

Believing

A sermon presented by Rev. Robert W. Scott, Jr.
On Sunday, February 14, 2010

Sermon:

Today I'm going to begin with two stories. One has to do with Mark Twain on one of his visits to the Holy Land – and perhaps some of you have heard one or both of these accounts. But, he was accompanied on that trip years ago by his wife, Olivia. While they were staying in Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee, one evening it was a moonlit night and the weather was perfect (no snow) which gave Twain the romantic notion of taking his wife on a boat ride out on the Sea of Galilee. They walked down to the pier, and he asked a man who happened to be sitting in a rowboat how much he would charge them to row them out onto the water. Twain was dressed, as you may remember pictures of him, in his usual white suit, white shoes, and white Texas hat. And looking him over, the oarsman presumed him to be one of those wealthy Texans from the United States. And thinking about that apparently, he said, "Well, I guess for you two, it would be about twenty-five dollars to take you out." (Now remember this was in the 1890's. Twenty-five dollars for a canoe ride out onto a lake.) Mark Twain at that thanked him, but then walked away, and with Olivia's hand on his arm he was heard to say, "Dear, now I know why Jesus walked on the water!"

The second story is about nine-year-old Johnny. One Sunday on the way home from church, his mother asked him what he had learned in Sunday school. And I don't know whether any of you ask the kids what they learned in Sunday school, but Johnny said they learned about the Jews crossing the Red Sea. And his mother said, "Oh, well, tell me about it." Well, Johnny seemed to roll his eyes a little bit and reluctantly he gave his mother this version.

He said, "Well, the Egyptians and their king, a guy named Pharaoh, were chasing the Jews. And when the Jews got to the sea they would have been trapped, but Moses had laid down some land mines while the engineers built a pontoon bridge across the water. The Jews got across, and Moses called in the air force and the F-16s flew in and bombed the Egyptians and wiped them out."

Hearing Johnny's version, mother was shocked, as you can imagine, and asked unbelievably: "Is that what they taught you in Sunday school?" And then Johnny said, "Mom, if I told you the story the way my teacher told it, you'd never believe it."

Well that little boy was probably right in some ways. It is an amazing story. In fact, there are many parts of scripture that can be difficult to fathom.

Our message this morning is partly for those who find it hard to believe some of these things, and their number is legion. The Bible as we know it and believe is the foundation of our faith, and yet there are hard-to-believe stories, some of them involve water and are seemingly a bit hard to swallow. One is the Exodus account of the parting of the waters so the children of Israel could escape the Egyptian forces of Pharaoh. Another is Matthew's version of Jesus and Peter walking on the water. A third involves that intense religious experience in which Moses talks with God at the burning bush (which is not consumed by fire as we recall), and then Moses comes down and as it is described in our scripture this morning, coming down from the mountain with the skin of his face shining so brightly that his own brother, Aaron and others are afraid to come near him. A fourth is that amazing mountaintop experience as Jesus is speaking with two paragons of the faith (Moses and Elijah) who already had passed on to heaven. And the voice of God there telling the disciples who were there to listen to his chosen one; in other parts of different bibles or scriptures he is described as God telling them to listen to his beloved son.

Some of the Bible's amazing stories, each inviting disbelief or at least some skepticism. As we read or hear stories – these stories from scripture, we may question what really happened. Most of us are inquisitive by nature, and analytical by our education. We are not at home in the environment of miraculous things. For one thing, science has given us an understanding of the universe that the people up to the first century didn't have. We know a great deal more about the laws by which God runs the universe than they did, and we count on the fact that God will keep the laws that He's made. So the thought of God's interrupting — especially violating — the law of gravity, for instance, to push aside or to allow a person to walk on water, or the thought of persons being transfigured before our eyes — isn't easy for us moderns to understand or accept.

And added to this fact is that we get from the Gospels the very definite impression that Jesus himself seemed not to want to be thought of as just a "wonderworker." He refused to make stone into bread or jump off the tower of the temple just to show God's miraculous power.

But there are a couple of things we must not forget. One is that stories like this have something behind them. And if we have any confidence at all in the integrity of the writers of the Bible, we can't think that they were writing fiction or that they deliberately lied when they wrote. Some people may feel that the details of the stories were perhaps changed — even exaggerated — as the stories were told and re-told through the centuries. But there must have been some center of fact around which these details were gathered in the first place.

And even more important I think: in the earliest biblical times when few people could read or write, they relied very heavily on accuracy in telling of events and stories from one generation to the next. Later when things were written down, the Scribes who copied manuscripts (and particularly scripture manuscripts) were extremely accurate. For centuries scribes actually could be severely punished or even put to death if mistakes were found in their work.

