

Faith and Doubt
March 8, 2009
The Rev. Michael Attas, MD

Lent 2 - Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

The two passages for today are, at least for those of us raised in the Bible Belt south, perhaps the most dangerous passages in the New Testament. They talk a lot about faith...sometimes I think that is our favorite topic down here, yet in the final analysis they call us to a radical new understanding of faith...what it means and maybe more importantly what it doesn't mean. Paul's letter to the Romans and Jesus' warnings to Peter and his disciples are joined at the hip. They explore...in very radical and unsettling language...the role of faith in our lives as followers of Christ. I want to explore this a bit, and to share with you a personal story while it is fresh on my mind.

You see, I struggle with faith. Always have, always will. Faith doesn't come easy for me. I hope that doesn't shock or offend you, but I figure by now you know that I'm going to always be honest with you all here. And I know that you won't hold it against me! Maybe because of my scientific bent, maybe because of my tendency towards what I like to think is a healthy skepticism and 'rational' way of thinking, the whole notion of faith to me has always been a bit elusive. I used to think of it as a moral flaw, a sign of weakness, a stumbling block to a mature and thoughtful form of Christianity. I was always more or less involved with the church--active in youth groups, even went to church in college in the 60s which was no small feat in itself... but I never quite felt "at home" there. In my innermost thoughts, I looked at myself as a fraud...I was afraid someone was going to peek in and catch me with my pants down and see my doubts. I was secretly embarrassed, afraid, ashamed to be saying one thing in public and another in private. I felt like the biggest hypocrite in the world...and then we moved to Waco and were surrounded by folks of various and sundry denominations who seemed...at least on the surface...to have their faith figured out. Faith was everywhere! I had to get used to the notion that folks were comfortable asking me "what church do you go to"...I hadn't been asked that in a long time, and it seemed like they were getting a bit too close, sort

of in my personal space. To be honest, I really didn't like it. And I continued to wonder exactly what faith could mean....here in Jerusalem on the Brazos.

A breakthrough for me in this whole issue of faith and doubt came 26 years ago. I was taking a night continuing education course through Baylor and sat at the feet of one of the master teachers in my life...Dr. Bob Baird, the chairman of philosophy at Baylor. Since then, he has been one of my closest friends and trusted mentors, and he gave a brief talk one night on the role of "creative doubt". Remember, Bob is not only a brilliant PhD in Philosophy but an ordained Southern Baptist Minister as well. Doubt, he claimed, was the springboard to creativity and growth. In fact, he went on to argue, it is actually the foundation of faith itself...the bedrock that underlies all we claim to believe. Without a healthy doubt, he said, we live an unexamined life of blind certainty...one that drifts all too easily into fundamentalism, moral rigidity, self righteousness, false hope, and even intellectual elitism. Finally, I thought...here is someone who is truly honest about this whole notion of faith. Faith and doubt, I began to see, are not mutually exclusive but are the twins of what it means to be human...to struggle, to get wounded and angry...to stand in awe of mystery and embrace it honestly rather than run from it. Faith and doubt, when lived at the core of our being, are what finally allows us to get a glimpse of divinity, of the beauty as well as the tragedy of creation, and to move with them both into the fullness of community that we call the Christian life.

Faith and doubt, as Jesus saw, are intertwined with our own reality as it was, I'm sure, for his. For if we take this whole notion of Jesus being "fully human" seriously, we have to acknowledge the reality that he must have struggled with doubt. He must have wondered what the heck was this notion of the death and the cross really meant...why do I have to go there, we almost hear him saying to himself. But what is really interesting and at the heart of the story is that doubt did not lead him into either a passive paralysis or an angry nihilism, but to a world of action where human suffering is met head on. Doubt doesn't negate the reality of suffering, but it doesn't let it have the last word.

Some in my family are also struggling, as we speak, with the whole notion of faith...what it means, what happens to it when tragedy strikes, and maybe more importantly...what do we do with ourselves when it disappears. My niece, the daughter of my only sister, had a beautiful little boy last fall. The product of a perfectly normal full term pregnancy, on the surface he was perfect. But in his tiny little chest beat a heart that was malformed and struggling...a serious form of congenital heart disease named Tetralogy of Fallot. The initial hope was to wait to perform a corrective surgery when he was older, but his deteriorating condition forced his doctors hands. So at age one month, he underwent a surgery that technically went perfectly. We all breathed a sigh of relief, and the first post op night was uneventful. The next morning the team called my niece and sister with the good news of a good first night, and literally while they were on the way to the hospital little Cooper had a cardiac arrest from which he could not be resuscitated. No cause...no medical reason...only mystery and tragedy. Now, almost 3 months later the final autopsy report has just come out...a perfect operation but the patient died anyway...at one of the leading Pediatric Heart programs and heart surgeons in the world. Instead of answers, all my niece and sister have is grief and darkness and mystery. And they have fallen into the all too human path of anger, resentment at the injustice of it all, and wondering where in the world is a just and loving God in the midst of their suffering. And so, like many, instead of raging and railing at God...which by the way is a very biblical and sound and honest way to behave...they are drifting into a sort of angry agnosticism. If God existed, he or she could have prevented this. Or should have. So obviously...there must be no God. It seems perfectly logical...and I know one thing for sure...they aren't the first suffering humans to walk down that desolate journey. If we are honest, I suspect that it would be the response of most of us. And that brings us hard up to the word faith...what determines our faith...why are some given that gift so effortlessly and why do some struggle with it. Why do some, when confronted with tragedy, seem to fall back on it to survive and why do others find it so elusive and no help at all?

