

Be Careful What You Ask For...

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Mark 9:24 'I believe! Help my unbelief!'

Romans 12:2 'Do not be conformed to this world but be TRANSFORMED, by the renewing of your MIND, that you might discern what is the will of God.'

My original title for today's sermon was, 'Faith in Easy Times.' I was planning on relaying some thoughts on what we could do when life is going along smoothly, and there are no great issues or dilemmas that we're facing. I was going to suggest that we stay diligent in our spiritual lives, and make regular investments into our spiritual bank accounts, to paraphrase a thought shared by Kathryn Kvols at a parenting seminar.

But that was before the economic downturn. Before that topsy-turvy political season. Before the challenges we have had to face these past few weeks, and past few days.

That was before I really took a good look at my own life.

After some thought and some discussion with friends, after some great sharing experiences on our men's retreat last weekend, I came to a more realistic view.

Is there ever an easy time? Isn't there always something that we're dealing with in our lives?

After looking at some of the issues some friends wrestle with, and looking into one of the mirrors that symbolically circle us here in this sanctuary, I did a little digging into my own emotional and spiritual well being, and realized that claiming any time as an easy time is a rare and infrequent thing.

The challenges we face at any given moment are always lurking, just below the surface. And while we are very good, as a culture and a society, at treading gently across our surface interactions, the truth is that oftentimes, like a duck, we're paddling like heck underneath, just trying to keep moving forward.

The struggles we face affect us all in different ways, and we all have our own mechanisms for dealing with them. Sometimes when I walk through the gym, I can tell the people who are trying to pedal the pain away. Sometimes, when I go out to a restaurant, I can spot the people who are trying to drown their worries or their sorrows in a bottle of booze. Many of us retreat into denial, and act as if we can wish away the pain by ignoring it.

I am a denier, myself. I tend to be pretty good at skating through my issues, believing I can breathe them away, or 'work through them' on my own, without letting anyone else know that I'm hurting inside.

Not too long ago, I had a frightening experience. In my life, my vocation demands that I keep up with my Bible, my prayers, and the latest theological trends. And believe me, keeping up with some of you folks here in this church can be pretty demanding. Not only do we have two members who teach at the Religion department at UF, (one of whose publications was required reading for one of the classes I took in seminary), but you also are incredibly well versed in the sacred texts from other world's religions. For instance, I need to know the sermon on the mount and be familiar with the Tao Te Ching just to keep up with you! Don't get me wrong, I love it! But one day, not too long ago, I hit a rut. I went to pray, and the words were not there.

In my vocation, if I can't pray for me, then I have no business trying to pray for you.

Somehow, I had unintentionally traded in my spiritual wellspring for the valley of dry bones.

A friend and mentor to me, a man named Rich Kirchherr, regularly warns of falling into the valley of dry bones. For him, and for me, wandering into what he calls 'functional atheism' is a death sentence for a minister.

I have friends who have no problem stumbling through times when they have no faith. Heck, most of the friends I confide these fears to hardly even recognize when those faithless times come. But for me, it was a frightening experience. How can I preach if there are no words of faith? How can I pray by the bedside of a parishioner?

When my ministry became my job, I knew I was in serious trouble. And it sent me into a tailspin.

Anyone who has woken up one morning and had that crushing sense that something was not quite right; that the universe was just a tweak out of balance knows what I'm talking about here. If you've ever looked into the mirror and suddenly not recognized the person staring back at you, you know what I mean. If you've woken up in the middle of the day to find yourself sitting at your desk and you have no idea what you're doing here, you know what I'm talking about.

I've recognized it in the sighs of the people in the check out line, and seen it in the lonely eyes of the college student trudging off to class, and off to his room, and not many other places in between. I've heard this same sense of desperation in the voice of friends on the phone, calling for no real reason but to check in, and seen it in the empty eyes of the people across from me waiting at the stoplight in their cars.

Sometimes, I think the scariest moments of crises in this life are the ones that sneak in, undetected, when you hardly even know they're there.

When I realized that my soul was weary, that I had taken for granted one too many times the spiritual wellspring that I thought would spring eternal, I knew that I had to regroup.

Fortunately for me, I have you. It's not difficult to find inspiration in this congregation. Nor is it hard to find people with whom to confide the issues that

we wrestle with. All we have to do is ask. Sometimes it's as simple as sitting down with a friend, and tweaking our world views a little bit. Reminding each other of where we find hope, and life, and joy. But I recognize that sometimes it goes a lot deeper than that. Mental illness is a very serious, but treatable affliction. And there are helpful resources for almost every ailment, right here in Gainesville. My beloved UCG, if you are wrestling with a demon that you are afraid might get the better of you, I pray, please, let someone know. I promise, if you but whisper the demons name to a friend in this congregation, a swarm of angels will fly in to help.

When I went through that phase of functional atheism, I felt like the young father who was pleading with Jesus to heal his sick son in the gospel of Mark. And I could echo his sentiments when he said, 'I believe! Help my unbelief!' I wanted to believe, I needed that well to be full once again, but I needed help getting the waters to come.