And another thing to remember is that unique creatures do unique things - physically, spiritually, and mentally. For instance, physically according to all our scientific knowledge, even today, certain creatures shouldn't be able to fly (bumblebees, for instance) but they do. Some psychics have helped police solve crimes by communicating spiritually with persons who have died. And in the mental realm, Mozart, for instance, wrote a concerto before he was five years old. Of course Mozart was not an ordinary person. But none of these examples is an ordinary happening.

And so I am suggesting it is with Jesus and his followers. They were not ordinary persons doing simple ordinary things. Our scientifically-minded age is rightly proud of its growing knowledge of the laws by which God operates, but it's also in great danger of limiting God within the laws that he created so that no room would be left for his doing anything unusual or extraordinary.

And so I am asking that rather than look upon these stories as embarrassments or insults to our scientific intelligence, I'm suggesting we try to see them as aids to our faith, which seems to be the intent of the biblical authors. They're stories intended to confirm our intuition and our belief that God is not limited by his own creation - we might say not limited any more than an inventor is limited to what he's already invented. He may be able to change how his invention works any time he chooses.

I began in college as an 'applied math' major - which is mainly theoretical physics. And there is a course entitled "the philosophy of science," it was taught by the head of the engineering department. And that course was partly intended to help us understand science and reason actually as simply tools of "trial and error" – tools of probability, really. They tell us only that the more something has happened in the past - under certain circumstances - the more likely it is to happen again under those same circumstances or conditions. That's why the weatherman or woman – the meteorologists aren't always right. (They're simply telling us what's likely to happen from what they've already seen and learned.) Science always leaves room for unforeseen forces to affect circumstances – as one scientist suggests: those unforeseen forces are like a butterfly in a meadow in England fluttering its wings eventually to affect the movement of a tropical storm in the Caribbean. What I'm trying to say is simply this: our beliefs (including our religious beliefs) and the field of science don't need to be at odds with each other.

But I'm also suggesting that it's not so important what you and I believe in. Most of the world believes "in" God - more than 97% we're told; but for an awful lot of those people, God isn't a very significant part of their life. In other words, their belief doesn't effect many of their decisions; and for the most part, as much as they may believe God exists - and even believe that he has great power, these folks feel they can get along quite well on their own; they probably actually hope or perhaps expect they'll never need God to help. Believing in God is not very important in that sense. However, what is important is what we believe into. Let me explain.

Novelist Frederick Buechner, who also happened to be a Presbyterian minister, compiled a little book on the ABCs of Belief as he called them. And here's his comment under the heading "Believing," he says, prepositions can be very eloquent. A man is "in" architecture or a woman is "in" teaching, we say - meaning that's their job, and that's how they make enough money to enjoy themselves the rest of the time. But if we say they are "into" these things, that's an entirely different story. "Into" means something more like total immersion. It means they live and breathe what they do. They take it home with them nights. They can't get enough of it. To be "into" books means that just the sight of a signed first edition of *Alice in Wonderland* sets your

heart pounding. However to be "in" books means simply selling them at the Borders Books store.

Actually, along similar lines as Buechner's describing the meaning of being "into something," you may be interested or you may perhaps you already know, New Testament Greek and Aramaic literally speaks of believing "into," rather than the English meaning of believing "in" someone or believing "in" something. The prepositions used are "into." And in English we perhaps can convey the distinction best by using either "in" for one meaning and by using "into" or using no preposition at all for the other meaning.

In other words "Believing in God" is an intellectual proposition. It need have no more effect on your life or mine than believing in Freud's method of interpreting dreams or believing in the theory that Sir Francis Bacon wrote *Romeo and Juliet!* Rather than Shakespeare. "Believing into God" or "believing God" is something else again. It doesn't leave you unaffected like believing the world is round; rather it stirs our emotions like believing the world is a miracle. "Believing into God", "believing God" affects who we are and what we do with our life. It moves us to action - as would believing your house is on fire or believing somebody loves you.

When Jesus says that whoever believes "into" him – and that's what he says – whoever believes "into" him shall never die, he doesn't mean that agreeing with statements like the Apostles' Creed guarantees eternal life. Eternal life doesn't come as a result of simply believing in God. It is the experience every day of believing him.

And believing "into" God means that our love and appreciation of God will grow every day, that he will affect our decisions, and that we'll look for all kinds of ways to serve him - and sometimes the results of our relationship with God will defy science and reason just like some kind of miracle.

Those who believed thousands of years ago were not God's only followers through whom God could work miracles. And I think you and I need an occasional reminder that God's plan is that we believe into him and that we become those through whom God can work miracles in our own day. We can be sure that it's the reason God planned that mountaintop experience for Moses and Aaron, as well as the mountain-top experience for those disciples who were with Jesus during that transfiguration.

