

Lectionary Scriptures  
in message / liturgy:

Mark 8: 27 – 38

2,710 words

Additional Scripture  
references:

2 Corinthians 5: 7  
Matthew 8: 23 – 27  
Mark 5: 33 – 36  
Matthew 19: 26

Key songs:

VU 705 For All the Saints  
MV 142 Oh a Song Must Rise  
VU 532 Creator, We Gather  
VU 580 Faith Of Our Fathers  
MV 28 God of the Bible

Additional music:

God Is In Control (Twila Paris)  
Only Faith (Joseph M. Martin)

Literary references:

Footprints (in the Sand)

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## **O Ye of Little Faith**

Back at the end of June, in the last of my three-part series on the Trinity, we considered the case of the woman who had been afflicted for decades by a bleeding disorder.

In Mark 5: 33 – 36 we had read the following:

*33Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. 34He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”*

*35 While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?"*

*36 Overhearing c what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe."*

After the woman touched Jesus' cloak, he felt the power go out from him, but hadn't seen what had happened. But the woman who was healed knew what had happened, and she told him the truth as she saw it. Jesus told her to go in peace, free of suffering. He then told something similar to the people from the synagogue leader's house, whose daughter had died.

Of course, when they went back to the house, they found the daughter alive and well.

That must have been a shock. And before considering that, think about what their thoughts were when travelling back to the house.

What did they expect to find?

They already *knew* Jairus' daughter was dead. Is it possible they even imagined a different outcome?

Back in June, we were exploring the concept of the Holy Spirit, and how we could begin to appreciate and understand what the Spirit was, when the Spirit was something we couldn't see.

We concluded that it required faith to believe in an unseen Spirit.

But at least with the Spirit, we sometimes think we can see evidence of the Spirit acting for our good and the good of the world around us.

We know there are things that happen, and we know that these things defy explanation - unless the explanation is that it is the work of an unseen God.

In 2 Corinthians 5: 7 (KJV) we hear:

*For we walk by faith, not by sight.*

We also recall the story of Abraham, who believed so much in what God had promised him and that what God told him was correct that he prepared to sacrifice his son.

That's extreme faith.

I wonder what it would take for us to have that kind of faith.

In our modern world, we are always interested in understanding all the details of the things, people and processes around us.

I enjoy watching television programs like "How It's Made" and "How Stuff Works" and also shows that teach do-it-yourself techniques for doing many things that we aren't trained to do, but are interested in learning.

It's part of understanding the physical processes that make the world tick.

I love to learn things, and in many of these cases, they are things I might not ever do. But I enjoy understanding how these things can be done, or how they are done by experts in fields that I may never, ever master.

I also enjoy shows like “Mayday” which looks at various air disasters and airplane accidents and crashes. I don’t watch “Mayday” because I enjoy watching crashes, or learning about people being killed which is sadly the reality most of the time in an airplane accident.

I watch it because I enjoy learning how it happened, what should have happened, what went wrong, and what experts have decided to do about it so the chance of it happening again can be minimized.

Yes, it’s true that I do enjoy learning that people did survive some of the disasters, and in some cases everyone survived (such as the well-known story of US Airways Flight 1549 that, after dual engine failure because of birds being ingested into both engines, landed successfully on the Hudson River in New York City because of the care and skill of the flight crew, Capt. Chesley Sullenberger and First Officer Jeffrey Skiles - If you’ve never watched the movie “Sully” about the story, I’d highly recommend it).

But it’s mostly the how and why that interest me.

Now, does that imply that, knowing what I know from those programs, it takes a bit of faith to step onto an airplane?

Sure it does.

But we do that sort of thing every day.

It takes a bit of faith to venture out on the roads. Sadly, we heard on the news this past week that a 23-year-old Bolton resident was killed in a crash at King Street and Coleraine Drive.

So in our minds, we know that kind of outcome is always possible – but we venture out anyway, having enough faith in ourselves, others and our God that we will probably be okay.

Consider the story of the disciples as told in Matthew 8: 23 – 27 (NIV):

*23 Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. 24 Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. 25 The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”*

*26 He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.*

*27 The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”*

Very low tech, compared to some of the things I’ve been talking about.

But I’m sure the disciples feared for their lives.

And they were told they simply didn’t have enough faith.

In a way, Jesus was telling them that they didn’t know him well enough to understand that he wasn’t going to let anything happen to them, and that they didn’t understand they also had been given that power, if they just used the faith they were entitled to claim.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we heard Jesus questioning the disciples about who they thought he was.

*27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"*

*28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."*

*29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

*Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."*

So by this point, the disciples understood who Jesus was.

This was still a leap of faith, because Jesus looked like any other ordinary man.

But they had previously seen him control the wind and the waves, and, as they say, seeing is believing.

It's much easier to believe in things when there's evidence involved.

So is the question "how can we have faith in a God we can't see"?

Or should I ask the question another way?

Perhaps the question should be "how can we see the things around us that confirm for us that God is real and working in our lives?"

We talked a bit last week about the natural world around us.

We talked about the beauty and order of Creation, as we considered this period of September called Creation Time. It's a time set aside to think about Creation and our relationship with the world around us.

Considering God's Creation requires, again, a degree of faith. We read how God created the world, and the seas, and the stars, and the moon, and the fish, and the birds, and the animals, and us.

Do any of you know how to do that?

Have you ever met anyone who knew how to do that?

Can you imagine doing all that?

I can't.

So accepting all the wonderful things we see around us requires a lot of faith. Faith that what is impossible with us, is possible with God.

As Jesus said in Matthew chapter 19, verse 26:

*"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

So does looking at the created beauty and order all around us help us to have faith in God?

I think it should.

