

WHAT HELPS YOU GET THROUGH AND GROW STRONGER?

Mark 9: 14-29; 15: 25-39

Storms, floods, fires, earthquakes... We've been seeing it all this fall. How many of you have lived through something catastrophic? Sometimes it's not so much what happens around us in a visible way, but what is happening in our personal lives. It can be about the breakdown of a significant relationship and how this destabilizes us. It can be the loss of a job which then leads to financial stress, depression and all kinds of other terrible consequences. It can be an accident which changes our health and our life direction forever. It can be the death of someone close, a major life decision someone makes or a major change in health that affects our lives in a decisive way. But whatever it is and however it happens, crises come into our lives one way or the other.

The question is: how have we coped, how do we cope, how will we cope? Will we be forever diminished in some way? Or, will we find a way to grow meaningfully and live meaningfully despite what we can never have the way it was before?

Sociologists Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek recently conducted a study. They interviewed hundreds of people devastated by the catastrophic storm and flooding that came when hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans twelve years ago. They're now documenting how people are coping with life twelve years later. How has the trauma they lived then changed their lives? Have they found positive ways to live? Have they found meaningful ways to integrate what they experienced? Or has the trauma of what they lost and what has forever changed in their lives left them forever diminished?

What they have found is that those who adapted the fastest were those who were surrounded by a network of support, community support and the individual support of teachers, pastors, shelter workers and others. They were given the space and place not only to express their personal grief and feelings of dislocation, but also support in finding new ways to live life going forward. And more than that. Some survivors have found ways to build on what they went through so that they have developed new qualities of compassion, gratitude, inner strength, courage and acceptance they didn't have before.

So how does this happen? Where is God in all this? Let's look at our scripture readings more closely. Our first reading brings us into a dramatic scene. Jesus and a few of his disciples have just come down from the mount of transfiguration where they have had incredible time together to re-centre their faith. But now, they walk right into mayhem and madness. There is arguing going on and there are a group of Jesus' disciples on the defensive. The reason: they have tried to carry out Jesus' healing ministry with little success. They're feeling weak and beaten down. The

religious authorities are pouncing on them in front of a big crowd. A father who has brought his child to them for healing is devastated, desperate and hopeless.

But now, Jesus enters the scene. The father comes to Jesus. Everyone quiets down to see what Jesus will say and do. The father explains the situation. His child has a condition which to our modern understanding appears to involve severe epileptic-like seizures. He's spent years bringing his child to anyone and everyone he's heard about, hoping for some relief, some deliverance, something... He's heard about Jesus. He came and Jesus wasn't there. Could his disciples help? Clearly not this case. It was too much. Jesus asks to see the child. The child has an episode right there and then. Jesus asks how long this has been happening. "All his life" the father tells him. Imagine what this has meant for child and father – a life-time of terrible suffering! Jesus challenges him and challenges everyone present. Where is their faith? Without faith nothing can happen. With faith, maybe something can happen. Can they find faith?

The father wants to believe, desperately. But think about it. All he has seen and lived! Hopes built up and then torn down repeatedly. Doesn't that kind of repeated disappointment wear down any faith and hope a person may have? And the more he loves his son, the more each disappointment hurts and devastates. Jesus sees the evil of the boy's condition and what it's doing to him. He must do something. And he does. The seizures stop. His demons are exorcised. The boy is healed. He experiences resurrection to new life. But what's the message here for the father, the disciples and for us?

This story is placed at a key point in Mark's gospel account. Jesus is telling the disciples that a time of crisis is coming soon for him and for them. He can see it. Their faith will be tested. Their faith will need to be rooted in prayer and solid spiritual fellowship. But the difference between them and the father of the child is this: The father knows he needs greater faith. The disciples, on the other hand, are sleep-walking alongside Jesus with no sense of urgency to their spiritual need. The father cries out: "I believe, help my unbelief." This cry is not seen as weakness here. On the contrary. The father's cry is held up as an example of what is needed to grow serious faith. In fact, our 2nd reading shows Jesus on the cross having the same kind of struggle and questioning when he cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." The resurrection is still to come. The healing of the child hasn't happened yet. Jesus and the father are in the valley of the shadow of death to quote Psalm 23, a dark valley of helplessness and pain. But, and here is the key: they are questioning God with utter honesty and openness. Without engaging that kind of inner heart-felt questioning, life-giving faith will not grow. Unless we struggle with the deep questions that can shake faith, resurrection will not come. Where is that place of questioning and need in you?

