

Vulcan Faith
Mark 11:12-24
Focus: Mark 11:22-23

Do you remember the classic Star Trek television episodes? The first one premiered in 1966. The series was cancelled unceremoniously after 3 seasons. Just not popular enough. Like dead Lazarus, though, the lifeless show was *resurrected* from its theatrical tomb. It became a pop culture phenomenon that has gone on to spawn shows and movies more than 50 years later.

Some time in the 1970s, *when the resurrection was in reruns*, when television viewers were actually *watching* the final frontier of space be explored by the voyages of the Starship Enterprise, trekkies were created. Trekkies were obsessive Star Trek fans. They had seen the shows so often and watched them so intensely that they could recite the dialogue. I was close to being a Trekkie. In the Trekkie game, I was not a starter, though. More like a bench Trekkie. In athletics and television, I was consistently second string. I remember the full on Trekkies. Awe inspiring nerd folk. The ones I knew in college were brilliant in their studies. So much book sense. So little common sense. They didn't tend to fit in in normal social circles. But I knew where to find them on the William and Mary campus. At 6 p.m. Every day. In a little television room in the campus center. By the time I would arrive at 5:55, the television was always tuned to the UHF channel on which the Star Trek episodes played. Don't know what a UHF channel is? You haven't lived. At least not long enough. I think anybody who even thought of watching something else knew that they'd be physically transported from the building if they didn't allow the compulsory channel change. At 5:59, the little television room would grow tense. Somebody would cut the lights. Trekkies would lean forward in their chairs. Little beads of sweat would start popping up on foreheads. Hands would clench into fists. I'm sure heart rates accelerated rapidly. Like great sprinters on the block, we were prepping for the moment. In this case, the starter gun would be the first musical tones that played at the beginning of the latest episode. A Clue. Game on. Who would identify the title of the episode first? On the worst day, it would take no more than 20 seconds into the audio and visuals before one of the Trekkies barked out the episode title. There would be nods and "ah, yes-es," and congratulatory words

and gestures thrown the victor's way. Then we'd all settle in to watch an episode most of us had seen dozens of times. Ah, those crazy college days.

Trekkies swore that Star Trek was a meaningful metaphor for understanding real life. In fact, Gene Roddenberry, the creator, claimed that he was able to write episodes that critiqued contemporary social issues in a way that people would not reject because they took the critique to be science fiction stuff about a science fiction world, not our world. So, messages on racism, anti-war, integration, care for the environment, xenophobia, immigration, poverty, health care, social justice were all embedded in these silly shows about the crew of a warp driven space ship. There were even shows with embedded messages about Christianity and faith. The crew landed once on a planet where the people worshipped the sun and the soldiers of an empire hunted them down to destroy them for their heretical, fantastical faith. It wasn't until the end of the episode that the crew learned, as they were breaking orbit and heading into space, that the people were not worshipping the sun in the sky, but the Son of God. And faith. The thing Jesus talks about in this text today when he says, Have faith in God and *do not doubt* and it will happen for you. *That* kind of faith, *without doubt*, was, the crew of the Enterprise knew, *impossible* for humans. Humans doubt. But Vulcans, . . . ah, . . . Vulcans did not. Vulcans, the greatest scientific minds in the galaxy, possessed the greatest potential for faith because they had learned how to erase all doubt.

The episode appeared in 1968. The title was "Spectre of the Gun." As punishment for landing on the planet of the Melkotians, a powerful and secretive race, Captain Kirk, a human, his first officer, Mr. Spock, a Vulcan, are sentenced to death. The Melkotians are able to reach into the minds of the crew and create a circumstance from their own history where they will be forced to play the role of characters who were killed. They are forced to become gun fighters at the OK Corral, a famous battle between Wyatt Earp and his brothers and the Clanton gang. They are to be the Clantons, the ones who die. It is like they are in a play, but everything that happens seems so real that they end up believing it is real. That is the problem. And *that* is where the matter of faith comes in.

Because the bullets are *not* real. The Melkotians have made everything appear as though the bullets are real. But they are not. All the crew have to do is believe that the bullets are not real, *believe without any doubt*, and the bullets will not harm them. But there in lies the problem. Mr. Spock, the Vulcan, tells his crew mates: “The smallest doubt will be enough to kill you.”

