[**Ezekiel 2:1-5**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=209#hebrew_oth_reading)

[**Psalm 123**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=209#psalm_oth_reading)

[**2 Corinthians 12:2-10**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=209#epistle_reading)

[**Mark 6:1-**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=209#gospel_reading)**13**

**THREE KINDS OF BELIEF**

**By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo**

I can remember many years ago being in a class in what we used to call 'grade school', though I think others call it 'elementary school', and who know what they call it these days. Anyway it was the bottom rung of the educational ladder in those days – in those days 'pre-school' meant just that: the glorious five or six years you had all to your own before you had to go to a school. And yet we all somehow ended up with a much higher level of reading and math skills than kids do today, even though I believe today formal education begins at about a year and a half.

But I digress....

Anyway, we were in probably the third or fourth grade and it was a music class, and the music teacher, Mrs. Henderson, put on a record – an LP – of Peter Pan. I think it was the soundtrack for the Disney animated movie.

So we are listening to the whole thing, and it came to the part where Tinker Belle has been poisoned by Captain Hook and has apparently gone to fairy heaven, but the speaker on the record – I think it was Peter Pan Himself - suddenly breaks the fourth wall, as they say in the theater, and speaks directly to the audience, which in this case was this bunch of little ten year-olds sitting at our little desks, and he says something like: Listen, we can still save Tink if you'll help me. All you have to do, when I say begin, is say out loud three times and all together...and you all know what we had to say, right?

I believe in fairies, I believe in fairies, I believe in fairies.

And so of course that's what we did and sure enough, Tinker Belle came back to life, and most of the kids heaved a big sigh of relief.

But I can actually remember, even at that time, thinking: Wait a minute, hold on here. I really don't believe in fairies. Aren't we supposed to be too old to believe in Santa Claus and fairies and all that kind of thing, and yet here's Mrs. Henderson – our teacher – encouraging us to lie about it! And we're lying to a record player? And we're supposed to believe that Peter Pan somehow hears us?

Anyhow, that's probably the beginning of a lifetime of thinking about this very peculiar thing we call 'belief,' along with all those things that are related in some fashion or another to belief, things like faith, and certainty, and trust, and knowledge. And of course those are exactly the concepts or ideas that are central, if not to the exercise or living out of our Christianity, but to our understanding of it. So that's what we're going to think about a little this morning.

And we'll do it in the context of this very interesting story we find in our gospel reading for this morning, so let's read it together.

Read Mark 6:1-6

The story tells us about an occasion when Jesus is already well into his ministry throughout the countryside of Galilee, and he returns to his home town of Nazareth, the town where he grew up and lived for thirty or so years, and the town where at least some and probably all of his close relations still live. And by the time he makes this visit, he has clearly established a reputation that the folks in Galilee at least were well aware of, a reputation for having a new and interesting point of view, and also for doing some remarkable and remarkably mystifying things, the many seemingly miraculous healings and cures that were the hallmark of this stage of His ministry.

So when he visits his hometown, he settles into what was apparently his routine on visiting other towns, and that is to teach on the Sabbath in the local synagogue, and during the rest of the time making himself available to those who might need physical or spiritual healing.

But what happens is very interesting. The townsfolk are amazed by him, by how learned he seems to be and by his reputation as a miracle healer; they can scarcely credit that this is the same Jesus they've known from childhood. But despite their amazement at his teaching and at his reported ability to heal people, the Gospel account tells us that Jesus couldn't do many miracles there, although he did heal a few people.

Now that can be read in either of two ways. We can imagine many people coming to him for healing but Jesus only being able to heal a few of them, perhaps because of their greater faith in his abilities.

But that seems to me very unlikely, both because the Gospel writer doesn't mention that, and it would have seemed an obvious point to include, and also because the Gospel accounts offer us many examples of Jesus healing people of little or minimal faith.

A much more plausible reading, I think, is that Jesus was unable to perform many miracles there because the people didn't even bother to come and ask him, although he did – as the account tells us – heal the few who did.

So when the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus was amazed at their unbelief, I think He was amazed that, despite everything they had heard about Him, despite even being impressed by how different and unexpectedly substantial he seemed to have become, they still didn't even turn to him for help.

And I think there's a very important lesson there for all of us, a lesson that maybe Jesus himself learned that day. And the lesson is that there's a very important difference between believing things **about** someone, and believing **in** someone.

What I'm going to suggest to you is that there are really three different kinds of belief when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, and that the first two are really beliefs about Jesus, while the third is belief in Jesus.

