

So after a brief break last week, here we are, back exploring the wilderness with Jesus during our season of Lent. In our Gospel lesson today, it's a different aspect of our own wildernesses that is being highlighted, the aspect of doubt and, conversely faith.

In our wilderness times, just about everything is tested and called into question. Doubt is often part of the experience in those periods of our lives when we have our deepest struggles. Our cry in the wilderness is often the cry of the father recorded in our reading from Mark:

“I believe; help my unbelief!”

The cry of that father seeking healing for his son was not the first such cry, nor would it be the last. People of faith down through the ages — including the greatest Christian leaders — have experienced doubt in their wilderness times. Unfortunately, we in the church have often dismissed or discounted doubts as the products of an immature faith. I would wager though, that sitting in any congregation on any Sunday morning are many people who hold unresolved issues of faith and belief. How often have we heard evangelical preachers bemoan the evils of having doubt? One gets the sense from that narrative,

that to have doubts is to lack faith, to in effect make oneself unworthy. Yet I would argue that it is critically important that the church be a safe place where these doubts can be raised without the questioner being made to feel like a second-class Christian!

The important truth is that doubt is a part of our faith journey. Most Christians experience it at one time or another — especially in the wilderness times. Some Christians experience it a number of times throughout their lives, and for some of us, myself included, doubt is an essential element of how my faith grows and matures.

Doubt is part of the Christian's journey, but doubt is not a good destination — any more than the wilderness is a good destination.

It is not intended to be a stopping place.

Doubt calls us to action. It moves us on and moves us forward. There is a big difference between doubting and giving up. There is an immense difference between wrestling with faith and throwing it to the side. There is a big difference between moving through doubt and getting stuck there and becoming a cynic.

The healthy way of understanding doubt is to understand it as part of the faith journey. The key to doubt being a journey and not a destination is caring about God and wanting to move to faith:

“I believe. Help my unbelief.”

John Calvin wrote, “These two statements may appear to contradict each other, but there is none of us that does not experience both of them in him or herself.”

The father in our Gospel story experiences belief and unbelief together, and both are manifest in his actions. He brings his son to Jesus, but only in desperation after all other options have failed. He asks for healing, but hedges his request with “if you are able.”

The good news is that the doubt we experience in the wilderness times can actually be beneficial to us because doubt stimulates us and spurs us on to faith.

Frederick Buechner wrote, “If you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Interestingly, God's most faithful servants have usually also been among the most doubtful. We tend to think of doubt as the opposite of faith, but in reality apathy or

staunch disbelief is the opposite of faith. Paul Tillich defined faith as “the state of being ultimately concerned.” In other words, what we are most concerned about is what we really have faith in. We are called to be ultimately concerned with God — to have faith and trust in God. The opposite of being ultimately concerned is not caring at all.

If I am ultimately concerned about God and my life in God, then my doubt will not destroy my faith, but deepen my concern and spur me on to resolve it. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a part of it.

As the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson put it:

“There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me,
than in half the creeds.”

If we look at the lives of those we consider the most faith-filled down through the ages, it would be difficult to conclude that doubt is destructive of faith and is something to be avoided. Rather, we would have to conclude that one of the marks of a strong faith is a struggle with doubt. Perhaps that struggle is essential to a strong mature faith in the same way the struggle of a butterfly emerging from a cocoon is essential to the strength of the new creature.

Perfect faith is not required.

In our story, the father does not permit his doubt to paralyze him. Instead, he moves closer to Jesus. He acknowledges the limits of his own power and asks Jesus to do the rest. In the beginning of the story, Jesus comes off a little harsh, criticizing the disciples and the crowd, calling them an “unbelieving generation.” Yet after the father’s confession of his doubt, and the limitations of his faith, Jesus shows compassion and heals the boy, but has no harsh words for the father. As theologian William Placher

observes, "In our story Jesus does not say to the father, 'Well, you'll have to try harder.' It is enough to take our fragile, half-broken faith to God, and in God's grace it suffices."

So, if doubt is a part of the wilderness experience, what do we do with our doubts?

First of all, we should not suppress them. The most famous doubter of all time is

Thomas. Throughout history Judas has been the only disciple criticized more than

Thomas. Tradition has given him a new name: "Doubting Thomas." He wanted proof

that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. But can you blame him? When the

resurrected Christ appeared to some of his disciples, Thomas was not there. Can you

imagine seeing someone die, knowing he was buried, and then hearing from friends

that they had seen him alive? You might feel sympathetic toward them, expecting

them to get over it in time. If they keep telling you on and on and on, you might feel a

need to confront them. That was the situation for Thomas. In recent years, many

Christians have been more sympathetic to Thomas. They have recognized that if they

had been in the same position they may have had the same doubts. In his position, I

have almost no doubt that I would have been a doubter. My nickname might have

become, "Doubting Glenn." Authentic faith begins with intellectual honesty, and doubt

is the foundation of honesty. Ask the questions and continue to search. Don't let your

doubts stop up the channels to God. Let doubts open the channels in new ways with

new insights and understandings.

Pray to God, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."

A second way we work with our doubts is by staying involved with other Christians. We

could learn a lesson here from the disciple Thomas, who voiced his serious doubts

and yet continued to remain in the company of the other disciples as he worked through those doubts. Group support and sharing is a powerful way we can share our burdens and find support for moving through the periods of doubt. Others may have had similar struggles, and their resolutions, or lack thereof, can give us valuable insight into our own discernment. I say "lack thereof", because sometimes we may find ourselves living in the question, not finding the simple answer we desire. Often it's in that space of unresolved doubt, that we find our most valuable learning. Those times drive us to study, to prayer, to research, and expose us to new thoughts and outlooks we never would have encountered without the uncertainty.

Thirdly, we should continue to seek Christ and faith in Christ. The issue for us is never, therefore, one of avoiding our doubts as if that will cure us of them. Rather, it is continuing in honest relationship to God. The prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God, says, "When you search for me, you will find me". Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you". When we do these things, our periods of doubts and questions can lead us to a deeper, more mature faith. Devotional writer Selwyn Hughes wrote:

"Those who doubt most, and yet strive to overcome their doubts,
turn out to be some of Christ's strongest disciples."

Thomas was transformed, saying, "My lord and my God!" That does not hit us as powerfully as it would have hit the original disciples. Before that day, they called Jesus rabbi, meaning teacher. They called him Christ, meaning the anointed one. They called him the son of the living God. No one, before Thomas, had called Jesus, "God." Jewish leaders would not have hesitated to pass the death sentence on Thomas for

blasphemy. It was an incredible and dangerous thing to say. Yet, he was so strengthened by his growth through doubt that some traditions teach he was the disciple who traveled furthest to tell others about Christ, proclaiming the gospel in Babylon, Persia, all the way to India. There are Christian churches in southern India who trace their heritage to Thomas.

I hope and pray that we may embrace doubt as Thomas did, and endeavor to become disciples cut out of his mold. Amen.

Hymn A Mighty Fortress is Our God 165

Benediction

May you learn to embrace the doubts you encounter on your journey.

Accept them as the tools they are to strengthen and mature your faith

As your path leads you forward in faith and understanding,

May you enrich the lives of others in community,

And continue the work of Thomas in sharing what you have learned. Amen.