The smallest doubt will be enough to kill you.

But who can believe without doubting? Only the Vulcan.

Who then can be saved? Only the Vulcan?

Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ *and if you do not doubt* in your heart, but *believe* that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, *believe* that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

I hear Jesus and I am sure that faith is what the Vulcan had and I could *never* have. Complete assurance. Without a doubt. Full on trust. I don’t have it. I’m not even close to having it. I’m not even a starter Trekkie. No way I’d ever presume to be a Vulcan. But to be a true believer you *have* to be Vulcan, right? And yet Vulcans don’t exist. The more I thought about how hard it is to follow Jesus’ command about faith, the more I thought that maybe real believers don’t exist either. *Can’t exist!!!* Who can believe free of doubt?

“...and if you *do not doubt* in your heart, but *believe* that what you say will come to pass, it *will* be done for you.”

Isn’t that what Jesus is looking for? A few good Vulcans. Is that you? Have you, like Mr. Spock, found a way to expunge the doubt? Do you pray with that kind of certainty? I’ll be honest. I have asked for some stuff in prayer, some *good* stuff--not frivolous stuff, although, yes, looking back, I have asked for some stuff I could have done without, but on the whole, I’ve asked for some decent, necessary stuff, even some *great* stuff--like when I’ve been asking for somebody else or some *thing* else like Union Presbyterian Seminary--and I must say, God, I don’t want to be a cranky Christian or anything, but I’ve not gotten some of that necessary stuff.

What's up with that? Didn't Jesus say, have faith in God, and whatever you ask you will receive?

I've been a seminary president for 11 years now and I can say that, as much as I have felt called to this job and felt supported in it, this has been 11 years of full on, hard core praying. I traded in my PhD in New Testament for a doctorate in prayer. *I've* prayed for more money and the budget was *still* tight. *I've* prayed for peace like a river faculty meetings and *still* floated into class 4 rapids. *I've* prayed for stuff and clearly my prime membership in Amazon, which promises 2 day delivery of whatever I order, has no prime equivalent where the heavenly inventory of grace gifts and gadgets are concerned. Is it me? Am I just not Vulcan enough?

Have faith in God.

From time to time, I have been told that God will respond, but God will respond in God's own way. I grew up hearing that God doesn't give you what you want, but gives you what you *need*. Well, . . . I have needed *more* money in my wallet, *more* As on my report card, *more* church calls on my employment horizon, *more* publications on my CV, *more* employment opportunities for my children, and *still* more money in my wallet. Did I doubt too much for God to deliver on those needs? I also heard God might not deliver when you ask for it, but God will deliver right on time. But God's time is not my time. Seems like someone like God, who lives *outside* of time, can not fully appreciate the urgency I feel living *inside* of time. A thousand years are like a day to God. Well, when I need something today, that's not helpful. If God is going to deliver it on God's thousand year timetable, God's delivery productivity is going to be even worse than the post office.

Have faith in God.

Is Jesus talking to the Vulcans or is Jesus talking to me?

I kept reading this text over and over again in the Greek. And then it dawned on me that I ought to do what I tell my students to do. If I want to know what Jesus means by faith in Mark, I needed to track how Jesus uses the language of faith in Mark. I found some clues. The language of faith in Mark is not used to describe belief in some content, unassailable, doubt free trust in

some idea or plan or thought or creed. The language in Mark is activity language. Faith language is response language not what we call belief language. It is not about believing or doubting, it is about doing or not doing something in response to what God is doing.

When Jesus saw how the friends of the paralyzed man had *responded* to what they thought God was doing in Jesus, Mark uses the language of faith. *When* the disciples do not *respond* rightly to what God is doing in Jesus after Jesus calms the storm on the sea, Mark uses the language of lacking faith. *When* a 12 year old girl dies and Jesus tells her father to *respond* to what God is doing by following him into his dead daughter's room, Mark uses the language of faith. *When* the woman with the 12 year bleeding *responds* to what God is doing in Jesus and reaches out and touches him, Mark uses the language of faith. *When* Bartimaeus *responds* to what God is doing in Jesus and cries out even when people tell him to shut up, Mark uses the language of faith.