So off I went, with the Reimer's blessing and the Congregational Ministry Review Board's urging, on pilgrimage, to Ghost Ranch, New Mexico.

On the plane out to New Mexico, I took some time to write out the goals I hoped to achieve while on this pilgrimage. What did I seek? What did I want?

I wanted RENEWAL. Like the spirit/breath of God is breathed out over the valley of dry bones to make them dance, I wanted to dance again.

I was beginning to get excited, and as I was getting ready to test out my prayer legs again, I started but stopped.

I was reminded of the sensations that come in the seconds before stepping off the high dive. I even wrote in my journal, 'Be Careful what you ask for, because you just might get it.' Be careful what you ask for, because you're going to have to work for it. Be careful what you ask for, because the power of God is not to be taken lightly.

The scripture passage that became my mantra for the week was from Paul's letter to the Romans. 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed, by the renewing of your mind, that you might discern what is the will of God.'

My week in the desert of New Mexico was easily one of the most powerful and pivotal times in my life of faith. Every day there was a prayer and a blessing on my lips, every vision offered scripture passages to wrestle with. Every day I worked through a different part of Paul's directive. Do not be conformed to this world? Being the well trained UCGer that I am, I had no problem with that. But 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you might discern what is the will of God.' That took some wrestling.

Often when we hit the hard times in our lives, in our faith, we want immediate transformation. Like Sandy said in her sermon last week, we pray to the God that we don't believe in, and demand that immediate action be taken. But we know that it is not that simple. God does not act that way in our lives.

It is up to us to attempt to discern what is the will of God, in our own lives. I was lucky to be able to take a week out of my life to go on pilgrimage; but surely you can find time in your busy lives to take Sabbath; to create empty space in which to simply sit with the presence of God. When the voices of doubt and fear begin to creep into your lives, I encourage you to find a place of peace where you can replace those negative thoughts with ones of grace. And if you need help with that, call me, or Larry, or Sandy. If we can't help you, we can put you in touch with someone who can.

I encourage you to welcome each day with gratitude, and to give thanks to those around you, who care for you, love you and support you, no matter what.

We need to make those spiritual inroads, as Larry said a few weeks ago, and cultivate a practice of hope and faith that will enable us to move forward towards grace when the going gets tough.

Another scripture passage that resonated with me while I was on my pilgrimage was from 1 Corinthians 13: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

It was time for me to put an end to my childish ways; my old ways of understanding my life, my faith, my world view. It was time for me to look at everything in a new light. Even today, when I look into a mirror, I see 'dimly.' And only occasionally have I had those moments when I am fully known and know fully. Two minutes of God's grace, I called it in New Mexico. Two minutes of God's grace is all I ask for today.

When I arrived in New Mexico, I knew that they had an outdoor labyrinth. So I vowed to make a practice of walking the labyrinth every night by moonlight. When my first night arrived, and I began my first journey into the labyrinth, I was stopped about half way through. There, on the ground in front of me was an egg, cracked, with the dead bird still inside. I didn't know what to do. If I passed on by it, I would be thinking about this egg the whole time. If I cast it aside into the bushes, I would feel as if I didn't give it the attention it required. I sat with this egg for a long time. Finally I picked the egg up, carried it with me to the center of the labyrinth, and buried it there.

Today, as we bring this theme to a close, I invite you to take whatever burdens you carry, to journey with them through the twists and turns of this life, and find a sacred space to bury them. As you do, send it forth with a blessing and a prayer. As we attempt to make sense of the challenges we face, I want to remind you NOT to ask God for what you want to happen, but instead to pray to God that you might be open to accept what does happen. This is how we discern what is the will of God.

And I invite you to look into these mirrors, one more time. As you look into the mirror, recognize that we see dimly, but I encourage you to scratch a little more below the surface, and when you do, I pray that you might see that the love and the grace of God are there, within you. And looking at these beautiful symbols of

our faith, created by the loving hands of UCG members, see that the light and grace of God are all around you, in this space, and in the faces of the people in this community of love. And through this community, I pray that you may witness the transformative power of God in your life.

Let us pray.

Blessed are you, Unknowable One,

Who sets the morning grass to shine with winters first frost.

As the earth shifts in her balance, and moves towards longer night, we feel our rhythm of life shift with her.

In the stillness of a winter morning, there are still signs of your presence. As the morning sun turns the frost to life giving water, there you are. As the morning birds find their voices in the chill, we hear your words of hope. As we gather together, we find you in the warm hands and hugs that enfold us here. And as we go about our daily lives, even still, your presence is inescapable.

You are with us in the times of blessing, but you are with us in the times of challenge as well. As our minds and worlds shift into new paradigms of understanding, you, God, are there with us to show us the grace, the peace and the blessing that emerge from all corners of the universe.

We pray, during these difficult days for our church, that we might be vessels of your grace and love to one another. We pray that the strength and support that you provide will be offered by the hearts and hands of those around us and that we too might be vessels of your love.

O God, great unknowable one, whose ways are not our ways, we pray that we might find the peace and grace that will sustain us through the hard times in our lives. Be with us, God of life. Our strength and our support.

Amen.