

Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith – 2. Doubt and the Existence of God

Psalm 19:1-4; Psalm 139:13-14; Mark 9:24

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In the Gospel of Mark there's a story about a father who meets Jesus in desperation. Since birth his son has been unwell, scripture describes his illness as what we might recognize as seizures that overwhelm the boy. Nothing the father does seems to help, and his parent is desperate. The father pleads with Jesus to help him, saying, "if you can do anything, help him!"

I can feel this parental love and helplessness in his words. No amount of doctoring or prayers seem to be any use. We don't know how old the boy is, but I imagine his parents have had countless days of worry, hours of prayers searching for a way to bring healing to their boy. And now, the father meets Jesus and pleads with him for help.

There was a time when one of my boys was a toddler, and for more than a year his body was covered by eczema, dry and bumpy skin that caused him to be not only uncomfortable, but also frequently sick. His body was so busy fighting for his skin to heal, it seemed to not have much left to fight off any number of toddler germs and illnesses. We tried everything. Lotions and creams, special baths and medicine. Nothing seemed to bring resolve.

None of this was life threatening, but it was significantly disrupting our lives and my son's health and happiness. We saw experts and tried alternative medicines. We too, were at our wits ends. If I'd met Jesus then, I'd have pleaded too, "If you can do anything, help him."

Finally we found a resolution, but this gave me a glimpse into the pain, fear and worry that this father must have felt that day. A growing desperation, and with it a growing sense of doubt - or unbelieving that we'd find a solution.

Jesus told the father that day to have faith, "all things are possible with faith". Now faith , according to the book of Hebrews, (chapter 11) is "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

Jesus invited the father to hope and trust even in what seemed impossible. The father responded, "I believe, help my unbelief." It's a simple and profound prayer, these words. That even while he doubts and is uncertain, he still has hope.

Hope that somehow, even when he couldn't see an ending, even though he couldn't understand, that Jesus would be with them. And Jesus brought healing to the boy that day. But he also gave healing to the father, assuring him that his desperation, his longings, and doubts- did not separate him from Gods power and presence.

All of us have likely experienced doubt in our life. There are situations - like this father's desperation to help his son, or times of immense grief when someone we love died too soon, or when prayers - faithful and earnest prayers- seem to go unanswered.

And we look to the heavens, we see the beautiful and countless stars in the sky, and we feel small. We might question everything we've ever been taught or believe about God in those moments, and wonder how we might ever believe with certainty.

Or perhaps you've known doubt when you look to scripture and can't connect what you believe about the world to align with the words you read, or practices a church holds. You might have had doubt when you tried to make sense of why scripture explains creation in seven days, and science tells us of another way- millions or billions of years of evolution.

Or perhaps you've been told you don't belong: because you're a woman who shouldn't preach, or you're gay and somehow even though you've been created and loved by God, the church has wrongly rejected you. Or maybe you, too, have been ill - physically or mentally- and words in scripture that tell you to "just have faith" seem to fall flat.

Or perhaps, you've simply become disillusioned because the words and actions of those who follow Christ don't seem to align with the words and actions of Christ. And through it all, you begin to doubt. There are countless ways and reasons for us to experience doubt. And unfortunately, many of us have been made to feel that our doubts are a sign of weakness or lack of faith. But, in this story from Mark, we hear Jesus suggesting another way: an invitation to believe with our doubts. To know that doubt is a sign of our hope, our searching, and our longing for Christ.

And all of us, in times of doubt, are invited to pray as this parent did, "I believe, help my unbelief." Because doubt is not a contradiction of faith. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Instead, doubt is a sign of the Spirit within us, encouraging us to search, to wonder, and hope for what might be. Doubt, in its most honest form, guides us to a deeper faith. It leads us to say: *"I do not know all the answers, or maybe even none at all, and still I believe. Still, I hope."*

If you feel doubt, you are not alone. It can be a lonely experience to be searching for answers, but this experience of doubt is common. Last year, COR did a large survey on doubt, receiving answers from more than 1000 people. These were people who were both faithful church attendees, and some who never attended church. People who were of any gender and age and lived experience. This is what they found: 95% of people experienced doubt at least occasionally. 24% said they feel it often.

Overwhelmingly, people experience doubt at some point in their lives. Doubt does not threaten faith, but is a crucial part of our growing in love of God and discovering something new about our faith in Christ.

Scripture too, is filled with stories of doubt.