Have faith in God. Not *believe* a thing. *Respond* to a person. *Respond* to the movement initiated in that person. *Respond* to what God is doing in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

When Jesus uses the language of faith here in 11:22, perhaps it is in this overall context that Mark wants us to think of faith's meaning.

We are a credal people. And the creeds were written for the Vulcan in us. We want to know something with assurance, we want to know something so completely, and too often we associate that knowing, that assurance with faith. For my students, *Faithful* is knowing rightly enough to pass the Bible Content and Ordination Exams. *Faithful* is knowing enough stewardship to give enough money. *Faithful* is knowing enough about being merciful that you show the right amount of mercy. *Faithful* is knowing enough about being prophetic that you know what to say and do when something prophetic needs to be said and done. *Faithful* is knowing the definition of "Christian," so you can always tell who is and, more importantly, who is not one.

But faith, as Jesus uses the language in the Gospel of Mark, is not about knowing. It is about responding. And, interestingly enough, all the people who are responding are ***responding*** in the midst of their doubts. When that father walks into his daughter's bedroom, Jesus at his side, and looks through tear soaked eyes at her corpse, he is just like that other father whose son had been possessed of illness since his birth. He comes to Jesus, he responds to Jesus even as he doubts Jesus can help him. I have faith, Lord, he says, please help my lack of faith. Jesus doesn't push him to ***know*** better what he knows. Jesus ***challenges*** him to respond even more powerfully than he has already responded by seeking Jesus out.

Have faith in God is not about saying the right words, thinking the right thoughts, doing the right liturgy, singing the right songs. None of these Markan characters was right in anything they did. Having faith in God appears to be responding to God's power by emulating that power in our own lives, even when all the right rules and regulations say what we are doing is not appropriate.

It was not ***appropriate*** for Jesus to curse a fig tree when it was not the season for figs. It was not ***appropriate*** for Jesus to cleanse that temple when the leaders had declared it righteously clean enough. But Jesus is responding to something odd, something hard to quantify, impossible to define, too strange, too Star Trekish to believe--that God had actually, verifiably, unbelievably broken into human history and taken shape in the form of a human person. In ***response***, Jesus was breaking into the laws of nature and breaking down the reputation of the Jerusalem temple.

Have faith in God. Respond to God. Respond to what God has done and is still doing through the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. ***It is not about how doubtlessly you believe; it is about how doggedly you respond.*** God has already done the amazing thing. Having faith in God is responding by doing something amazing yourself.

Have faith in God. Do not doubt.

He says, "do not doubt." What does doubt have to do with responding? Isn't doubt about rightly believing. Like a Vulcan?

It is hard to tell with the word doubt for Mark, because the only time Mark ever uses the verb is right here. The verb is not used very much in the entire New Testament in fact. Perhaps that sounds about right. One would not expect the New Testament to give a lot of time and space to doubt. The interesting thing is, that when the verb doubt *is* used, it is used in a way that fits the understanding of faith as responding. In the New Testament, doubt is not about disbelieving, doubt is about not responding. Acts 10:20, Peter is told not to hesitate, but to *respond*. Acts 11:12: the Holy Spirit told Peter not to hesitate to *respond*. Romans 4:20: Paul did not hesitate to *respond* concerning the promise of God. Romans 14:23: anyone who *responds* by eating the food in hesitation is doomed. In fact, the verb we associate with doubting is used more often in the New Testament, the few times it is used, to speak of either discriminating judgment or responding without hesitation. When God is on the move, when God, like a stormy sky, threatens to move, the believer does not hesitate to move as well. Faith is responding. Faith without doubt is not responding with certainty; *it is responding without hesitation*.

Have faith in God. Respond without hesitation to God. That is the message. A message to any and everyone who would hear it.

The mighty NRSV translates this verse as Truly I tell *you*, if *you* say to this mountain . . . That translation reinforces the wrong message for me. It makes me think of the Vulcans. The Christians. The right believing, right acting, right knowing Christians. Who is this YOU? Well, clearly, it's the disciples, right? The ones around Jesus. If they, those near and dear to him, the ones who have access to him, can see and touch him, and see what happens when he sees and touches others--when those insiders say to this mountain--be taken up--if they truly believe it, then it will happen.

