

Mark 6: 1-13

Stumbling along: The interplay of faith and doubt

Objectives:

- To understand the broader sweep of the Gospel of Mark, and how questions of unbelief may function in the whole journey of faith;
 - To see the complexity of Jesus' life – fully human and fully divine;
 - To welcome the parts of us that have questions about our faith;
 - To create a safe place in community to voice our doubts.
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“Faith is faith, not when it is looking more and more like we are right, but rather faith is faith when the situation is beginning to look impossible.” (John Caputo).

Mark, the author of today's gospel, gives us a snapshot of a moment of unbelief. A moment where thinking we know what is right, overshadows faith.

“Faith is not about being right, but rather faith is opening up to possibilities even when nothing makes sense.”

Jesus returns to his hometown.

- The narrative has moved away from the faith of Synagogue-leader Jairus who faces the unimaginable – the death of a child. And he asks Jesus in a moment of faith to do the impossible.
- The narrative moved away from the faith of a haemorrhaging woman, unclean, but braves the crowds anyway in order to touch Jesus' cloak. In a moment of faith she expects the impossible.
- And now the narrative moves to Nazareth, away from stories of faith and to the family and friends of Jesus who stumble over what they think they know. What they think they know to be right. And that is not faith.

Theologian, John Caputo writes “Faith is faith, not when it is looking more and more like we are right, but rather faith is faith when the situation is beginning to look impossible.

Today's gospel is the negative of faith.
Like the negative image of a photograph.
This story is the negative image of faith.

These folks from Nazareth bore witness to the growing up years of this God-man, Jesus. They witnessed the ordinary. The diapers, tantrums of the terrible twos, slingshot stones hurled through windows as Jesus roamed the streets with his young buddies. They witnessed ordinary life.

And oh, how difficult it can be for us to see the miracle in the ordinary.
It is easy for us to let our knowledge of ordinary things cast a shadow over the things of the Spirit.

- When last did we look at a sunset and whisper thank you God.
- Or look at a friend's face and feel our hearts stir with gratitude for their presence.
- Or chop a bunch of celery and marvel at the wonder of their colour and crunch.

There are miracles in the ordinary.

The Nazareth story gets called the 'un-miracle story'.

Notice when Jesus began to teach in the Nazareth synagogue, the crowd was first amazed.

And then they questioned. It was their interpretation that led them away.

A miracle is not just an event but it is also an interpretation of an event.

"Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?
What deeds of power are being done by his hands?"

Questions that undermined the miracle of the moment.

But these questions in the broader narrative of Mark's gospel actually function to help us on our way. Mark is building the narrative up to Jesus' central question:

"Who do you say that I am?"

And when we reflect on this question, it can lead us more deeply toward faith in the risen Christ.

Mark has cleverly scripted the response of Jesus' family and friends as a contrast, to build up and highlight moments of faith surrounding it.

So, while most commentators give the unbelief at Nazareth a bad wrap...

I am grateful for these questioning folks from Nazareth.

Because had Mark written a snapshot of me in my mid-twenties, my mind was full of doubting questions. And Jesus may not have found much faith in me.

Like the people of Nazareth, I was stumbling along. I worked as an occupational therapist in psychiatry.

I was asking:

Is my faith just in my mind?

Is prayer an illusion? Am I crazy?

And I lived with, what seemed like a divided mind.

Asking doubtful questions and mustering up faith.

You see I was taught that doubt was wrong.

Yet, I have come to accept that doubt will always be part of my journey of faith.

Faith and doubt, might just be the flip sides of the same coin.

John O Donnehue prays this beautifully in a book of blessings.

He writes:

May the companionship of doubt
Restore what your beliefs leave out.

The conversation in our minds and hearts between faith and doubt is part of the journey.
Stumbling along is often the pilgrim's way.

Clare Marcus had just retired from her position as Professor in the Department of Landscaping Architecture at the University of California, Berkley. She had recently recovered from cancer. Quite by accident she finds herself on the little Hebrides Island of Iona off the West Coast of Scotland.

She writes of her experience in a memoir called "Iona Dreaming".

Let me read to you two different snapshots of her journey, just 6 months apart.

- (1) After walking by the shore, I go in [to the Abbey] to hear [the evening service]. I am reassured, if ever I doubted it, that this kind of institutional religion is not for me. For it is empty, boring and almost offensive. I leave.

Later she writes:

- (2) One evening, as I walk back from the service at the abbey, it seems as though everything is suffused with light, honeysuckle blossoms growing over a garden walk, the tall flower-heads of reeds bending in the wind, a lone gull on a rock... I finally sense what I have resisted ...; that an immanent God permeates all matter. Once there was doubt; now there is none.

This snapshot of the people of Nazareth is a snapshot of each one of us in the moments where we find ourselves questioning.

And the Invitation for us is twofold:

- (1) How do we respond to our own doubt,**
- (2) And how do we respond to the doubt of others.**

So first is to consider how we respond to ourselves in those moments when faith is hard to find.

Can we believe, that there is an interplay between faith and doubt.

We can't know light without darkness.

We can't have faith without questions.

As followers of the risen Christ, we will go through times where our knowledge or life experiences necessarily cast a shadow over our faith.

During these times where we question the things we thought we once knew; we enter what Paul Ricoeur calls disorientation. A necessary time, of letting go. This is a dynamic of life, a movement from disorientation to reorientation. Even though we feel deep reluctance and loss. It is the only way to open up and embrace a new gift, a new way. A deeper faith.

Jesus shows up at Nazareth. And asks the people to see him differently.
And the people stumble.

Nazareth moments are not the end.
They are a moment along life's way. It takes courage to be there.

Let us respond to ourselves with compassion and understanding as we move into moments of doubt.

And then secondly, how do we respond to others in their time of doubt?

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Leaving Church*, she writes about a time when she found herself in this place of **questioning and unbelief**.

She calls it her wilderness time and she writes this:

"If my time in the wilderness taught me anything, it is that faith in God has both a center and an edge and that each is necessary for the soul's health. If I developed a complaint during my time in the wilderness, it was this, that [the] Church lavished so much more attention on those at the center than on those at the edge."

For there will be times when some of us are amazed and wide open to possibility; and at the same time some of us will be disoriented, questioning, and filled with unbelief.

May we learn to lean on each other.

To let the questions highlight what our beliefs have left out.

This is what it means to be a community of faith - we stumble along holding onto each other.

And just maybe (with Nadia Bolz-Weber) we can say:
Blessed are the agnostics. Blessed are they who doubt,
Blessed are those who aren't sure, and
Blessed are those who can still be surprised by Christ.

Amen.