Abraham and Sarah, having been promised descendants to number the stars in the sky, had doubt. Their doubt caused them to make decisions about their life and family that were outside of their initial plan. And still God was present and blessed them.

Peter, the great disciple of Jesus, had doubt. Lots of doubt. In one instance, when Jesus called him to walk on water, his doubt caused him to sink. And in another instance, his doubt caused him to deny his relationship with Jesus.

Thomas, another beloved disciple, so famously doubted, that we *call him* "Doubting Thomas" But all of the disciples, those first followers who made their life with Jesus, who heard first hand his words, who witnessed both his miracles and his death. They all doubted. Luke's gospel tells us that after the women told them what they had seen, that Jesus had risen from the dead, that *"these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."*

What I'm telling you is this: doubt is scriptural. Doubt is human.

Richard Rohr, a beloved and respected theologian and Franciscan priest wrote this: "Before doubt, I thought that faith was a matter of correct beliefs. My religious teachers taught me so... [but] Doubt chipped away at those beliefs, one agonizing blow at a time, revealing that... **Doubt need not be the death of faith. It can be, instead, the birth of a new kind of faith, a faith beyond beliefs, a faith that expresses itself in love, a deepening and expanding faith that can save your life and save the world.**"

Our experience of doubt is not a sign of our weakness, but a sign of our faithful searching for God. It is one way that we experience growth in our commitment to Christ, as faith can lead us into a deeper relationship. Doubt forces us to look at *who we think God is*. And when we faithfully search, we will discover more about who God *actually* is, and the power of God's love and grace.

Doubt is a recognition that faith is not certain. What I mean, is that faith is a daily choice, an act of trusting God- even when we don't have all the answers. Doubt helps us see that faith is a gift. Choosing to love God and follow Christ, is a practice of trust. In this way, in times of distress, or deconstruction, or uncertainty: doubt can save our faith. It reminds us that God is with us, forgiving and redeeming us - not because we are strong or perfect, but because we are loved. Because even with all the distractions and disturbances of life swirling around us, we choose to trust. Or as the father in Mark's story said, "I believe, help my unbelief."

Now over the next several weeks, we will look at some of the common questions that come to us in doubt. Things like: how do we make sense of the Bible? Is heaven real? Why do innocent people suffer? And why do our prayers go unanswered?

Together, I hope our wrestling with doubt will lead us to a deeper faith and an understanding that doubt is not in opposition to faith, but a faithful part of it. But today, I want to leave you with three suggestions for *what to do when you wrestle with doubt*. A roadmap, if you will:

Stay With Community

Remember back to the story from Mark I shared with you, of that desperate father. Even in his doubts and helplessness, he sought out community. He left his home, he found Jesus, and he earnestly pleaded with Christ for help, unashamed in revealing his worries and fears.

In spite of his skepticism, he trusted that Jesus and the crowds around him might offer support, prayer, and encouragement. Community can carry us, believe for us, when we doubt. If you, like this father, are struggling with faith, stick with the community. There is room in this church for doubters and skeptics. Let us believe for you until you can believe again for yourself.

2. Continue to be Faithful.

In every account of the resurrection, doubt and disbelief are part of the story. For good reason, I suppose, because it is not within our comprehension to believe that the dead rise. Instead, belief in the resurrection is *always* an act of trust and hope in God's promises.

But in every account, the women and disciples accompany their doubt and fear with faith. The women left the tomb to tell others. The men ran to the tomb to meet Jesus. All of them told the story again and again. Even with their doubts and skepticism, the disciples kept following Jesus. Even when they were not sure, they relied on Jesus' words and followed. And so when you doubt: continue to be faithful. Keep praying. Keep seeking God. Keep hope that Christ is with you.

3. Continue to Worship

When we struggle with faith, we need worship more than ever. Even when the songs and prayers get stuck in our throat, we need to worship God, and wrap ourselves in God's comfort and guidance. Worship is a space where God can break through, offering us comfort, encouragement, and nourishing us for the journey ahead.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, just after the resurrection, still amid the confusion and doubts, we're told: "And when they [the disciples] saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

It was in community, by their faithfulness, and in worship that Jesus confronted their doubts by blessing them and sending them into the world. Jesus greets our doubt with blessing, and assures us of his presence. It's as if Jesus was saying to them, "I am with you in good times and in bad times. I am with you when your faith is certain and when you doubt. I am with you in every time and circumstance."