I think, and I'll go down this road gently, it is because we have misunderstood the very word itself. Let's look carefully at the text for today. The word faith is used in Paul's letter to the Romans 6 times in this one little passage alone...and scores more in the whole book. And yet there are two other very key words in this collection of readings. Believe. Follow. Somehow, we have gotten the first two words--belief and faith--confused and equated them with each other. In nice little mental constructs, we have created a Christianity that consists of a rigid belief system instead of a living relationship. We have a check list of doctrinal positions, and if we check enough of the boxes we label ourselves as Christians. And we couldn't, I would submit, have gotten it more wrong. Christianity isn't about intellectually having a check list...a laundry list...of propositions. If that were all there was to it, many of us would be left alone in the dark. Jesus doesn't say to Peter and the disciples here is what you must believe. He says here is what you must do. "Here it is guys", he says "follow me". They are, I believe, the two most dangerous imperative words in human language. For they tell us that faith is not identical with belief, that ideas about faith are often totally misunderstood, and that following this crazy middle Eastern carpenter and prophet is going to lead us to our own cross, and that to lose our life for the sake of something is the only way we can finally save it. It is the ultimate existential paradox, and I'm not sure I like it at all.

But it is quite clear what Jesus didn't say and what he did say. And we can't sugar coat it. He didn't say...believe in me and you won't get hurt. He didn't say...believe in me and you'll never have a tragedy in your life. He did say...we have to deny ourselves. We have to walk the same walk to our own Jerusalem that he did. We have to carry our own crosses, our own burdens, our own weaknesses and even our own doubts. And then when we lose something...indeed our very lives or something precious to us...it is then when we--like the Phoenix rising from the ashes--somehow rise again and discover what it means to be alive, to be human, and to be made in the image of God. For it is there...and maybe even there alone... we encounter not a God tucked safely away up on some altar to worship from a distance, but a God who chose to meet humanity head on...where it hurts and where it counts, not where it is safe. Faith, I believe, is not

something we do with our heads but a place we live with our hearts. It is a place to stand.

And for me, that becomes the sort of God I can get along with...can put my trust in...one who "pitches his tent with me". Personally, I can relate to a God who hurts along side of me better than a God who created a perfect Pollyanna world where suffering doesn't exist. I want the freedom to hurt, to doubt, to shake my faith and to turn my world upside down. I want, as crazy as it may sound, hurting and grieving and loud raging cries to God that "I'm alive"...this matters...this is awful. A pie in the sky theology of grief and suffering simply doesn't sustain me in the dark night of my soul. It doesn't acknowledge the horror of death, the unending suffering of the human condition, and the open, gaping wound that life can leave us with. Freedom to suffer finally means freedom, and freedom is not to be found in the perfect and beautiful world that only exists in our imaginations. Like Kris Kristofferson said in the song "Bobby McGee" "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose, nothing ain't worth nothing if it's free".

And that claim then brings us back full circle to our starting point. If faith, as we misunderstood it, isn't just a check list of talking points, then what is it? What does it mean, when push comes to shove, to follow? Besides Jesus' warning that it can lead to a kind of death, it also means we are going to get glimpses of glory we hadn't dared to imagine. For it means when we are walking that road in our Samaria and stop to tend to the broken stranger, we come face to face with a suffering God. It means when we feed the hungry we feed a God hungry for love. It means when we liberate the prisoners...which of course are all of us...we liberate ourselves to a new kind of freedom to love and serve a broken and needy world. It means when we speak healing words to each other they count for something...and true healing may take place even when curing may not. It means that we won't always be popular. We may at times get crossways with culture and with the trends of faith. It means we may have to abandon the sanitized and safe faith of our childhood and search for a more radical kind of faith. But, when push comes to shove, I don't know how else to live. I may not ever eliminate

my doubts. I may not ever understand the mystery of faith with my rational mind. I may not ever get over the amount of suffering in the world...and I hope I never do. All I can do is walk the road and follow. Put one step in front of the other. Free to hurt, free to doubt, free finally to love. We live into the heart of this mystery, this brokenness as well as this glory of creation. It is what sustains us. It is what liberates us. Finally, it is who we are. Not robots who cannot feel or think or love or grieve. The depth of our grief is only matched by the power of our love, and that will ultimately be how the world knows us. We become followers of God...not believers always...sometime doubters...often confused, eventually broken and wounded... but followers nonetheless. Carlyle Marney, my first pastor and a giant of the Baptist tradition, went through a dark night of the soul where he doubted everything he preached. He was lost, alone, afraid. He was angry and frustrated, and felt his life was over. Finally, he admitted his doubts to a close friend and colleague. He told his friend that he could no longer say the creed or pray the prayers...he had too many doubts. "Marney" said his friend. "You only have one choice. Say the words anyway. Live the words. Trust the words. They will live in you despite yourself". And, of course, they did. And they will. AMEN