

Someone once said, “There are no atheists in foxholes.” 1. (oops!) Are there really no atheists in foxholes? Whoever said that must not know much about atheists or foxholes. There are plenty of people who have faced the horrors of plague, war, sickness, suffering, and death and have come out of the other side broken and unbelieving.

2. (ugh!) Plenty of tragedies create atheists. In the book *The Year of Living Biblically* the author A.J. Jacobs attempts to follow all the commandments of the Bible as closely as possible for an entire year. From the Bible’s prohibition of coveting to the command not to wear articles of clothing with mixed fibers, he tries to follow all the commandments.

However, Jacobs does this mostly as a publicity stunt. Growing up in a secular Jewish household, he considered himself an agnostic—someone who thinks God may exist but doesn’t know for sure. Part of what deterred him from seriously considering religion was the problem of evil in the world. How can God exist in a world of the holocaust, wars, and his fourth-grade teacher who insisted on sugar free bake sales. There are plenty of doubters in the midst of tragedies and suffering.

Hold that thought, and let’s move on to our Gospel reading for today. Our text opens, “**And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them.**” We need to take a moment to explain the context. Jesus had just gone up to the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John. He became radiant as He fully unveiled His divinity. Jesus talks to Moses and Elijah. The voice of the Father came from the cloud saying, “**This is my beloved Son, listen to him.**” Then Peter, James, John, and Jesus go back down the mountain, and what’s the first thing they see? They see the other nine disciples arguing with the scribes.

Now, the Bible doesn’t explicitly tell us what they were arguing about. However, likely, the scribes were seeking to discredit the other nine disciples of Jesus for not being able to heal the boy with the unclean spirit. Might the Scribes have said something like, “Is not Jesus powerful enough that you can heal this boy in His name?” “What kind of God do you worship that lets the devil have such power over a child like this?” “Where is your faith?”

Perhaps we can relate to a situation like this. All of us know people who have faced tragedies. In many cases, that person who faced a tragedy is you. We know people who have chronic health conditions. We know epileptics, those who struggle with acute mental disorders, and even children who have died before their time because defects at birth meant they only lived a few days, months, or years. Where is God in these kinds of foxholes? Where is God in my foxhole? Why couldn't He heal my ailment?

The answer lies in comparing the account of the Transfiguration to the account of the boy with the unclean spirit. If our God was truly impassive, disconnected, and above dealing with our suffering, He would have stayed on the Transfiguration Mount. He would have taken Peter's advice, "**Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.**" God would be in His heaven, and maybe He'd do something if we went through the trouble of climbing up the mountain to talk to Him.

However, that's not the God we worship. Jesus went down the mountain to minister to the boy and His father. 3. (aha!) Jesus enters into the foxhole with doubters. Jesus interacts with the father of the boy. He laments the faithlessness of the world He lives in, asks the father diagnostic questions, "How long has this been happening to him?" Then the father asks Jesus to have compassion on his son and him by healing the son.

This word compassion connotes a churning in the guts that we have when we feel pity on others. When we watch a commercial with starving orphans, we feel compassion. When we see someone in need, we have compassion, our stomach churns, and we feel the need to help. **JESUS HAS COMPASSION ON DOUBTERS BY DYING AND RISING.**

4. (whee!) The God who suffers knows how best to heal. Our text continues, Jesus rebukes the man's unbelief saying, "**If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.**" Mark continues, "**Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'**" Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit, and the boy

became like a corpse. However, Jesus lifts up the boy, and he arises, having been healed.

As we consider the words of the man, “I believe; help my unbelief!” How often those become our words. A.J. Jacobs commented that throughout his year of living biblically, he drifted between unbelief, believing that there is some kind divine force out there, and believing there actually is a god.

I would pray that for those of you listening, even as we have dark moments where we doubt the existence of God, that we are able to land in a better place than a vague notion of there being a god who is out there somewhere. At the end of his year of living Biblically, that is about where A.J. Jacobs landed.

Instead, dear Christian friend, remember that who we believe in is spelled out through the Bible. Who we believe in is spelled out through the I believes of the Apostles and Nicene Creed. We confessed the Apostles’ Creed today as it was recited at Peter’s baptism. With the Sawalls we confessed I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. I believe everything about His birth, life, and death. I believe He ascended into heaven and is in control of all things at the right hand of God. It is to *this* I believe that we sometimes cry, help my unbelief!

But take a moment to unpack what this means. The God you believe in has compassion on you! He has compassion on you so much so that He sent His Son Jesus not to stay in Heaven, but to suffer alongside sinful humanity. He sent His Son to bear your sins on the cross. He sent His Son to rise again!

It is in this dying and rising that our lives then take on this form of dying and rising. It comes as no surprise that the son oppressed by a demon lays down as though dead before Jesus raises him up again.

In this world of suffering and evil, I believe that our God is bringing life even in the midst of death. I believe that even as we experience small deaths through suffering, Jesus is working through them to bring new life. I believe that even if we were to die from illness,

violence, or war, that God promises to bring to life those who have passed away in the faith. Our compassionate God cares for us, and will bring us through even the worst. He knows how best to heal our ailments.

Finally, 5. (yeah!) The God who suffers teaches us to pray in foxholes. Our text concludes with the other nine disciples taking Jesus aside privately to ask why they couldn't cast the demon out to which Jesus replies, **“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”** In the midst of our crises of faith, the Lord uses prayer to draw us closer to Him.

In A.J. Jacobs' book *The Year of Living Biblically*, he details his growth in prayer. At first he forces himself to pray using pre-written prayers from the Psalms or elsewhere, but eventually it grows on him. He gets the advice from a retired Lutheran pastor to have his prayers follow the format ACTS. ACTS stands for: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Maybe you learned that in confirmation. Jacobs grows in his ability to say these types of prayers.

Jacobs cites a heartwarming example of his growth in the practice of prayer. When his toddler son Jasper falls and gets hurt, Jacobs' first instinct is to say a quick silent prayer, “God, please let him be okay.”

If a secular Jew who doesn't know for sure if there is a god can be trained in this reflex, how much more can we who know the true God be inspired gladly to call upon our Heavenly Father who shows us His love through His Son Jesus Christ. The Lord tells us in Psalm 50, **“and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”**

We may never know why exactly the tragedies in our lives have befallen us, but while we're in these foxholes, the Lord Jesus Christ compassionately invites us to pray with Him even as our Great High Priest He brings our requests before the Father. In so doing, we might find that unbelief gives way to belief, that doubt gives way to trust, and that turmoil gives way to the peace which surpasses all understanding. Amen!