

**The foot of the mountain is where God shapes our faith.**

For about 15 years of my student ministry career, I would lead an annual High School Ministry trip to Mexico. Depending on the church I was at, we would either go to Mexicali and work in a village or partner with Amor Ministries and build homes for families in different villages.

One of my favorite trips to Mexico was the year we moved from going to Mexicali to partnering with Amor Ministries. The year before, it felt like students and adults were just going through the motions. Of course, going to Mexicali had become a “sacred cow” in our ministry, but I still felt the Lord nudging me for a change.

I went to my boss about it, and we talked and prayed; then we went to our student leadership team, comprised of Juniors and Seniors. Of course, kids don’t always see the need for a change; they want to do what they have done and loved for years. So this was a big ask for them to pray. After praying, we all felt the Lord was moving us forward to try Amor Ministries and build homes for those who did not have one.

When we got to our village, we were helping several families, and our goal was to build all three houses in one week and put on a VBS for the church in the village. These homes that are made are tiny, about 8x24’ no running water or electricity, basically glorified shelters. We were building one of the homes for an elderly lady who took care of her grandchildren.

Somebody discovered that she didn’t have an outhouse for a bathroom, and our senior guys couldn’t believe that this older woman had to go out to the fields to go to the bathroom. They wanted to do something about this. During their lunch break on our first day, they went throughout the village to find spare and old materials and conned one of our leaders to go back over the border to get the last of the supplies they would need to provide an outhouse. During our week there, these guys dug a 6-8 feet deep and 6 feet wide square hole to build an outhouse. They worked on it during

lunch, during breaks, and spent time after hours digging. They were motivated.

Throughout our week, we were all stretched, stepping out in faith and using the gifts God had given. On our last day in Mexico, we presented each family with their home, prayed for them, blessed their home, and blessed the elderly lady’s outhouse! Our hearts were full, and we rode a spiritual high as we headed to San Clemente for the night.

That night we had dinner on the beach around the campfire and talked about all that God had done as a group and in our individual lives. We talked about God’s faithfulness and prayed for what would lie ahead when we got home.

It’s easy to have a solid vibrant faith after a “mountain top” experience like Mexico or any mission trips or retreats we may go on. Struggles, fears, and doubts don’t seem to creep in when we are on top of the mountain. Students always say, “Do we have to go home? I want to stay here.” Adults say it, too, when they’ve met God on a retreat!

These are the same emotions the disciples faced as they came down from Mount Hermon after the transfiguration. Peter, James, and John just witnessed the Glory of God and the reassuring voice of God. They just experienced the ultimate mountain top experience. Even though Peter wanted to turn that time into a camping trip, Jesus knew there was work to be done in the valley.

**When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. “What are you arguing with them about?” he asked. A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 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.” “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus**

replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” Mark 9:14-19

### **Misplaced Faith**

This scene reminds me of Moses descending from Mount Sinai with tablets in hand and seeing an unbelieving Israel worshiping a golden calf. Here comes Jesus with three disciples after being transfigured, after experiencing the glory of God, to a new generation of unbelieving Israelites. As Jesus, Peter, James, and John descend the mountain, they see a large crowd with the other disciples and the scribes in a heated argument. Scribes were experts in Hebrew law, preparing copies of the sacred Torah.

As the scene unfolds, we see the scribes bullying the disciples, using knowledge as their club, after a failed attempt to cast out a demon and heal a boy. In usual Jesus fashion, he confronts his critics with a question: “What are you arguing with them about?” And a hush falls over the crowd.

In that moment of silence, a father stands up. A desperate, courageous father steps forward and addresses Jesus’ questions: “Teacher, I brought you my son...” Mark gives a pretty graphic account of what happens to this boy, not once, but as we will see, three different times. Let’s freeze this frame right here. We have the crowd, who is hoping to see a miracle but are disappointed when the disciples can’t deliver; we have the Scribes who are smirking because of the disciple’s failure; we have the disciples who are wondering why they couldn’t heal the boy; and, of course, we have a desperate father and a boy who has lived a miserable existence.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John, coming off of their mountaintop experience, seeing God’s glory and hearing his comforting voice, get smacked upside the head with the reality of life at the foot of the mountain. Coming down the mountain is so hard; maybe that’s why we never want to leave!