And what happened at the event which we now call the Transfiguration had a tremendously significant effect upon the disciples' understanding of who Jesus was. High on the

mountain, Peter, James, and John experienced this miraculous transfiguration of Jesus; this vision of the two greatest heroes of their tradition — Moses, the lawgiver and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. These two heroes of the past talking to Jesus who appears “in glory” – appears to be the “heavenly-looking” Messiah whom they expected or hoped; whom God himself with a voice from the clouds, calls Jesus “His chosen one”; in other translations, “His beloved Son.” And then God directs James, Peter, and John to listen to Jesus.

I think that one of the reasons this experience of these three disciples ought to be believable (even to a skeptic) is that in all three Gospel accounts of this event, Peter, James, and John didn't really understand what was going on. It really made no sense to them at the time. And yet, although they apparently were afraid (and that's quite understandable I think); they didn't seem to want the experience to end. They even asked if they could put up several booths (temporary shelters) for these three heroes - perhaps hoping that they'd all be there for a while longer. But Moses and Elijah were soon gone, and only Jesus remained. Then, as they came down from that amazing, wonderful mountaintop experience, Jesus (as he had spoken on their way to Caesarea Philippi) again spoke about his rising from the dead - and later, again about his having to suffer: concepts on that transfiguration day well beyond the disciples' understanding. And remember: the idea that the Messiah should suffer and be killed was in complete contrast to the Jewish tradition and expectation.

I suggest one of the reasons God staged this event was that those three key disciples - Peter, James, and John - needed that unusual and extraordinary experience of the voice and the power of God himself letting them know who Jesus really was. It probably was what enabled them to retain enough trace of believing Jesus through what later at the cross surely would seem like hopelessness and defeat. God knows what it takes for us to believe him. Even these men, who were so close to Jesus, needed this amazing experience, something big to believe; something they could never forget.

God has done his part to enable this world to know how much he loves us and to believe him in these words; to enable us to know the extent to which he'd go “so that we would want to love him and want to help him make this heaven on earth.” He came in Jesus; not as the expected conquering warrior, but as a gentle savior - he came not

with the power of coercion, but with the power of love. He came not wielding the punishment of a sword, but yielding in the suffering of the cross. And he came not with the threat of death, but with the promise of resurrection and life. God knows that instilling fear in us might cause us to follow him, but it would never enable us to love him. God's plan clearly has been what you and I feel this tremendous love he has had for us should be and that we believe into him; and then that we help the rest of this world know who Jesus really is.

We began with two stories; we'll close with one more. A few years ago, Douglas Maurer, of Creve Coeur, Missouri, had been feeling really bad for several days. His temperature was ranging between 103 and 105 degrees, and he was suffering from severe flu-like symptoms. Finally, his mother took him to the hospital in St. Louis. Douglas Maurer was diagnosed there as having leukemia. He was 15 years old. The doctors told Douglas in frank terms about his disease. They said that for the next three years, he'd have to undergo chemotherapy. They didn't sugarcoat the side effects. Among other things, they told Douglas he'd lose his hair, he'd go bald and that his body would most likely bloat. He soon went into a deep depression.

His aunt called a floral shop near the hospital to send Douglas an arrangement of flowers. She told the clerk that it was for her teenage nephew who has leukemia. When the flowers arrived at the hospital, they were beautiful. Douglas read the card from his aunt. And then he saw a second card that came with the flowers, and this is what it said, "Douglas — I took your order. I work at Brix Florist here in St. Louis. I had leukemia when I was seven years old. I'm 22 years old now. Good luck. And God is with you just as he's been with me. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura Bradley."

Douglas' face lit up when he read that card, and he gave out a tremendous sigh of relief and hope. It's curious. Douglas Maurer was in a hospital filled with millions of dollars worth of the most sophisticated scientific medical equipment. He was being treated by expert doctors and nurses with medical training totaling in the hundreds of years. But it was a young salesclerk in a flower shop, a woman making at that time \$170 a week, who by taking time to care and by being willing to go with what she believed God-in-her-heart told her to do — it was that young woman who gave Douglas the miracle of hope and the will to carry on; the will to make the best of his very difficult

situation; and gave him the experience of believing God whose love gave Douglas life.

I'm certain that we tend to be unaffected by much of what we believe in; but the God you "believe" or "believe into" will set your heart pounding; you'll live and breathe his love for you and for everyone; it's a relationship and a journey which will affect everything; it will affect who we are and what we do with our life — and most important, it will effect the ways we love and serve him as we become those through whom God works His miracles of love in the lives of others. In Christ's name, Amen.