The first sort is what I call intellectual belief, and it is the most vulnerable sort of belief, the kind of belief that’s most easily shaken.

Somebody told me once about a professor of theology at a Catholic college who prided himself on his debating skills. He would invite professional atheists – and believe me, there are such things – on to campus and debate them, with the audience, comprised mainly of students, to vote afterwards on who they thought had won. And this particular fellow was so learned and so glib that he invariably won.

Except on one occasion, when a woman atheist was invited to debate him on some religious issue, and she was just as clever as he was, and just as glib as he was, and a good deal better looking than he was, and, guess what, she won the vote.

Now this fellow's world didn’t exactly come crumbling down, but he definitely seemed to be a changed man, what some described as a diminished man, a tightened, almost a shriveled man. He still taught theology and still published, but he stopped debating, and his manner both in speaking and in writing seemed far less courteous and generous, far more aggressive and almost punitive. It was as if he was more interested in defending himself than he was in defending God.

And I think that's the great danger for those whose belief in God rests on their intellectual assessment, on their brain power, so to speak. The danger is that, unless you're the smartest person in the world, there's always somebody else who's smarter. And if you happen to run into that person and she disagrees with you, and her arguments are cleverer than yours, you have nothing to fell back on.

You're very much like someone who has built his house on sand. You’ve believed many things about God, but you haven’t believed in God.

The second sort of belief is what I call hereditary belief. This is the sort of belief in God that I would suggest most people have. Many are fortunate to have had good parents or a good Christian family support system, they went to church and had friends who shared their faith. These are people who, so to say, breathed in their Christian faith right from the cradle.

This is a great form of faith and those who have it are blessed in many ways. But that form of belief is still surrounded by a great danger. The danger is that, just because it is so easily and naturally acquired, that we lose all sense of just how profoundly fundamental it is. To stick with our analogy, like the air we breathe, we take it so much for granted that we don't even realize it's there, even though it's necessary for our very life.

As with the air, we go about our daily lives simply taking it for granted. We take jobs and have careers, we have families, we engage in hobbies, we become passionate about politics or sports or music....and all the time we are completely unmindful of the very air that makes all this possible.

The great danger for this kind of belief, in other words, is that, because we forget how fundamental it is, we fill up our lives with everything else, and leave it with only a tiny sliver, perhaps an hour or so on a Sunday morning. The belief itself become frail and insubstantial, and unable to bear much stress. Which is fine, until stress comes.

And this is also a case of believing many things about God, the things we learned in Sunday school or heard from the pulpit…but not yet really believing in God. It’s like the difference between believing that Abraham Lincoln was an honest man because of all the things you’ve heard about him, and believing in your neighbor’s honesty, because you know your neighbor.

And that brings me to the third type of belief in God. And now I'm afraid I must say some hard things.

The third type of belief results only when we have come to the end of ourselves, when life – in any of a thousand different ways, most of them sadly painful – when the realities of life have opened our eyes to our own helplessness, when something brings to absolute clarity about the fact that what is happening is wrong, is senseless, and that there's absolutely nothing we can do about it. In other words, when our eyes are opened to the truth that the world really is broken, and they we are helpless in the face of that brokenness.

Some people here today have experienced wrenching, terrible loss, have faced tragic situations where there was no good to be found in them, and nothing that could be done about them. Others of us will face such situations some day. For those of you who recognize what I'm talking about from experience, I want you to reflect whether that time wasn't in some way the birth of your faith, of your real belief, of your real belief in God.

For the rest of us, spend a little while in any nursing home or children's hospital, and you will see the same sort of senseless tragedy manifesting itself in slow motion. Make it your own parents in the nursing home or your own children in the hospital, and you truly begin to experience the sense of utter helplessness that is the first and necessary step of being brought into a personal relationship with perfect and infinite love.

God doesn't call for us to make sense of such situations. God doesn't call us to find the silver lining in such situations. God calls us to turn to him, even if only in tears, even if only in anger, even – and I say this with reverence – even with hatred, because all those things mean that, at the deepest level, the level that matters most, we now believe in Him, and not just things about Him.

And so Gracious God, although we ask over and over again that we not be led into the testing of our faith, we acknowledge the extraordinary grace that makes that very testing a path towards a deeper relationship with you, a personal relationship, and we pray that, when such testing comes, you give us the strength to surrender, the trust to lay down our defenses, the faith to perfect our power in weakness, the belief in You that Jesus alone had fully and without qualification, and we ask for these things in His name. Amen