Coming back from Mexico, we were hit upside the head with life as well. After an amazing dinner and worship time on the beach, a few hours later, we all had food poisoning. Sixty some kids, 15 or so leaders, all losing their cookies all night long! Some had to pull over every few hours on the way home. Needless to say, the mountain-high hit was traded for the valley low at the bottom of the toilet!

This is the turning point in the Gospel of Mark. From here on out, everything will get harder for Jesus and the disciples. Jesus will be the ultimate example of what it means to “take up your cross and follow.” God will shape these characters’ faith at the foot of the mountain. It’s at the foot of the mountain that God will shape our faith. In this passage, we learn that taking up our cross and following Jesus will result in hardship. As Bryson said last week, “Hardship is the path to glory.”

The father’s original intention was to bring his son to Jesus to be healed, but since Jesus was not there, he asked the disciples. It’s a fair ask, as the disciples were sent out to preach and perform miracles. They had been successful in the past. But in this situation, they fail miserably. I love what Andy Drake says:

**The man had brought his son, believing in Jesus’ ability to exorcize the demon, but the failure of the disciples, who represent Jesus, crushed his faith almost completely. If their strength derived from Jesus, then their failure would seem to imply that Jesus, too, will lack the power to heal. Thus, the father’s belief in Jesus (and the belief of the entire crowd) is badly shaken.**

### **Humble Faith**

“You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” 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.

Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. “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’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out.

**The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. Mark 9:19-27.**

Jesus asks two rhetorical questions as he laments the world’s brokenness and is exasperated with people’s faithlessness. You can hear pieces of it in Numbers 14:11. *“The Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?’”* Jesus is directing his rebuke to all of humanity. It was the disciples, the crowd, and all of humanity. There is a sense of urgency to this cry from Jesus. There isn’t much time left to soften hard hearts and grow their faith quickly. The miracles of Jesus were to show that he and God were one. And even though Jesus and God were one, this instance and the ineffectiveness of the disciples would call into question Jesus’ true nature and power.

In Jesus’ exasperation, he shows compassion. Jesus asks the boy to be brought to him. As he sees the boy’s condition, he is moved to compassion. He asks the father how long this has been going on, again showing compassion to this father. For you parents out there, imagine this being your child. Imagine the pain this father goes through and a natural feeling of helplessness.

As the demon continues to assault this boy, Jesus continues asking questions. It’s almost as if Jesus is building up this father’s faith, repairing the brokenness of the situation the father just experienced. The father goes into more detail about his son and how this demon has tried to kill the boy.

I’m sure this father has gone to great lengths to find a cure for his boy; he thinks Jesus might be the answer, but due to the misplaced faith of the disciples, they could not cure the boy.

The father then asks, “But if you can do anything, take pity on us, and help us.” The father isn’t just asking Jesus to heal the boy, but to heal him. The father needs just as much restoration as the boy. We see the seeds of doubt show through in the father’s request. “If you can....” I think this father’s faith was squashed when the disciples couldn’t heal his boy. He doubts who Jesus is and lacks faith in Jesus’ power.

Let’s not be too hard on this father. He is just like us. The world’s weight beats us down; it’s easy to let doubt creep in. It’s easy to doubt God’s goodness and kindness in our world. We are that father. It’s even more

complicated when this verse gets taken out of context with the “name it and claim it” movement, which says it will happen if you just have enough belief. But see, it’s not just belief. It’s in whom you believe.

I was talking to my friend Jimmy the other day as we were talking about this passage, and he reminded me, “Jesus’ faith becomes our faith. Jesus is the one who always believes. Jesus’ faith never wavers. Have faith in his faith. His rest is our rest. It’s not relying on myself but on him.” This is the beauty of the new covenant. That is the doubt that Jesus pulls out of this man. It’s not about whether the father believed Jesus but was he willing to trust Jesus with his and his son’s life.

In genuine authenticity, this man spurts out, *“I do believe; help my unbelief.”* I think this is one of the most excellent phrases in the Bible. He begs for help just as he is—a doubter. The minute the father casts his weakness onto the Lord, Jesus heals his son.