Today, some of you are wrestling with doubt. If so, I want to encourage you to follow in the footsteps of those who have walked this road before you. The road of doubt is well worn, and you will find a path: Stay with the community of faith. Continue to be faithful to Christ. Continue to worship. And as you do, I believe -- I trust -- that Christ will come to you. Jesus will say to you, just as he has said before to many others: **"I am with you always, even to the end of the world."**

Let us pray:

Holy God, You call us to be people of faith, yet we are often people with doubts. Help us in our unbelief. Remind us that our doubts are an act of faith. Comfort and heal us, help us to trust in you. Assure us that you bless our doubts and invite us to be our full and true selves. Give us courage to confront our doubts, knowing that as we do, we will find you. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 7, 2024

Weekly Prayer

God of unity and love, enter once again into my heart and world, that I might be joined to you and to others. From the beginning of time, your wisdom has been at work, giving beauty and meaning to all of creation, rejoicing in all living creatures. Grant me the wisdom to do your will, that I might share your love with all, working towards the community you long to fashion, in the name of Christ Jesus, my Lord. Amen.

Monday, January 8

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1, 8, 39

Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out without knowing where he was going.

All these people didn't receive what was promised, though they were given approval for their faith.

Observation

"Faith" does not mean never having doubts. Over 90% of people report facing times of doubt. Hebrews 11 defined "faith" as trusting despite causes for doubt, saying, "Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see." It described the patriarch Abraham's great faith. But Genesis said his next act was a deceitful act born of fear (Genesis 12:1-4, 10-13). Trusting "what we don't see" can never totally exclude doubt.

Application

What are some of the most beautiful sights you've seen, or deepest loving relationships you've had? Was their beauty or love something you could "prove" with abstract logic, or did you need to take the risk of experiencing and trusting them? Scholar Leon Morris noted, "There are realities for which we have no material evidence, though they are not less real for that. Faith enables us to know that they exist." What are one or two realities beyond "proof" that make your life better?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you call me to trust that your spiritual world truly is more real, joyful and free than the material world that's always tugging at my heart. Keep growing that faith deep within me. Amen.

Tuesday, January 9

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. It is written in scripture: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent.* Where are the wise? Where are the legal experts? Where are today's debaters? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.

Observation

The apostle Paul knew his central message was "foolish" to some and "scandal" to others. He knew no PR person or mythmaker would try to impress Greeks, Romans, or Hebrews with a crucified savior. Yet he preached Christ crucified as a life-changing physical and spiritual fact with utter conviction. He relied on God's power, not sheer human logic, to change people's lives and thinking. He trusted that God's wisdom and strength were greater than this world's and found that they were.

Application

Paul knew his message was "foolishness" to the Greeks and "scandal" to the Jews (verse 23). Just telling the story seemed to invite people to mock. The message sounded "weak," yet it carried God's power. Verse 18 stated Paul's conclusion: God's weakness is greater than human strength; God's foolishness is greater than human wisdom. In what part(s) of your life today do you need to trust that God's saving wisdom is wiser than any other kind of wisdom you might rely on?

Prayer

Dear God, I am grateful that your strength and wisdom are greater than the world's! I need that—I can't save myself. Help me to trust and depend on you for what I need most. Amen.

Wednesday, January 10

Scripture: Mark 9:14-27

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John approached the other disciples, they saw a large crowd surrounding them and legal experts arguing with them. Suddenly the whole crowd caught sight of Jesus. They ran to greet him, overcome with excitement. Jesus asked them, "What are you arguing about?" Someone from the crowd responded, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, since he has a spirit that doesn't allow him to speak. Wherever it overpowers him, it throws him into a fit. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and stiffens up. So I spoke to your disciples to see if they could throw it out, but they couldn't." Jesus answered them, "You faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me." They brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a fit. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been going on?" He said, "Since he was a child. It has often thrown him into a fire or into water trying to kill him. If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!" Jesus said to him, "If you can do anything? All things are possible for the one who has faith." At that the boy's father cried out, "I have faith; help my lack of faith!" Noticing that the crowd had surged together, Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, "Mute and deaf spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again." After screaming and shaking the boy horribly, the spirit came out. The boy seemed to be dead; in fact, several people said that he had died. But Jesus took his hand, lifted him up, and he arose.

Observation

In Jesus' day, most of today's medical and psychological insights didn't exist. People called nearly all inexplicable ills, like the probable case of epilepsy reported in today's reading, "demon possession." The father's plea in verse 24 feels familiar to most Christ-followers at times. He sounded like Donald Miller's friend in the book *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, who said, "There is this part of me that wants to believe.... I feel as though I need to believe.... But it is all so completely stupid."

