

The Cast | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

The Unbelieving Believer (An All-Terrain Faith)

Mark 9.14-32

March 12, 2017

When they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ Immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and began running up to greet Him. ¹⁶ And He asked them, "What are you discussing with them?" ¹⁷ And one of the crowd answered Him, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it." ¹⁹ And He answered them and said, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!" ²⁰ They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. ²¹ And He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² "It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" ²³ And Jesus said to him, "'If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, "I do believe; help my unbelief." ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." ²⁶ After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.

²⁸ *When He came into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not drive it out?" ²⁹ And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."*

³⁰ *From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. ³¹ For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." ³² But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.*

We've been considering the "supporting cast" (better: "supported cast") people who intersect with Jesus Christ in The Four Gospels and each encounter Jesus Christ has with these minor characters tells us a little more about HIM.

God did not reveal His Messiah through a text-book or a philosophical treatise ... but through a story... God's Message to us is a real flesh and blood PERSON who relates with other persons...in a story. That's why we're looking at these encounters with all these "everyday people" – we're looking to meet the "everlasting Man" (G.K. Chesterton) the Word made flesh in the Story.

From Mark's version of the Story, scholars have identified one class/category of these characters, i.e. people who come to Jesus Christ looking for help. Scholars have named this needy class of people, "The Suppliants". There are 13 of them in Mark's account, 13 individuals who come asking ...sometimes begging...always desperate ...making supplication...SEEKING HELP.

The suppliant we meet today is found in Matthew, Mark AND Luke... They all put this pitiful scene directly after the spiritual mountaintop experience we looked at last week, The Transfiguration. This father's sad situation stands in STARK contrast with the peak experience of Peter, James and John.

They go from MOUNTAINTOP GLORY to the VALLEY of MISERY in one JARRING moment!

And I'm sure we've all experienced something like this...a sense of ecstasy...or even a kind of spiritual breakthrough or "epiphany" ... It could be a vacation or a holiday...birthday ...a wedding (maybe your OWN wedding!)... IT COULD BE A SPIRITUAL RETREAT... You find yourself in a situation where you WANT TO STAY (like Peter wanted to campout on the mountain)... "That vacation was life as it was meant to be"...or that retreat...or even a Sunday with time in worship and a day of rest and reflection and then... Bam! Monday hits you like a ton of bricks.

And the disciples are experiencing this in the extreme... the honeymoon is OVER!

Let's see how Jesus Christ deals with these INTENSE MOOD SWINGS we all face on this fallen planet –

1) The Mountain 2) The Valley 3) An All-Terrain Faith

We saw last week that the Master Teacher was leading His students to make big discoveries. He had locked down the first lesson: "Q: Who do people say that I am? A: Well, Lord, public opinion is all over the place!"

Q: "But who do YOU say that I am?" AND Peter answers for the group: "You are the Christ of God."

Then immediately, Lesson Two – "Next, you need to see what a Christ is and does – I will bring about a New Exodus, a mass liberation. I will be handed over to the authorities and I will die... and three days later be raised again."

The disciples don't get it and Jesus Christ says, "THIS is how I will bring in My Kingdom...and some of you here will SEE My Kingdom even before you die..."

Then He takes three of them on this mountaintop experience... Peter, John and James go up on the mountain and they meet, Moses and Elijah. Peter wants to stay there!

But then the three disciples see that their Teacher is NOT ONLY on a par with Moses and Elijah but is infinitely above them... They are the HOUSE but HE, Jesus Christ, IS THE BUILDER (Heb 3.3)... And the disciples get a glimpse of His true identity – they see Jesus Christ in His glory... He takes off the disguise.

But even then...in this epiphany ...they STILL DON'T GET the death and resurrection. They DO see His glorious destiny but they DON'T see HOW He will get there. They SEE but they DON'T SEE...they believe...but they don't believe. It reminds us of a story in Mark that we skipped OVER this year.

It's a story of a blind man who was healed but when questioned, "Do you see?" the man says, "I see people walking but they look like trees – I see but I don't see!" And he dares say to Jesus Christ (like Oliver Twist), "Please Sir, I want some more – heal me all the way." And that little episode becomes a kind of living parable for what's happening in the disciples – AND what often happens in US. We see but WE don't see and we need to come again and again saying, "Lord – finish the job!"