I thought of the right Jesus pedigree then. I have tried to get it in my life, that pedigree. At first, I admit, I did not want it. My parents wanted it for me. In church, all the time. Sunday school. Youth group. Junior ushers. Junior choir. Youth Sunday. Homecoming. Revival. There's no choice about going to church. The only option is how *often* you're going to church. They wanted me to have the pedigree. Then I wanted it myself. I wanted to be a Jesus Vulcan.

Have all the right faith knowledge. Know all the right faith things. So I was a psychology major in college. I saw you could be a religion major and I added that on. I wanted to add more mind stuff to my pedigree. Then seminary. And then being a pastor wasn't Vulcan enough, I had to get a PhD in Christian Vulcanism. I was not just Rev. Vulcan, I became Dr. Vulcan. All this knowledge. All this content. Driving out all that doubt. All that faith teaching and faith researching and faith writing. You'd think I could move the Shenandoahs. And it turns out I can't even get a pebble out of my shoe.

What happened? I had the right stuff. What happened? I became an insider. What happened? The NRSV leads me to think that people like the disciples, like me--who give it all up and go for broke in the God *content* thing--they can *believe* better because they *know* better and once you know so much better, you don't doubt. *Then* you can move mountains.

But then I read this text in the Greek--cause I've got this pedigree--I might as well put it to use, right. And you know what I found. Jesus doesn't say, "if you--meaning you believers" tell this mountain to move. Jesus says, "*whoever* says . . ." Not the Americans, not the wealthy, not the educated, not the go to church every Sunday, Bible carrying, cross bearing, salvation swearing Christian convert from hell, but whoever. *The* guy hollering on the street corner. *The* lady bleeding out on the floor. *The* immigrant stuck at the border crossing. *The* refugee with no country or community in which to lay down his weary head. *Anybody*. Perhaps the very body you least expect can just show up and see what God is doing in the world and be ready to respond without hesitation to what God is doing in the world is the person Jesus is talking about. It could even be you and me. Not because we're Christian though. But because we are a part of that whoever-dom, Christian or not, who believes God is on the move in Jesus and gets up off our pew to move behind and alongside. That's who Jesus is talking to. Not you on the inside, but you, outside, inside, as long as you find yourself alongside what God is doing, where God is going.

What can you do? You can tell this mountain to be thrown into the sea and it will happen. Two interesting things about the word mountain here. First, it is obviously the

mountain upon which the Jerusalem temple sits. Jesus has just cleansed it and thus foreshadowed that it will be destroyed. The second thing is that this temple represents, as does the word mountain itself in Mark's gospel, a sanctuary. The temple is the sanctuary for the official religion of the people. Throughout the gospel, Jesus goes to the mountain to pray, calls disciples to the mountain to name them, takes disciples up to the mountain for transfiguration, begins his preparation for the Lord's supper on the mountain, says in the apocalyptic times the sanctuary for the people will be the mountain.

So I wondered, why would Jesus use as an example for the power of faith the throwing into the sea the symbol that represents sanctuary for the people? How are we to understand having faith in God, responding to God, without hesitation, in this context? And then I thought that perhaps this fits Jesus, who in the Gospel of Mark has no sanctuary. He keeps coming down off mountains and getting himself and his people into trouble. He was up safe on the Mount of Transfiguration and Peter wanted him to stay there. Jesus chastises him and throws the safety of the mountain space away and heads for the possessed and oppressed and depressed and distressed down in the valleys shadowed by death. That is how Jesus responds to the movement of God's power in the world, by throwing the mountain of sanctuary away.

It is what he seems to be suggesting *they* also do now. Throw this mountain into the sea. Throw this sanctuary away. Give it up. If you have faith in God, not if you believe the right content, but if you trust enough in the power of God cutting into and through this world to respond by cutting without hesitation right behind it, then you'll show that faith by throwing aside the sanctuaries and venturing out with the force of God's power to engage your world as Jesus engaged his.

When Jesus says "don't doubt in your heart," he's saying, *don't doubt the power. You* will become the representation of the power of God to which you are responding. That kind of responsive, without hesitation faith transfigures our world with such earth shattering magnitude that it is as if a mountain were lifted up and thrown into the sea. If you have such faith, well, you know the rest...