Application

Scholar N. T. Wright said Jesus came to rescue people "from the destructive forces that enslaved them. So, whether it was shrieking demons, a woman with a fever, or simply whatever diseases people happened to suffer from, Jesus dealt with them all... Jesus had joined in a struggle against the forces of evil." Are you ever tempted to shrug off the forces that cause suffering as just "the way things are"? In what ways have you (or will you) joined in Jesus' struggle against those forces?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you did not stay comfortable and safe while destructive forces were loose in your world. Give me the caring and courage to enlist, working with you to help all those who are hurt. Amen.

Thursday, January 11

Scripture: Jude 1:20-22

But you, dear friends: build each other up on the foundation of your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep each other in the love of God, wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will give you eternal life. Have mercy on those who doubt.

Observation

We seldom read the little one-chapter letter of Jude. Most scholars are virtually certain the writer was the “Judas” named as one of Jesus' brothers in Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55. In the letter he called himself “brother of James,” Jesus' brother who led the Jerusalem church. His letter mainly warned against false teachers, but in verse 22 he carefully distinguished the false teachers from those who had questions or doubts due to the influence of those who held erroneous beliefs.

Application

Jude's and Jesus' better-known brother, James wrote about the need for belief to go beyond intellectual assent and become life-shaping faith (James 2:18-20). That's why facing doubts honestly is so vital. If we hide them, they can get us stuck in our head without ever involving our heart and hands. What helps you move from the intellectual aspect of most doubts to a level of trust that shapes your whole life while you keep wrestling with the mysteries of God?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I take comfort from the mercy you showed the father who wasn't sure you could help his son, and Thomas who resisted believing you'd risen. Thank you for showing me mercy when I struggle with doubt. Amen.

Friday, January 12

Scripture: Romans 8:22-25

We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

Observation

The apostle Paul faced many tests of his faith (2 Corinthians 11:22-28). Today's passage showed that he had moments of doubt as the apparently indestructible Roman Empire opposed the message of Jesus. Clearly, he couldn't “see” the Roman emperor accepting Christianity 300 years later, much less today when over 1 billion people identify in some way as Christian. But he chose to live “with patience” in his hope for God's invisible better world that he (and we) cannot yet see fully realized.

Application

What was the favorite gift you received this Christmas? Would you tell anyone you're still hoping for that gift you received? Of course not—you have it. In a much bigger way, that was what Paul meant when he asked, “Who hopes for what they already see?” But there is still brokenness and pain in our world. What helps you, like Paul, to anchor your spiritual hope in God, and live with patience and trust for God's full restoration of our broken world to its intended wholeness?

Prayer

Loving Lord, I want to trust you. I need to live in your hope. Go with me into this new year, that I may face none of its days entirely in my own strength. Amen.

Saturday, January 13

Scripture: Matthew 3:17, 4:1-11

A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*" After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me." Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Observation

The letter to the Hebrews said Jesus "was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). The temptations Matthew (and Luke 4:1-13) reported involved doubt about whether he really was God's beloved son, and if so, what that meant. Could/should he use his powers for his own benefit or stay on a path of service and self-giving? The temptations tugged Jesus to do things that would make his life easier by matching popular hopes about what the Messiah would do. Jesus, loyal to God's way, didn't "play to the crowd," even though that deprived him of applause that might help push away questions or doubts about whether this was truly what God's Son should be doing. Nor should we think this was a one-time test. Luke ended his account by saying, "The devil departed from him *until the next opportunity*" (Luke 4:13). With Scripture's principles shaping his response, Jesus overcame the questions and doubts that might have derailed his ministry.

Application

You never have to choose not to turn stones to bread or avoid throwing yourself off the highest point of Messiah Church. How are you tempted to use your unique abilities solely for your own benefit, instead of building God's kingdom by blessing others? How successful are you at resisting temptation and self-doubt? If you don't like your answer, know that facing inner struggles head-on can defuse them. Ask a gifted counselor or pastor for help. Scholar and pastor N. T. Wright said of the temptations we all face, "They are not simply trying to entice us into committing this or that sin. They are trying to distract us, to turn us aside, from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us...as God's children, we are entitled to use the same defense as the son of God himself. Store scripture in your heart and know how to use it." How do you intend to deepen your inner supply of biblical understanding in 2024?

Prayer

Jesus, son of God, I face temptations every day. Plant the principles of your word firmly in my heart, that, like you, I might stay on God's path and resist the lure of going my own way. Amen.