the inner darkness and dryness and pain over the absence of God continued year after year with one brief respite for over 50 years. That was the secret pain of Agnes whom we know as Mother Teresa. She channeled her life's passion into serving God through the poor, and we love her for that, but after her death, we have come to love her as much for continuing on in faith when she felt no faith.

What I want to say is that each of you, each of us, has that experience at some level or another and if we are going to talk about being people of faith, we have to talk about the times when we lack faith. Jews and Christians have the story there in the treasure map in front of you. We love to tell the stories of the heroes, how Moses drowns Pharaoh's army, how David kills Goliath and becomes king, but we rarely hear about Gideon, the hero Sarah [Sarah Norton, Director of Kids' Ministries] introduced to the children. Gideon is called a great warrior by God but he is hiding at the bottom of a well. In the old days when the harvest was brought in and the wheat and the grain would have to be threshed, often they would copy the Middle Eastern pattern of putting it on a big blanket, throwing it up in the air, and letting the wind blow away the chaff, right? But in doing this, you need the wind. The story starts with Gideon threshing his wheat down in a well. Now I'm not a farmer, but is there a lot of wind down in a well? So Gideon is throwing the grain up, and it is coming right back down on him, and this is a person God said was a mighty warrior. Then it talks about Gideon laying out his fleece on the threshing floor to test God's will. God works, not because of Gideon's great faith, but in spite of his doubt. Gideon doubted just like you and I doubt.

And so we come to the story in Mark 9. We are going to pick it up in verse 14, but you won't understand that unless you see the very beginning of Mark 9 which is where Jesus takes three of his favorite disciples up to the top of the mountain and is transformed. Literally, his apparel starts to glow and two angelic figures in the shapes of Moses and Elijah come and speak with Him. The apostles are like, "Wow! This is what heaven is going to look like. I never want to leave up here." Jesus is not a regular human being. Trust me, Peter. I've seen regular human beings. You can't do that. They want to stay up there, but Jesus says, "No, we have to go down, back into the valley. Don't tell them what you've seen." Then we get to the very next thing that happens. They have been up on the mountain top and seen Jesus as God, and then they go down into the valley.

<sup>14</sup> When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

Isn't it interesting, the text does not say, "When the other disciples saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed and ran to meet him." I think the disciples stood right where they were and said, "Okay. You tell them." "No, you tell them." "I'm not going to tell them. You tell them."

<sup>16</sup> "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. <sup>17</sup> A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. <sup>18</sup> 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."

So first, the disciples couldn't do what their Master did although, apparently, they gave it a shot. Then instead of saying, "We blew it; let's wait for the Master," they got into a fight with the cynics around them. Some Jesus! So they got into a fight and because of that, the crowds knew that they were not the real thing. I think it is still true - how often our failures as a community, as people, make it harder for other people to see God through us. If my job is to be a follower of the King, then I ought to look a little bit more like the King.

<sup>19</sup> "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

What I understand this time through is: He is probably not talking to the man yet. He is probably not talking to the crowds because they ran up to him. He is talking to His followers. "How long before you get it?" Well, apparently for me, too, a little longer. Jesus says,

"Bring the boy to me." <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. <sup>22</sup> "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."

"If you can," Jesus asked? Sometimes what you believe, what you really believe, your core convictions, they leak. You have to repeat it. I believe **faith leaks. Conviction leaks, and we need to be reminded or refilled**, but it leaks out of us in a single word like this man uses. What is that word he uses? If. If. If you don't mind, and even if you do, would you take out a pen or a

pencil and circle that word *if*. If it is already circled in your pew Bible, why don't you show somebody else that you read it, that you understand that *if* is a huge part of this verse. *If* you can do anything...."

<sup>23</sup> "If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." <sup>24</sup> Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Jesus tells him, "Anything is possible with the power of prayer, interacting with spiritual reality. When the dad hears that, he immediately does something that is very unusual. He does not fake it. He doesn't say, "Oh, did you think I said *if*? I didn't mean if you can. I meant, *since* you can." He doesn't beat himself up or wallow. He asks for help. "Help me believe like that." How does Jesus respond to his honesty? Does the next verse go on and say, "I'm shocked and appalled that you have doubts. Too bad for you. Worse for your son. No time for this." Is that what your Bible says? No! In the face of the man's honesty,

<sup>25</sup> When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

In the face of the father's honesty, Jesus speaks to the boy and the boy's life is never the same.

<sup>26</sup> The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." <sup>27</sup> But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. <sup>28</sup> After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" <sup>29</sup> He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

There are some things the followers of Jesus can do and some things we *should* do. But there are many things we cannot do so we must over and over say, "I can't do that. Let's ask God." That is the problem of faith, isn't it? Because we are just like Gideon, just like the disciples, sometimes we are filled with faith and delight in God. We are up on the mountain top. But other times we are desperate with doubt. We are down in the valley. "*If* you can...." is not a phrase that you hear up on the mountain top with God. That is valley talk. But for the rest of his life, that little boy can talk like he couldn't before. For the rest of his life, you can bet that he would say, "I don't know what happened. There was a minute when this young rabbi reached over and grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet and all of a sudden, there I was standing on a mountain top, and I could talk." He went home. He and his dad probably worked together at the dad's trade. He maybe had kids, grew old, but all of his life, he would remember that there was a second when he was on the mountain top. But most of the year, he will live in the valley.

