“Doubt”

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Scripture Lessons: Exodus 17: 1 -7, Psalm 105
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Doubt. The Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner called doubt “the ants in the pants of faith.” Doubt—and ants—can keep you squirming. Doubt is often understood as an opposite to faith…as something that is bad for faith. Well, for me, I don’t agree with that at all. People sometimes say, “If there was rock solid proof that God existed, then I would find it easy to believe.” Really? I don’t think that’s really right either.

When we think about Biblical stories of faith and doubt, I think there is none more powerful than the story of the people of Israel embarking on the Exodus. Theirs should be a story of deeply convicted, assured faith in God. After all, they had incontestible proof that God existed and that God cared for them. Just start listing their experiences. First there were the ten plagues, including the Passover safety of the Jewish children. Next there was the miraculous escape from the Egyptian army as the people of Israel passed through the Red Sea over dry land. God next provided a pillar of cloud as a guidepost by day, and a pillar of fire to allow them to travel by night (13.21). When the only water available was bitter, God cleansed it. When the people were hungry, God provided Manna and quail. Certainly, initially, these grand events did bolster their faith. After they crossed the Red Sea, we read, “And when Israel saw the great power which the Lord had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and His servant Moses” (14.31). One would hope so! How could you not have rock solid foundational hopes after experiencing all that over a few weeks! How many of us have yearned for even a bit of this evidence to make our foundational hopes in God sure and certain? What a gift the people of Israel were given by God to help them believe.

Ande so our story today can seem surprising. Camped in a place with no water, the people start grumbling. They questioned whether God is with them. They start to wonder if God really cared. Despite all the evidence they’d seen pointing to God’s caring presence – things we would love to experience in our lives – they found themselves doubting. There is a serious lesson to be learned here. These people were given an overwhelming amount of evidence pointing to God’s existance and love, but even they found it hard to maintain their convictions concerning their foundational hope in God. Even for them, doubts crept in. This became even more clear later when they traded in God for a golden calf idol – after everything God did for them!. So what does that imply for us? It means doubt can be a reality for any person of faith.

Many Christians do have a sure and certain faith that doesn’t waver. Many Christians have come through trials as if through a refining fire, their faith being stronger for it. But this is not the case for a whole lot of Christians, for whom doubt is an occasional struggle or a constant companion. I don’t know for sure, but my hunch is that most of us have dangled by our doubts at times.

The philosopher and public intellectual Bertrand Russell was one of the most famous athiests of the 20th century. He was once asked what his reaction would be if in death he

indeed did find himself standing before God. Russell replied, “Why I should say, God you gave us insufficient evidence”. Even some of those closest to Jesus had their own struggles with doubt. Jesus brothers didn’t believe him (John 7.5). John the Baptist – Jesus’ cousin – sent messengers to Jesus to ask, “Are you really the Messiah?” (Luke 7.18-). The apostle Thomas doubted Jesus resurrection. Peter denied Jesus and Judas betrayed Him. If in their own ways they doubted, we shouldn’t beat ourselves up for our doubts. Doubts that can come when God seems absent too long. Doubts that can come when life goes badly. Doubts that come when evil, rather than God, seems to reign. Doubts that come when our vital hopes die. As Blaise Pascal said in the 17th century, “too much to deny and too little to be sure”. The wilderness Jews had “too much to deny” and yet we see in their story that even they had “too little to be sure.” If doubt is this prevelant then perhaps we need a different understanding about doubt. Not as the enemy of faith, but a reality in faith…perhaps even as a tool for the faithful.

Now that might sound quite odd: doubt as a tool for the faithful! I think it can be, and I’m not alone. The popular Christian writer Philip Yancey wrote, “Doubt is the skeleton in the closet of faith. There is no better way to treat a skeleton than to bring it into the open and expose it for what it is: not something to hide or fear, but it is the hard structure on which living tissue may grow”. Hear what he’s suggesting. Doubt can be the structure on which the living tissue of faith can grow. A gift of God to the world was the person of Rachel Held Evans. Twice a New York Times best-selling author, in her books, columns and blogs she explored her shift from a fundamentalist faith that was plagued by doubts to (she said) a mature faith that not only accepted doubts and questioning, but even relied on doubt to help her discover deeper faith. Evans died a couple of years ago at the age of 38 as a result of an allergic reaction of medication. Remembering her, the magazine *The Atlantic* wrote that her “very public, vulnerable exploration of a faith forged in doubt empowered a ragtag band of writers, pastors, and teachers to claim their rightful place as Christians." I’ll turn it over to Rachel for a few minutes in a short video where she explains this herself.

Doubt is the mechanism through which faith evolves. Doubt, Evans says, keeps faith “awake, alive, thinking, movable, changeable.” A few times she said she wanted to stay “yielded.” For Rachel, early in her life, doubt was the enemy of faith that needed conviction hold off doubt…but conviction was always contested by doubt. So she changed her point of view on conviction, doubt and God. To her, “being yielded” was to have an openness to God, in the midst of the uncertainties and questions. Doubt became for her a tool—a place to wrestle with the reasoning of your mind and the feelings of your heart…with an openness (“yielding”) to God that God could come into the midst of that and help. Her encouragement was that this is a good spiritual practice for us when we have doubts: bring your thoughts and feelings to those doubts, wrestle with them, be open to God and open to see your faith evolve into something different, more mature for you, authentic, meaningful and life giving. Doubt as a tool. The consequence, she said, is that it makes faith more real. And here is a benefit of online worship. I recommend you go back later and listen again to what she says. I think there is much wisdom there.

An author I’ve read calls this kind of moment “the sacrament of doubt”. A sacrament is a means of grace to connect us with God. It’s counter-intuitive, but doubt can be a means of grace that connects with God—a sacrament. Faith and doubt are intimately linked in our quest for meaning. On the one hand belief can provide a safe harbour in the turmoil of

uncertainty. On the flip side doubt can restrain the arrogance of certainty. Doubt can make us more open-minded about God. It can also make us all better theologians, prompting us to explore the cracks in our faith and to search for greater harmony between our beliefs and experience. Christians too quickly define doubt as that slippery slope that can lead, inevitably, to unbelief. But doubt can take us in the opposite direction, if we take our doubts seriously, if we doubt our doubts as much as we doubt our faith. Our prayer can be like the request made of Jesus, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” To Evans, that is the essence of being “yielded.”

So what about the Israelites, camping in a place with no water? Despite all that they had seen from the hand of God up to then, at this one thirsty moment they doubted. They asked Moses, “have you brought us out here to die? Is the Lord really with us?” Moses took his frustrations to God. “These people are driving me crazy!” God responded, “Take some elders. Go to a rock I will show you. Hit that rock with your staff and you will have water.” And they did.

Our God is a God of grace, who wants to come to us in our need. Doubt, I think, is one of God’s mechanisms to help us move on to a deeper appreciation and relationship with God. What we have is called the Christian faith, not the Christian certainty. Again, let’s hear from Frederick Buechner, “How could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there was no room for doubt there would be no room for me.” And there must be room for us if there is ever to be hope that faith could ever become a deeper thing.