

THE GIFT OF DOUBT

A SERMON FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
FEBRUARY 24, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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GENESIS 15:1-12; 17-18

The strange story that is our Old Testament lesson this morning is the story of God's covenant with Abraham. In Genesis, we can learn that God is a God who reaches out towards humanity, entering into covenant relationships first with Adam and Eve (twice actually with them), then with Noah, and now with Abraham. A covenant is a contract, an agreement, in which two parties agree. The old Hebrew language for making a covenant was "cutting a covenant" and here, we see the sacrifices cut in two halves as a sign that a covenant had been cut. Don't we still talk about "cutting a deal" in modern usage? And here you thought that had to do with a deck of cards!

God comes to Abram, as he is then known, an older man, with an older wife named Sarai at this point, and promises to make a great people, a great nation out of his descendents. You can read that initial call to Abram in Genesis 12.

Now God will renew this covenant with Abraham's son, Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob. At this point, God makes the promise that Abram will be given a son, that his descendents will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and all he has to do is receive the promise, and believe it.

Abram resists, doubts, can't fathom the depth of the promise, and this is not unusual. We still today, having seen God's Old Testament promises fulfilled, and having seen the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ become a reality, have our doubts. God's deals just seem too good to be true.

Take this New Covenant: all we have to do is believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Oh, it helps to repent of our sins, but belief is the key. That's too easy, too simple. There has to be a catch to it.

I had a man tell me once that he was sure that he was going to hell because of the things he had done in his life. He'd killed two men, he'd been an adulterer, he'd paid bribes and kick-backs in the business in which he'd made a fortune, and he knew he was going to hell for what he'd done. I told him that what he'd done didn't matter, that what mattered was what Jesus Christ had done for Him, that the death of Jesus on the Cross paid the price for all the sins of the world, including his.

There by a campfire on a cold October day in Tennessee, he prayed the sinner's prayer, and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, and all his sins were freely and fully forgiven.

But he still had his doubts. "You're sure?" he'd ask me. I'd tell him, "Yes, I'm sure. It is the best deal you've ever made. Jesus paid it all."

It is so simple: like the old hymn said, "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take Him at His word." But we want to overcomplicate and add to what God makes so simple. The Old Testament people did this with the Law. God made the covenant with them in the time of Moses, and all they had to do was keep the Ten Commandments. And before you knew it, they had made over six hundred laws that regulated just the Sabbath alone. When Jesus came, He

broke some of those laws, and was criticized for it, but pointed out correctly that “the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.”

But we have our doubts.

This is why some churches have dress codes, and why some folks give large sums of money to churches and charities: they are trying to overcomplicate something that is so very simple. They just can't believe that it can be that easy. And so they doubt.

There are two great stories of doubt in the New Testament. One is the one that everyone remembers: Doubting Thomas. You can read that story in John 20. Jesus had appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room on the evening after He had risen from the dead. But Thomas wasn't there. And so he said he would not believe that Jesus was risen until and unless he put his finger in the wounds the nails and the spear had made in the hands, feet, and side of Jesus.

Well, of course, the next Sunday evening, when Jesus appeared, He confronted Thomas, and said to him, come, place your finger in the hole in my hand, and put your hand in the wound in my side. And Thomas falls to his knees, confessing that Jesus is indeed his Lord and his God.

Well, all it took to remove Thomas's doubts was coming face to face with the risen Lord.

The other great story of doubt is found in the 28th and final chapter of Matthew, where the eleven are gathered on the mountain in Galilee from which Jesus will ascend. Matthew writes in verse 17: “When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.”

You know, I think that describes the state of the church today: we worship Him, but some doubt.

Will Willimon, the Methodist bishop of North Alabama writes:

“We normally think that we have doubts about Christ or scripture because there is so much time between us and the originating events that are being described. A 2000 year gap in history separates us from the original moments that are reported in scripture. Should we not doubt that things were actually as scripture reports them?”

“But (in Matthew 28) there is no historical gap, when the risen Christ is standing before them, ‘some doubted.’”

“What did they doubt? I wonder if our deepest doubts about Christ are not related to a problem of a historical gap between us and Christ but rather to another kind of gap between us and Christ. Christ comes to us in all of his glory. And yet, that God comes to us as Jesus of Nazareth, as the crucified savior, is doubt-producing because God has come to us in a form quite different from the form which we expected. In the words and deeds of Jesus, God is revealed to us in something other than our divine expectations. Therefore, there is doubt....”

“Sometimes we in the church give doubt a bad name. The presumption is that if you are spiritually attuned, if you were spiritually perceptive, you wouldn't have doubt. You would have firm faith.” (Pulpit Resource, Vol.41, No. 1, p.38)

Jesus didn't feel that way. He came to Thomas in spite of his doubts. It was to that group standing on the Mount of Ascension that He gave the great commission, to go into all the world

baptizing them and teaching them all that He had commanded. And it was to them that He said He would be with them (and us) even to the end of the world.

Doubt is a gift. It causes us to question. To not take our faith for granted. To not take our God for granted.

Frederick Beuchner, one of the great preachers and Christian writers of our times says, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep faith alive and moving." Anyone who has been attacked by fire ants, I can identify with that statement.

The 19th century poet Alfred Lord Tennyson said, "There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds."

Doubt is often the first step towards faith. We don't come to faith because we have proof. We come to faith because we have faith.

Jesus can work with our doubts. He has a greater challenge with our certainties.

Many are the folks who have responded in faith while believers around them were singing the old hymn "Just as I Am, Without One Plea". The third verse says, "Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, o Lamb of God, I come, I come."

And the next verse continues:"Just as I am, Thou wilt receive, Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, receive, because Thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

Dear hearts, we all have our doubts. We all have our fears. We all have our sins. And in spite of all of that, Jesus still welcomes, pardons, cleanses, receives us.

And to Him be the glory, the power, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more, Amen.