After all, we need evidence, and if you look around, the evidence is staring us in the face.

Because if we can't think of another explanation for Creation, then perhaps what we see is the evidence we're looking for in favour of a generous creating God.

We aren't usually looking for evidence, and when we do find some, we're often quick to dismiss it or explain it away.

One of my favourite literary stories on this topic is the allegorical poem "Footprints" also known as "Footprints in the Sand"

There have been many versions published over the years, and the authorship is disputed.

The version I'm going to read is attributed to Carolyn Carty in 1963, although there are versions with differences in wording going back to, supposedly, 1936 as claimed to have been authored by Mary Stevenson, and a version claimed by Margaret Fishbeck Powers, who has resorted to litigation in hopes of enforcing her authorship claim. The versions all tell the same story, even if using different words.

Powers claimed she wrote the poem for her wedding in 1964 and also claimed she once had a post-office-dated, sealed envelope that she sent to herself to prove ownership but it had become lost. She claims her boxes of poems, including Footprints, were stolen from a moving truck that was bringing her



family belongings from Toronto to British Columbia in 1980. Hallmark, the greeting-card company, agreed to her ownership claims in the late 1980s and sends her royalties whenever they reprint it. Stevenson's son launched a copyright infringement lawsuit 20 years ago, almost a decade after his mother died. The case couldn't be settled, because the copy Stevenson supposedly wrote in 1936 (which, the family claimed, had been authenticated) has also since gone missing. Nobody has an original any more, and although all three copyrighted their version, there's no actual evidence to support any of the claims as being more truthful than the others.

All of the alleged authors insist that their version is original and that this message suddenly and independently came to them as inspiration from the Lord — though the overlap in wording would cast doubts on such claims.

Tracing the exact origins and development may be impossible, but there is a theme in 19th-century evangelical spirituality that highlights the metaphorical footsteps of Jesus. For example, here is the beginning of the 1871 hymn, "Sweetly, Lord, Have We Heard Thee Calling":

*1. Sweetly, Lord, have we heard Thee calling,*

*Come, follow Me!*

*And we see where Thy footprints falling*

*Lead us to Thee.*

*[Refrain:]*

*Footprints of Jesus,*

*That make the pathway glow;*

*We will follow the steps of Jesus*

*Where'er they go.*

Rachel Aviv, in a thoughtful essay on “Footprints,” points to another 19th-century use of the footprints imagery, this time more in line with the 20th-century poem-meditation. It comes from the opening paragraph of an 1880 sermon by Charles Spurgeon:

*Were you ever in a new trouble, one which was so strange that you felt that a similar trial had never happened to you and, moreover, you dreamt that such a temptation had never assailed anybody else? I should not wonder if that was the thought of your troubled heart.*

*And did you ever walk out upon that lonely desert island upon which you were wrecked and say, “I am alone—alone—ALONE—nobody was ever here before me”?*

*And did you suddenly pull up short as you noticed, in the sand, the footprints of a man?*

*I remember right well passing through that experience—and when I looked, lo, it was not merely the footprints of a man that I saw, but I thought I knew whose feet had left those imprints. They were the marks of One who had been crucified, for there was the print of the nails. So I thought to myself, “If He has been here, it is no longer a desert island. As His blessed feet once trod this wilderness-way, it blossoms now like the rose and it becomes to my troubled spirit as a very garden of the Lord!”*

So although you can debate the origin, it's been printed and reprinted so many times by so many people that I don't think anybody knows who really wrote it in the first place. Nevertheless, it's a great poem.

I personally like the way the version claimed by Carolyn Carty reads, so regardless of the authorship disputes, that's the version I'll read.

If you're not familiar with it, close your eyes and imagine the scene with me:

## FOOTPRINTS

***One night a man had a dream. He dreamed He was walking along the beach with the LORD. Across the sky flashed scenes from His life. For each scene He noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. One belonging to Him and the other to the LORD.***

***When the last scene of His life flashed before Him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of His life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times of His life.***

***This really bothered Him and He questioned the LORD about it. LORD you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.***

***The LORD replied, my precious, precious child, I Love you and I would never leave you! During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.***

It's an inspirational story, and shows how interpreting the evidence we see has a major impact on our faith journey.

The person in the poem has seen the evidence, but has interpreted it in a way that threatens to destroy his faith. He sees it as proof that God's promises were in vain, and that perhaps God isn't really there at all.

However, he does still have enough faith left to ask God about it.

And God's response changes everything.

I like to think that there's an ending, where the man confirms his faith has been restored. Perhaps he breaks down, weeping at his lack of faith, and confesses anew that he will follow the LORD wherever his faith leads him.

Perhaps he smiles, maybe even beaming from ear to ear, because he now knows in his heart that God is there for him.

Perhaps he drops to his knees on the beach, clasps his hands together, and looks prayerfully up to the heavens, offering silent words of thanksgiving.

But maybe if I added an ending, I'd wind up in another messy lawsuit.

So perhaps we'll just remember that with God, all things are possible.

Remember that God is in control. We'll hear Twila Paris sing about that shortly.

If God is in control, we don't need to know everything. We don't need to know how God is going to do the things that, to us, seem either mystical or miraculous (or sometimes both).

We just need to believe that God, who has done these things in the past, will continue to do these things in the future.

We need faith.

And, fortunately for us, God supplies more than enough evidence to justify that faith.

As we journey in faith together, let us always be thankful that we are heirs to a world created by a loving and caring God, and that God's grace is freely available to us, just for the asking.

As we ask for God's grace, let us feel that our faith in a creating God is being renewed each day.

As we give over control of our lives to God, let us feel comforted by knowing what God has done for us, and will do for us in the future.

Thanks be to God.