To paraphrase Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. Remember Alexandr Solzhenitsyn? Political prisoner in Russia. Nobel-winning author about the gulags of Russia. At a Harvard address, Solzhenitsyn says, "The battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every human being." Well, I believe that the battleline of faith and doubt runs through every human heart. It is not like I believe or I don't. I do both, so I just want to spend a few minutes with you this morning talking about how you have faith and why you believe. Is it possible that there really is a world beyond sight? A radical idea! Easy to say, hard to believe in—a good God! There are a lot of intellectual reasons to believe or disbelieve. I guess as a pseudo-intellectual, I have read a lot of them. I started to come toward Christianity based on C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, but most of those

intellectual reasons I have read do not lead to faith. They end up as head games. The power of faith, I believe, goes through the head into the heart, and the battle for faith and doubt is in the human heart. It is in the experiences of life that faith dwindles or grows. Why do I believe? Why do I have faith?

This last May when Laura and I were in Africa, we went with World Vision to one of their staff chapels. As usual it is early in the morning, and we are already late. And as usual, the Africans do not care. They sing and I go, "I don't sing like that." They pray and I go, "I don't pray like that." They preach and I go, "I preach like that long and loud." They are late and at the very end, they have three staff people stand up and share, "This is how water changes this community." "This is what AIDS has done to it and how we help with it." A little boy, I could see him over there, wanted to speak but they said, "We don't have time. We've got to...." Finally they pushed the little boy up. He was not a little boy. He was 19. He comes up, and he says, "My name is Event. I am the junior assistant bookkeeper trainee." And he is very, very proud of it. He tells a story. He says, "I thank God that when I was a child, I was sponsored by World Vision. I wish I could find Mrs. Sandra Elliott of Canada and thank her." Then he pulls out a little harmonica and plays *On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand*. There is a God active in the world in Canada and in Africa! There is a God. The God of goodness will triumph in the end, but it may be a long time until the end. That night at the edge of the Zambezi River, right next to Victoria Falls, I thought of little Event. As the sun went down, I raised a glass of wine, and I said, "To the King" because the King had won one that day, and I had faith. How about you?

Can you remember a time or moments or seasons in your own life when you knew, not just with your head, when you knew because you had an inherent certainty that the events of that season could not just be in Africa. The universe cannot just simply be a random, chaotic machine. Love is more powerful and vibrant than any biochemical reaction could be. There must be someone, somewhere, sometime to whom you could say *thank you*, a power, good and present and awesome, greater than ourselves. You *know* that. You are driven to worship with humility or awe, knowing that nobody else will really understand and you couldn't really even explain it with words. You just, in your own way, in your own time, go to the King. You have faith. Think of it just for a second. If you don't mind, let's make this a spiritual exercise. Close your eyes for a second and see a time when you felt the goodness of God, the reality of God, come to you (*pause*). An act of goodness, forgiveness, a life change, hope, a second chance, worship. It is different for each one of us but that is why we believe, that is why we have faith.

Much less often do we talk about why we doubt. Why do you doubt? If that God is so good, if little Event is a living example to me of the goodness of God, why do I doubt? Why do I live in fear instead of confidence? Why am I so skeptical instead trusting? Why do you change so little if you have faith? It is because you also doubt.

When I was in my study and asking myself, "Why do I doubt?" another person came to mind, not Event or anybody on that trip but on the worst trip I have had in my life. It was about five years ago now and, again, it was in Africa, but this was in Uganda to the north. I left the group and I went to the northern edge of Uganda to town of Gulu. In Gulu the Lord's Resistance Army, some of you may remember this, had been in the pattern of kidnapping children, literally stealing them out of their houses at night, often making them kill other people in the village, putting a gun in their hand and saying, "Shoot her or him," so that the child could not return to the village. Over weeks and months, they conditioned the children through food and sex and reward to become child soldiers, to kill so that they could never go home. I went to Gulu, and at night I didn't have

my glass raised to the King because I was in a refugee camp, and as the sun went down, I saw children swarming into the compound. There would be 8,000 to 10,000 children who would leave their homes, walk an hour to the compound and stay there guarded so they would not be stolen at night. I spent the night with those children.

The next morning before I left, I met with a young girl who was in their clinic. Their clinic was not for the sick or the hurting. Their clinic was for the kidnapped child soldiers who had been recaptured. Most of the children do not escape. They are afraid to go home, but they are recaptured. One of them, Terese, had been recaptured, shot in the leg but that was healing quickly. Terese told me they had treated her very well. She had not had to have sex until she was 11. She was 13 years old. Fortunately she did not have a child yet, but they were afraid to check if she was AIDS-positive. Terese talked about how it was mostly good, the way you associate with people who have been involved in abductions, but she said there was a time that she could not forget. A boy she knew had seen an opportunity when none of the sentries were around and he escaped. "They sent us after him," Terese said, "and they beat us when we stopped looking so we caught the little boy. We caught my friend, and we started to beat him, and if we stopped beating him, they would beat us. So we beat him, and he ran into the middle of the stream. We chased him, and we caught him in the stream and beat him with sticks. I hit him on the head again and again, and there was blood." She wouldn't even look at me. She looked down at her hands and said, "There was blood on my hands, and I could not get the blood off of my hands." I said, "Oh, God, really? Really?"