And when they come down...from this supernatural experience... like Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and the people in the valley were dancing around a golden calf (Exo 32.9). They come down from the mountain – with this experience fresh in their memories – they see but they don't see – back from the holiday and now...so suddenly...it's over! And there's a crowd... wild and in some sort of dispute and Jesus is already in demand and, "The Honeymoon is OVER!"

So – point two – we all know how this feels at least a little bit. You were so looking forward to seeing the grandkids, so looking forward to spring break or vacation from work... time away and then it's snap back to reality and stuff all piled up.

So what DO they see in the VALLEY (our second point – In the Valley)? Well, they see the tough stuff of real life...on a fallen planet.

There's an argument between the Jewish theologians and the disciples. The people are relieved to see Jesus and amazed...maybe He's still shining as He was on the mountain...maybe they want Jesus to break up the fight (the bullies have to face the Big Brother!).

AND then they get HIT right between the eyes with the Big Clue that we are no longer in that "heaven-on-earth" mountaintop moment: there's a dreadful problem - a young man – the boy's father describes him as being "possessed with a spirit." It makes him mute and deaf with seizures and convulsions and foaming at the mouth and it makes the young man try to destroy himself by fire and by drowning.

And you think of this father and this family and the unmentioned mother and how this whole affliction – demonic evil – how it affected that family – someone has to be always with this young man – always fearing "Maybe today he'll succeed in killing himself" – every day filled with

that fear and frustration and the disciples aren't on holiday anymore. This sad, sad sight awaits them – seems like some crisis is always waiting for us when we return from holiday.

Now you MAY be wondering what this thing was ...it's called a "spirit" but it looks like epilepsy ...and the only thing I'll say about THAT is...I don't really know.

I know Jesus Christ addresses it as a "spirit" and He doesn't ALWAYS treat sickness that way...so obviously NOT all epilepsy or seizures or illnesses are a spiritual thing.

On the other hand...we in the West want to always have a scientific explanation ...and we should be humble enough to listen to our friends in the Southern Hemisphere who see that OFTEN there is a spiritual component to some illness.

As it says in Hamlet, "There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy [science]."

But Jesus Christ speaks directly to the entity – later He'll tell the disciples to pray (that's why they couldn't stop it). But He himself doesn't take his own advice – unless He's another category and that's exactly what He's communicating. For people like you, my disciples, the thing to do is pray – but for me – I have authority. He IS a different category and He doesn't pray. He just speaks the command and that's it - total authority.

Now as we look at the last point I know our situation is different from the unique experience of Peter, James and John – but there IS a parallel – we have our own experiences with joy and beauty and goodness. Maybe only a vacation peak experience or some celebration or special event. Or it may be a true, spiritual mountain-top experience – a retreat – a time of rapid spiritual growth or some very intense experience of prayer... even a normal Sunday... "my I don't have to run day."

And then the disillusionment and low-level despair upon returning to Manic Monday and the rest/joy and inward peace seems to unravel and there's arguing crowds and sorrow and sickness and destruction and evil...and really sad stuff. And we wish we could go back to the mountain! Well what does the Gospel enable us to see in that moment?

Let's think about an "all-terrain-faith" – faith on the mountain AND in the valley...on Sunday AND Monday.

Let's isolate three truths here. First – in the valley, Jesus seeks to clarify what really are the central issues of life. The key moment in this episode is the Q & A in verses 22-23. The desperate father says to Jesus Christ, "But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." And Jesus seizes the moment (right there in front of the disciples) to get clarity. "IF you can?" as if to say, "Is THAT the real issue here? Is this really about if I can or if I will?"

The question is not if I can give but rather if you will trust Me – “All things are possible to him who trusts.” That’s the central issue facing the man and the disciples and facing us after the mountaintop experience has faded: When you don’t SEE will you still TRUST?

