

“On My Believing Days”¹

Psalm 23 and Mark 9: 11-29

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I

It was a cold day in January, 1986 when the phone rang in my office at the United States Army Military Police School at Fort McClellan, Alabama. At the Military Police School I was the chaplain-instructor teaching leadership, ethics, counseling, stress management, and a few other things. My students, the future leaders of the army, were second lieutenants fresh out of college. The caller was the personnel director of the chief of chaplain’s office in the Pentagon calling to inform me that I had been selected for a sabbatical year of study in counseling. I could pick any school I wanted; however, I must earn another graduate degree and it must be completed in one year. After an exhaustive search, I enrolled in Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

The program was demanding. It consisted of class work each morning in the seminary followed by a practicum in the afternoon held at the Georgia Association for Pastoral Counseling located down the street from Emory University. There were about six students in the course with me.

The degree work was like drinking out of a fire hose. We studied human development, diagnosis and change, grief, and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Plus we participated in individual and group supervision of our counseling often lasting into the late evening. We were all feeling overwhelmed with trying to help deeply wounded people.

Somewhere in this process, we discovered that we were struggling too. We were wrestling with how to integrate this difficult body of knowledge along with the skills of a therapist. How could we help persons who were so severely scared early in life?

While I don’t remember the exact context in which the following dialogue took place, it seems like a group of us were bemoaning our lot in life as becoming therapists and wondering if healing was really possible. Dr. John Patton had been there listening to our concerns and questions so we asked him, “Is healing possible?” He said, “*On my believing days, I would like to think so.*”

It was those first few words, “*On my Believing days*” that hooked me. These words came as grace to me. It was like someone had cut on a light. I thought to myself, if he has believing days, then he has unbelieving days. His words humanized the journey of faith. His words said

¹ Words attributed to Dr. John Patton, Professor Emeritus, Columbia Theological Seminary.

to me that there are days when we believe and days we do not believe. We live in that tension. That is what the journey of faith looks like. Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Beuchner said it this way, “*It [Faith] is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all.*”²

II

This struggle of faith is dramatically portrayed in a 2002 movie entitled *Signs*. The major characters of the story include Mel Gibson as Graham Hess, a former reverend who has lost his faith due to the tragic death of his wife. He has taken refuge on his family farm with his younger brother Merrill, a failed minor league baseball player. Also there are Graham’s two children. Morgan, his asthmatic eleven year old son, and Bo, his daughter, is about four. With the death of Graham’s wife just six months ago, the family is making the dark journey of grief. Graham had resigned his parish as their Episcopal Priest and the family took sanctuary on their Pennsylvania farm raising corn.

Very early one morning Graham is awakened by his children’s screams coming from the cornfield. He and his brother race to their sides only to discover that someone or something has made a series of circles and various signs pressing down the corn in his large cornfield. As the day progresses news reports document these strange signs are showing up all over the world. World leaders and scientist believe that these signs were made by aliens and that they intend to invade the world. The world is on the verge of panic as people attempt to find a way to cope with this overwhelming threat.

Merrill, wrestling with his “unbelieving days,” looks to Graham for comfort and reassurance. Graham gives Merrill a sarcastic mini-sermon about faith. Graham tells Merrill that people break down into two groups. People in group one believe that regardless of what happens there will always be someone up there to help them. Knowing this, they are filled with hope. Whenever they experience something lucky, they see it as a sign of God’s care. On the other hand, Group two feels that whatever happens they are on their own. There is no one up there to care for them and this fills them with fear. If anything happens to them that they would interpret as lucky, they see it as a coincidence not as a sign from God. It is just a turn of chance. Graham then asks his brother what kind of person he is, group one or two. Merrill states that he belongs to group one. Graham asked him if he now felt comforted. Merrill said, yes.

On the surface this movie appears to be a horror movie with aliens invading the world, but if you look a little deeper you realize that this is a story about faith. The struggle of faith not only wrestles with believing God is there for us, but also includes how we interpret the signs we meet along life’s way. Are signs just coincidences or are they God’s epiphanies pointing to God’s presence in our world? The movie ends with the family surviving and the aliens going back home. Merrill found the comfort and assurance he needed. Maybe it wasn’t everything he needed, but it was enough. He felt strengthened by the experience of “believing days.” Graham even found some “believing days.” The last scene shows Graham once again putting on his priestly collar heading back to church with his family.

² *Buechner 101: Essays and Sermons by Frederick Buechner*, pp. 65-66.