One of the great Russian authors was Dostoevsky. He was also a believer. He said, "The death of a single infant calls into question the existence of God." Martin Luther, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, they all doubt. This list is tough, but it is so important to look at the other side of the coin of faith, so let's be brave for a minute. This is why the dad says, "Help me. I believe. Help my unbelief." Can you remember one of those moments? Probably not as dramatic as what I've described? One of those moments or seasons or times in your own life when you had doubts about God? Maybe you just closed your eyes and realized it is today. God's existence or God's goodness or God's presence because the events of that moment, if not just an accident, are too awful to accept as the product of a good God. But creation shows itself to be so evil or broken that believing in a benevolent God is too much for you. Do you doubt because you have seen evil win and good people lose and nobody seems to care? Do you doubt because your desire to be found by God, to find God, seems far away? Has that ever been your experience? It's been mine.

The truth for me, at least, is that **there is faith and doubt in every soul**, and how we receive our doubts, how we allow them, how they instruct us in the way that we pray (interesting phrase how doubt can instruct us how to pray), how we work through them, what drives us to consider these doubts, are all part of the journey of faith that all of us have to face. We all have faith. **We all have doubts, but we also have choices to make.** Will we let doubts make the choices or will we let faith? That is so often true. If you choose not to decide, you have decided. **If we want faith for the hard days, we need to find and build faith in the ordinary days.** I've had you open your treasure maps, right? But the Bible stories are about extraordinary days. They go from mountain top to pit to mountain top to pit. There are a hundred ordinary days before Moses and a hundred ordinary days after Moses. How does your faith work then? How does your faith grow?

Jesus sees a woman who has nothing, giving two quarters and putting them into the offering plate. He notices that very ordinary deed. Does your faith every day show up in your wallet or in your service or on your calendar? Joseph obeys God to his disadvantage over and over and over. Faith shows up in integrity in good times, in hard times, but most of all in ordinary times. The centurion doesn't even need to come and see Jesus for his servant to be healed because in submission, his faith chose. Do you submit? Do you submit to God or do you go your own way when you don't agree with God? If we want to have faith on the hard days, we need to develop it in the ordinary days.

I have a friend, Brad. Shortly after I came here, a group of us started to get together in a little Bible study, and after a while Brad came back to church. He had grown up in this church, married Susie, and then didn't come back for a long, long time. But he had kids now, and he started to come back, in part, because the kids joined our group. He started to teach Sunday school and said, "It's hysterical. Here I am Saturday night reading the Sunday school lesson like, 'Really? Really? I never knew that,' and teaching these children." That was a good season. Then Brad's little boy, Ian, got sick with cancer. They lived just on the other side of the highway, and I remember going over to their house and praying on Ian, anointing his head with oil and seeing a remission of the cancer. Brad said to me something like, "I'm so glad I started coming here again before Ian was sick, teaching Sunday school, learning about faith. I'm so glad it happened before Ian got sick so I would have a little faith now, but most of all, I'm glad it happened before so I don't feel like I'm starting to believe in order to bribe God. 'God, if I'm good will You fix this? If I'm real good, can it turn out okay?'" The ordinary days come between the tough days. Brad and Susie's faith persists, but it is very different today than it used to be. Shouldn't it be? But it is there, and it is real.

In addition to believing and doubting, there is choosing how to live today. I have to decide which road I will follow. Will my doubts and my fears drive me, or am I going to place my bet on faith? Am I going to place my bet on God and live by faith? Ortberg says, "We believe, and we doubt. Believing and doubt are both inevitable, but they are not equal." Let me say that one more time. Believing and doubt are both inevitable, but they are not equal. "They cannot lay the same claim on our allegiance. They do not share the same power. If there are places beyond the pain, doubt cannot take us there." "I believe, help my unbelief." Each of us. Not each of you, each of us.

I'm appreciative of the liturgy of the church, but I very rarely pray with a written prayer. This is not the way I pray best, but I came across a prayer by Richard Foster that I would like to pray with you and for you today. Foster is one of the giants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century faith. Yet he wrote about his faith and his doubt, and then he prayed. Would you pray with me.

God, today I resonate with the desperate cry in the Gospel, "I believe, help my unbelief." Sometimes I think we operate our lives more out of doubt than faith. And yet we want to believe, and I do believe. Increase faith within us, O Lord. We're sure that for faith to grow, You will put us in situations where we'll need resources beyond ourselves, and we submit to this process. Will this mean moving out on behalf of others, forgiving and reconciling with others, praying for them and trusting You to work in them? If so, then show us the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*, and we will seek to act at Your bidding. Throughout, we are trusting You to take us from faith to faith, from the faith we do not have to the faith we are in the process of receiving. Thank You, God, for hearing our prayer. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*