Will you believe? That’s the issue - Lilius Trotter wrote, “Believe, in the darkness, what you have seen in the light”. It’s good to have these mountaintop experiences...we get one every week – The Lord’s Day – and in these moments of reflection, when we deliberately stop doing...where we intentionally stop (Heb 4.11) – active-passivity (Schaeffer) God may give us glimpses of glory and these we are meant to sustain us when we re-enter the valley, “Believe, in the darkness, what you have seen in the light.”

The valley is where sight becomes faith...where we have opportunity to actually believe in spite of the chaos.

Second – this man answers for us – “I do believe, help my unbelief” – I see but I don’t see... I know but I don’t know. See, believers are often...unbelieving. Jesus includes his own disciples in that great question of holy exasperation in verse 19, “O unbelieving generation, how long shall I put up with you?” Jesus is speaking of his own disciples – His own beloved “unbelieving believers”. The point is God is calling Christians to believe. “But Christians already believe” - right – I know but I don’t know. I see but I don’t see. I believe but help my unbelief.

Am I believing the Gospel in my marriage or singleness...as I deal with a difficult coworker ...a child who may NOT be healed?

And what we’ve seen in the last few weeks...is that the answer is to keep running to Jesus Christ...our older Brother and Defender. He comes down from the mountain WITH us! He never tires of receiving our complaints and our supplications and needs. Your friends get tired. If you treat people like this they’ll call you weak or needy or clingy or a freeloader...BUT WHAT IS REPULSIVE IN OUR HORIZONTAL RELATIONSHIPS IS SUPREMELY DESIRABLE IN THE VERTICAL.

People will run from you if YOU’RE A SPONGE or a LEECH or a PEST...because people can’t sustain us... But God, in Jesus Christ CAN...and wants us to trust Him... especially IN THE VALLEY where all the painful stuff seems so ...real and...so painful.

Where people will get fed up with you – where Oliver Twist has to fear being spurned by the cook... “Please sir, I want some more” WE DON’T HAVE TO FEAR BEING SPURNED BY HIM...He is the God who comes down from glory and steps with us INTO the valley... and He is the One who invites us to come again and again. “Can you see?” and the blind man says, “Uh not really... but You know...it’s ok ...I’ll figure it out myself.”

No...he was bold and came again to Jesus...and Jesus was happy that he did. The disciples asked, “Lord what does this parable mean – we need You to interpret and teach us!” And Jesus says, “Figure it out YOURSELVES...quit being needy...and slow!” NO! He says, “To YOU who come to

Me and keep coming and coming ...to YOU are given the mysteries of the Kingdom – all good things for those who keep coming to Me!”

Look ...we all want to be secure...well adjusted... self-assured... confident people... but life in the valley shows us we are NOT! We are powerless over microorganisms and car-crashes and the spirit-world and arguments and autism and all kinds of overwhelming stuff... and Jesus Christ keeps calling us, “Trust, Me” – rely NOT on what you see...but rely on ME...I came down from glory and INTO your deepest valley – your guilt and sin – to live and die and rise for you – TRUST ME!”

And when we say, “I DO believe...Lord help my unbelief” we’re only acknowledging that everything depends on Him...even the faith to trust Him...my dependency depends on Him...it’s a recognition of the truth and He doesn’t send us away, or clock us with the ladel...He runs to help us.

And to the degree – even in the valley...especially IN the valley – when I am actively depending on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus...then I am bringing the glory of the mountain down into the stuff of life... right here in the boisterous crowds and the arguments and doubt and outright evil - in traffic, on the job, with sick children, in the mundane Mondays or the Manic Mondays– in the valley, I am enabled to see and look beyond what is seen/temporal to what is unseen/eternal. It’s an all-terrain faith... a sense of confidence that believes in the valley what it has seen on the mountain.

Last – maybe you’re here today thinking – “I’d like to live that way (consistently) – sort-of always on the mountain even when I’m schleppin’ it down here in the valley...like to live above my circumstances but I don’t know... God doesn’t seem to work in me that way.”

Uh...uh! Let me remind you the issue isn’t that God is unable or unwilling to work in you that way – the issue is “will you believe?” “Yeah...but I’m not sure I can believe...” The question is will you depend on Jesus to make you dependent? Will you go to Jesus Christ right now (Christians and non-Christians) will you simply say, “Lord, Jesus Christ – I believe...help my unbelief...”