III

Faith has always been a struggle. This struggle is graphically seen in Mark's story about the demon possessed boy which takes place following the Transfiguration of Jesus. Remember, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John saw and heard things they had never seen or heard before. They saw Jesus become dazzling white as he stood with Moses and Elijah. They experienced the overwhelming cloud and they heard God saying, "*This is my son, listen to him.*" The three disciples wanted to stay there and build three shrines, but Jesus led them back to the valley below where ministry is needed most. They came down the path basking in the glow of their "believing days." It is easy to believe when things are going good, but as they joined the other nine disciples things were about to change.

There appeared to be a conflict between the scribes and the other nine disciples. The scribes were the professional men of knowledge who served in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish house of government. They were experts in the law, keepers of wisdom. They were delighted to find that Jesus' disciples had failed to heal the demon possessed boy. According to the scribes, they had their stuff together in contrast to Jesus and his followers. They had all the answers. Their motto was just believe like we do and everything will be okay.

The nine disciples were now "against the ropes." They had failed to exorcise the demon from the boy. They were embarrassed, ashamed, and felt like failures. Although they had done exorcisms before, they could not help heal this boy. They did not know what to believe; it was an unbelieving day for them. Before the day was out, Jesus let them know that prayer was needed to exorcise the boy's demon.

Another group of onlookers was the crowd in the market place. They didn't have "a dog in the fight," but there is nothing like a good fight. They wanted to know how all this would play out. When they recognized Jesus, they were in awe and ran to him. About this time, Jesus asked what was going on.

It was the father who spoke first. With a lump in his throat, he began to tell a story that he had been telling every day of his son's life. No one knew the depth of sorrow this father felt. With an anxious heart, he described the uncertainty and anxiety of his son's illness. When the demon came upon his son, he fell to the ground, sometimes even in the fire. He foamed at the mouth, clenched his teeth, and became stiff all over. Of course he had tried everything, been everywhere, and seen everybody who might help, but nothing helped.

But now the father was at the end of his rope; his faith was running dangerously low. He was close to despair, close to "throwing the towel in." If Jesus could not help who could? This father knew more than anybody there what it was like to look into the darkness, ask why, and receive no answer. But he was a parent and parents never stop giving, never. But this father felt he was at the end of the line. The father begged him. If Jesus could help, please have mercy. Jesus, the shepherd king, said, "*Everything is possible for him who believes.*"

Immediately the boy's father cried out, "*I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!*" Jesus healed the boy, he rebuked the demon, and the boy was healed. He could speak and hear, he was no longer at the mercy of a demon. I can just image this father and child walking through

this crowd going home whole. This family had found the “believing days” they needed so desperately. They had a story to tell.

God in Christ is present in our most horrific tragedies in life. Regardless of the magnitude of life’s sufferings, God’s Spirit is present in all our days, believing and unbelieving. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Watch how God will come to you, especially how he comes to you in ordinary ways.

IV

Frederick Buechner,³ tells a story about a time in his life that he was terribly depressed, very concerned about his daughter’s illness, and what was happening in his family. He states he had just pulled his car over on the side of the road when out of nowhere a car came along with a license plate that bore on the tag only one word – TRUST! Buechner mused what do you call a moment like that. Something to laugh off or was it the word of God? For Buechner it came as an epiphany. It turned out that the driver of the car was an officer in a bank. After Buechner had written about this experience, the bank officer dropped by Buechner’s home and presented him the tag. Buechner said it was a bit rusty around the edges and battered, but he placed it on his book shelf and for him it was a most holy relic. The word TRUST on a car tag was his tipping point; it came to him as grace. You never know what will do it. What will come to you when you least expect it but need it the most. The Psalmist said it this way, *“He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.”*

V

God’s grace covers our “unbelieving days. John the Baptist knew what it was like to live with “unbelieving days.” John stood out from the minute he stepped into town with his camel hair suit and health food diet of bugs and honey, but what landed him in prison was his condemnation of the king’s immoral behavior. While in prison John had a lot of time to think about Jesus. John expected the Messiah to come with fire and fury with a lot of brimstone, but Jesus was doing something else. John began to have his doubts about Jesus. So to clear things up, John sent his disciples and asked Jesus if he is the one to come. John’s doubt was central: Is Jesus the Christ? Jesus said tell John, *“The lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, poor have good news preached to them!”* John’s doubt did not disqualify him. In fact, Jesus said there is none greater than John. “Unbelieving days” do not disqualify us from being a child of the King.

God has a way of meeting us where we are and moving us to the place he wants us to be. Watch how God will come to you. Watch for the signs that spring forth from the kingdom of the ordinary. And thank God...always thank God for the gift of “believing days.”

³ *Listening to Your Life* by Frederick Buechner, p. 326.