At that very moment, this boy and his father have new lives. The demon has departed, and this boy rests for the first time in a long time. We see the tenderness of Jesus once again as he goes and lifts up the boy. Through this story, we see Jesus have victory over sickness, evil, and death itself!

Mark doesn’t record the father’s reaction, the boy, or the crowd; his attention goes to Jesus and his disciples. There is work that needs to be done in the hearts of the disciples as they sit at the foot of the mountain.

### **Prayerful Faith**

*“After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why couldn’t we drive it out?’ He replied, ‘This kind can come out only by prayer’” (Mark 9:28-29).* The disciples are stumped about why they couldn’t drive out the demon. If you look at this passage in Matthew and Luke, they record Jesus’ answer as their lack of faith, faith not even the size of a mustard seed, whereas Mark records their lack of prayer.

There is an old saying, “Where there is little faith, there is little prayer, and where there is little prayer, there is little faith.” Both of these go hand in hand. As the disciples sat at the foot of the mountain, we learned they had been going through the motions. They might have known all the right things to say, but they were powerless due to their lack of prayer.

If we look at this story, we don’t see Jesus praying over this boy. But we know that Jesus spends regular time in prayer, in silence and solitude, communing with his

Father. One of my favorite authors, Henri Nouwen, has this to say about Jesus' prayer life:

**Jesus continuously left his apostles to enter into prayer with the Father. The more I read the gospels, the more I am stuck with Jesus' single-minded concern with the Father. From the day his parents found him in the Temple, Jesus speaks about his Father as the source of all his words and actions. When he withdraws himself from the crowd and even from his closest friends, he withdraws to be with the Father. "In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there" (Mark 1:35). All through his life, Jesus considers his relationship with the Father as the center, beginning, and end of his ministry. Henri Nouwen**

For three years, Jesus modeled prayer for the disciples. He got away regularly, and his disciples watched that. The disciples learn a harsh lesson, don't ignore your prayer life, one they will take with them long after Jesus ascends into heaven and one we can learn from; it's at the foot of the mountain where God shapes our faith. We can chase those spiritual highs and try to stay on top of the mountain and not face life, but it is at the foot of the mountain where God shapes our faith. It's at those times, the complex, ordinary, everyday parts of our lives, where God shapes us.

Over the last year, we've talked a lot about what shapes us at CPC. As we lean into our ten year vision of Transformed people, Transforming the Peninsula, we must guard our hearts against unbelief and lean into the ways of Jesus. The disciple's problem was they thought they could follow Jesus in their own power. They still didn't get it. This is a form of unbelief. They trusted themselves instead of Jesus. But as we learn in this story, it wasn't them but God who overcame evil.

I have found myself much like these disciples on my faith journey. Most recently in 2020. We walked into 2020 with a staff member's spouse ending their life and a dear employee who locked up the church on her way out from work, went home perfectly fine, and died overnight from a stroke.

And then, the pandemic hit, and we could not meet in person. Several of us, whose roles were more behind the scenes, now became front and center roles. It was grueling. Long days, constantly solving problems, how are we going to do this or that, getting creative to keep people connected, adding more content opportunities

to the plate to help people stay connected, teaching people how to use technology, dealing with disgruntled people and their constant complaints about the decision that was made to not meet in person, my anger of the whole situation from work to our world was boiling below the surface. Frankly, I had no time to pee, let alone pray! My soul was suffering.

In the summer of 2020, I was asked to be in a Soul Care cohort with 30 other pastors from around the Bay Area that would start in September. We were coming out of lockdown with small groups of people being able to meet outside. So once a month, I drove to Livermore to meet with pastors in similar situations to learn to care for our Souls in an open-air barn at the foot of a mountain. I needed new tools. I found myself embracing spiritual practices like silence and solitude, the sabbath, spiritual direction, and new forms of prayer, which slowly brought my soul back to life. I was learning new habits and practices to abide in Jesus. It was at the foot of the mountain that God was shaping my faith.

We live in a culture where we put our faith in ourselves. That has shaped us, and it has formed us. To be transformed, we believe we must abide in Jesus.

**Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5, ESV).**

This story I'm preaching on is one of the first passages I heard preached at CPC. When Jesus tells the disciples that "This kind can come out only by prayer," we can see Jesus doesn't pray before he heals, but he has been caring and cultivating his prayer life from a young age, knowing he is getting his strength and power from his Father. He abided. In that first sermon I heard here at CPC, Mark Mitchell said, "If you move into those kinds of situations without an ongoing and intimate conversation with the Lord, you are going to get beat up. Prayerlessness results in powerlessness. Faith expresses itself in an ongoing life of prayer."

This is why I'm so excited about the next phase of our vision and the practice labs offered. We have the opportunity to be intentional in forming spiritual habits as God continues to transform us through practicing an ongoing life of prayer!

If I polled this group, I'm sure we would find that many of us relate to different parts of this story. For all the doubters out there—maybe you have been beaten down by life's challenges, or you need to have all the answers before you believe—this story is for you! First, every believer doubts, if they say they don't, they are lying. Second, do what this father did; cry out to God with your unbelief. Be authentic with him. God can handle it!

See, Jesus taught we only needed faith the size of a mustard seed to believe, and he takes it from there. Remember, it's the object of our faith, Jesus. Can you believe that he can do anything? Jesus asks us to "Come, follow me." It's one step at a time. Joni Erikson Tada says, "Faith isn't the ability to believe long and far into the misty future. It's simply taking God at his Word and taking the next step." There is something about receiving God's goodness and kindness when we come to the end of ourselves as we take that next step.

Also, don't do your doubting alone! Find some friends in the faith to walk with you through your times of doubt who have been honest with their doubts. Jude 1:22 says, "Have mercy on those who doubt." When I was in youth ministry, we made space for kids to doubt. We walked alongside them in it, and seeing how God would move was always fun. Parents, this is critically important as you raise your preteens and teens. Don't shut down their doubts, don't be afraid of their doubts; listen intently, pray earnestly, guide them to the truth, and be honest about your times of doubting. This is the time in life that they start to make their faith their own.

For those going through the motions, this is a hard place to be. It's time to confess your unbelief as well. You believe more in yourself than in the power of God. Growing up in the church, I've learned I'm pretty good at going through the motions. I've learned the words to say, the prayers to pray, and the scripture to quote, yet, my heart is empty. Ministry is pretty ineffective when I'm in that place. It's the attitude that "If I pull myself up by my bootstraps, I can make this ministry happen."

God will call me out when I'm in these places, whether it's by nudging my heart, or someone on staff, or a friend, lovingly offering what they see. It's in those times that I've got to ask Jesus the same questions the disciples do, "Why can't I..." It's in that posture Jesus asks me, "Do you believe I can do anything?" and "Will

you stop worrying, quit interrupting, cease striving, and simply pray?" These questions expose areas of my heart that I've not paid attention to.

Like the disciples, maybe your focus has shifted from God can do anything to I can do anything. To you, Jesus says,

**Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. Matthew 11:28-30, MSG**

I want to offer some time for quiet reflection. One of the prayers we learned in our practice lab on silence and solitude is the prayer of examen. Let's ask God to search our hearts through the prayer of examen. Close your eyes and take a deep breath or two. Offer yourself and your time to God. Ask the Holy Spirit to be in your prayer time. If you are in the doubting group, reflect on the question, "Do you believe that God can do anything?"

If you are in the going through the motions group, reflect on the question, "Will you stop worrying, quit interrupting, cease striving, and simply pray?" Notice if you were distant from, resistant to, or unaware of God's power, goodness, and kindness. Offer these reflections to God, and ask for the grace to receive God's power, goodness, and kindness more freely. Continue to run to him in your unbelief; it's where Jesus meets and shapes us.

### **Adaptation of a Valley of the Vision prayer.**

**Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, you have brought me to the foot of the mountain, where I live in the depths but see you in the heights; hemmed in by mountains of sin, I behold your glory. Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive, that the foot of the mountain is where you shape us. Lord, let me find your light in my darkness, your life in my death, your joy in my sorrow, your grace**

in my sin, your riches in my poverty, your  
glory at the foot of the mountain. Amen

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail,  
please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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