So then, what's the lesson here? First, God can only come to us deeply when we name it, face it and somehow engage it. We cannot come to a strong faith without having passed through our time of struggle, doubt and questioning. It's part of the

faith journey at every stage of life and through any number of crises, disappointments and losses. The alternative is giving up on faith altogether. We must engage our unbelief not put it on the shelf and ignore it. If it's important to us, we will wrestle it until new life comes.

Second, we need prayer and community. Flying solo with our questions, doubts and struggles will leave us worse off than before. Engaging our faith honestly and intentionally, and drawing strength and support through prayer and spiritual fellowship will help us discover a new pedestal of faith, a pedestal of faith that is like resurrection. Resuscitation is just me getting back to where I was before. Resurrection is a new kind of living. Life can't be the same as before. I carry scars like Jesus does on his body. But resurrection means moving into a new kind of life where what I've lived serves something beautifully new in me with which I can bless the world.

So then, if we are to take our faith seriously and if we are to work through our life struggles with God and others rather than going solo, we need to name our inner questioning and doubt. And through that process we need to pray it, engage with others in community, and find our way to nothing less than resurrection however resurrection will manifest itself in our lives going forward.

Now, what does that look like in real life? Two brief examples. First, Martin Luther. Luther is acknowledged as the father of the Protestant Reformation. 500 years ago, on October 31, All Saints Day, he challenged publicly the ruling Christianity of his day. The church then, was the single greatest cultural and spiritual institution in society. The church defined public values on what's acceptable and not-acceptable with serious consequences if you were on the wrong side of things.

Before Luther, faith was about trusting the institution, confessing the doctrines and following the rules. If you failed, as everyone did, the church was there to prescribe the remedy and ensure that you and your loved ones avoided hell and got to heaven. The alternative was being judged, condemned and ostracized. You had no future. But Luther found this profoundly wrong. A faith that just went through the motions just to fit in lacked authenticity. He was hungry for something much more real and solid to get him through the questions and struggles of life.

And so, he came to a new understanding of faith, a new understanding that was much more biblical. How do we engage God ever more deeply when we are confronted by our struggle with serious doubt and questioning? How do we find solid spiritual ground when the foundations of life are shaken? Luther was tormented by what he called in German "*Anfechtungen*". "Assaults of the devil," he called them. You cannot work through such inner demonic assaults by relying on institutional, doctrinal or religious affirmations outside your experience. You need something much more immediate and real based on a direct engagement with God yourself. It must be personal, and you must find others who can engage with you in that kind of personal way with God.

Well, through his search and through finding others who were also hungry and thirsty for similar deeper engagements with God and life, a new movement and new churches were formed. Faith includes things we believe and confess. But even more basic, faith is a relationship of trust – trust in God. Out of such trust I build an authentic and real spiritual life that can lead me into new directions of coping with the challenges of life and experiencing resurrection. I move into new spiritual waters of refreshment and renewal even as my scars are always with me. Who I become and what I have to offer the world is shaped by what I've experienced in a way that's transforming.

And this brings me to a young man living today, 500 years after Luther. His name is Jordan Bridges. Jordan evacuated with his mother and siblings before hurricane Katrina hit and settled at a friend's place near Washington. Life was hard. In his words: "My mom was overwhelmed. I had to get my little brother to school every day; it was like every day I woke up and had to forget everything that had happened the day before..." Jordan, now 29, works for a social justice non-profit organization and sings in a band called Melomania. Over the last twelve years many challenges have come his way. There was one incident, for example, when Jordan tried to stop a fight between two men. The police arrived and assumed because he was a young black man he must have been the culprit. Jordan was beaten by the police and his jaw was shattered.

But here's what Jordan had to say about it: "I honestly believe that having been through Katrina helped me get through that...I don't know that I would take either of those back, honestly. It's part of who I am. I became a storyteller. I'm an optimist; going through those things, I know nothing can put my light out." Wow! Isn't that kind of faith a powerful thing?

So, what about you and me? What grounds and energizes our light? Where does faith fit in? How is God a part of our journey, especially the times of struggle, questioning and doubt? Have we named it, faced it and found a space and place to engage it like the father with Jesus or Luther or Jordan? Have we found a space and a place for the kind of spiritual fellowship that can support and inspire our growth through and beyond the dark valleys? God is all around us. God is ever seeking to move into new places of healing and renewal with us as we journey. Have we found God anew?

Let us pray: Come to us anew, O God... take us deeper and take us higher... make our light shine in ways we have yet to experience... Amen.