

“Inside Doubt”

February 21, 2016

From the Inside Out series – 2nd Sunday in Lent

“In our doubt, there is believing...” That phrase from “Hymn of Promise” that the choir sang this morning is, for me, one of the best lines of a hymn ever written. I have a lot of favorites, but Natalie Sleeth’s words have helped me to realize the place of doubt and struggle in our faith.

Her words meant even more when I learned that she composed “Hymn of Promise” before her husband was diagnosed with cancer. It was sung at his funeral. What a testimony to be able to say “in our doubt, there is believing” as she faced the death of her spouse and celebrated his life.

Over fifteen years of ministry, I’ve had people who are certain about their faith with no questions or wonderings - or at least none that they would admit. And I’ve encountered others who were uncertain if it was okay for them to have questions about God, doubts about God’s presence, and struggles around why things happen or don’t happen.

I remember one woman who was trained as a science educator telling me she had struggled to reconcile the truth of science and her faith in Christ. As we talked about the Bible as a book of faith and the connections between faith and science as partners, it was powerful.

Another man and I had a poignant conversation about salvation - not his own assurance of his faith - but his struggle to get to a place where he had to trust in God’s grace for a loved one who didn’t speak about faith the same way he did. In the end, both of us admitted our need to trust in God who judges – not in our own understanding.

And there are many stories of faithful people who want to know why a loved one dies suddenly, why illness, why the struggle to conceive, why it seems that evil seems to be stronger than the goodness of God? Even as we gather this morning, we’re aware of our own feelings as we pray for the people of Kalamazoo who are waking up to a tragedy of senseless violence and families grieving the loss of loved ones killed by a shooter.

We started our journey in this season of Lent meeting Jesus in the wilderness when he was tempted to forget who he was and who God was - tempted to go his own way. Our challenge was to repent - to turn away from temptation - from anything that seeks to take us away from God - whether it’s thinking that we’re good on our own or thinking that God couldn’t possibly want anything to do with us because we’ve strayed

too far. In the language that we use in baptism, it's *renouncing the spiritual forces of wickedness and the evil powers of this world and repenting of our sin* - turning away and turning back to God.

Looking at Abram and his relationship with God, we can imagine turning toward God. We seek to depend on God and show our reliance on God. In the language of baptism: *Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression?* So we're on the journey of trusting God to help us. And as we live in Lent, the hope is that God is working to change us - not just for this season - but forever.

Now I want to be clear that when we talk about doubt in terms of our faith, we're not talking about disbelief. Doubt is defined simply as a feeling of uncertainty. How many of us have ever felt uncertain about God or faith? It doesn't mean we're rejecting God or turning away from God. Doubt includes the questions we have, the wonderings about how this is all going to work out, the moments when we're just not sure.

Some of the most fruitful times and seasons of faith are when we're honest with God and each other about our questions and doubts. Some of the best conversations happen when we're open with God and each other about our doubts. Some of the best opportunities to grow and to help one another grow occur when we share our hearts - not just when it's easy to claim our faith, but even when it's more difficult to trust.

As we've been studying John Wesley's faith journey in our *Revival* study, I was reminded that Wesley wanted people to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus, but he wasn't content to have them answer an altar call and stop there. Early Methodists were organized into classes and bands so that they would grow in holiness together. And a part of that was honest sharing that helped them to be formed spiritually and nurture their relationship with God.

When they asked, "How is it with your soul?" the answer wasn't "I'm fine." They dug deeply together and were transformed by it. I would encourage you to find a connection to a small group whether it's Sunday School, Bible study, choir, planning worship, or another opportunity.

Notice that Abram has a relationship with God. This conversation isn't a first for them; to read about Abram's journey shows us clearly that he was in communication with God. He had already left his home country and his family when God said "go" with the promise of blessing and prosperity. He's been through a famine and gone to Egypt where he was successful. He's moved again with Lot and then moved on with God. He's been obedient all along.

But let's be honest, when we come to this part of the journey, it's been a while! That promise from long ago is there, but Abram is wondering what's going to happen. In a time when children were the mark of blessing, how is Abram supposed to believe in

a promise from God? God, how are you going to get this done? I heard what you promised, but I'm just not sure.

What's so great about Abram is that he questions God. Faith isn't an unwavering acceptance or a complete and total trust that never questions. If we take Abram's experience, faith is very much interactive, relational, and even a struggle sometimes. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but rather a part of living a faithful life.

Frederick Buechner says, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." Rob Bell says, "For many people in our world, the opposite of faith is doubt. The goal, then, within this understanding, is to eliminate doubt. But faith and doubt aren't opposites. Doubt is often a sign that your faith has a pulse, that it's alive and well and exploring and searching. Faith and doubt aren't opposites, they are, it turns out, excellent dance partners."

But doubt is tough for us. It was 2007 when a collection of Mother Teresa's personal letters was released in a book. There was controversy because she wrote honestly about her own struggles to feel God's presence - and even confessed feeling like she was in darkness. Rev. James Martin wrote, "I think that this is a real treasure for not only believers, but even doubters and skeptics...it also makes her much more accessible to the everyday believer. It shows that even the saints struggle in their spiritual lives and that they don't have it easier than we do. They sometimes have it harder than we do."

Our honesty about our struggles and questions can help others realize that faith doesn't mean we're always certain of everything. There's room for doubt. There's room for questions. There's room for wondering. Ultimately, faith has everything to do with where we put our trust - in whom do we trust? Is it ourselves? Our stuff? Or is it in God who is gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love?

It's important to note that Abram questions, but he also pays attention to God's response. God uses the stars to remind Abram of the promise that he will be the father of many nations. I assume Abram has a renewed sense of who he is and who God is, and we're told that he believes God.

It's a next step. Abram is called righteous because he trusts God - not because he does the right thing. Righteous means having right aim - being a right relationship with God. Abram is lifted up as one who is righteous precisely because he's engaged with God.

What's key is that doubt is a normal, natural, and necessary part of our journey with God, but it's not a place we stay. Abram's story isn't one of constant questioning, but of healthy doubt that moves him forward with God. That's a part of being in covenant with God - that interaction and relationship.

Lent is time to commit or recommit ourselves to a covenant-relationship with God. To keep on keeping on with our faith even when it means that we have more questions than answers, even when we have doubts. We say “yes” to God and ask our questions honestly.

Lent is a time to get back into practicing our faith. It’s taking the time to respond to God’s grace in tangible ways – worship, fellowship, study, prayer – instead of saying that we don’t have time. This is about perseverance and commitment. This is about taking the time to engage with God and knowing that God will meet us where we are and move us where God wants us to go.

Friends, God is faithful. God can be trusted. God says “yes” to you and to all the world in Jesus Christ. God invites us to say “yes” and believe in God’s promises, to hope, and to persevere in faith with God’s help.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.