

Doubt and Faith (Hope)

Psalm 86, Luke 1:26-49

Center Church, Hartford

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“How can this be?” Mary said to the angel Gabriel.

First, points to her for being brave enough to question a being that must have been a bit unnerving, claiming to have come with a message from God! I love stories like this where people don't just accept what God is up to, but ask questions, and God receives the questions! First word then, it's okay to ask questions about things we are told about God, no matter who does the telling.

Second, I have talked with so many people who say some version of this: “I come to church but I don't really believe a lot of the stuff in the Bible, the miracles and all that.” Or “I **don't** come to church because I don't really believe a lot of the stuff in the Bible. I mean, ‘How can this be?’”

I have had so many parishioners who don't want us to say the Apostles' Creed in worship because they don't believe Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary,” the “virgin” part being the problem. Ironically, Mary didn't believe it would be possible for her to give birth, either. It's hard to know what tone of voice she used in that verse where she says “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Maybe she said it like this: “yeah, go ahead, knock yourself out!” Maybe she said it like this: “Okay, sure, I'll believe it when I see it.” Maybe she said it as I read it, with confidence that all this would happen and it would all be okay.

If that's true, then after the angel left, all the doubts came back. Luke tells us that Mary left home after this and went “in haste” to find her relative Elizabeth, to whom the angel had referred. She was frightened and unsure, perhaps. She needed to find out if what the angel said about Elizabeth was true.

Then that amazing greeting happened. Elizabeth calling her “the mother of my Lord!” Knowing her doubt and fear and telling her “Blessed is she who believed” that God would do what the angel said. And Mary erupted in a song of deep faith, certain belief, clarity of God's love for her,

and great joy. Her soul, her deepest self, proclaimed how great God is. Did you ever have a moment like that, when everything seemed clear and God's presence was palpable?

I wonder if that strong faith lasted through 9 long months. Through the smirks of the neighbors and Joseph's doubt and the journey to Bethlehem. "How can this be?"

The Bible, which some say is so unbelievable, is full of people who also doubt what they are told or what they see with their own eyes. How wonderful that those stories got included! This book is not some superhero story or constant string of miracles, but the story of people like you and me encountering struggle and joy, difficulty and success, hope and despair....and God. Doubt is a central component of a thoughtful faith; we are not called to be mindless followers like those who fawn over the latest celebrity preacher or cult leader.

Mary doubted. Abraham, Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth all doubted that a woman past childbearing years could still bear a child. Moses doubted over and over again that God could use him to free the enslaved Hebrew people. Peter doubted that day Jesus walked on water and invited him to come out onto the waves. Thomas doubted that the Resurrection had happened. Paul doubted the whole Jesus movement until Jesus smacked him upside the head and knocked him off his horse.

The Psalm you heard this morning is a song of faith and trust in God, something I would certainly like to be able to sing. But the Psalm I might have used instead is Psalm 22, the Psalm Jesus began to say when he hung on the cross, dying. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Psalm has a rhythm that goes like this: "life is awful and I don't believe you care or are even there/yet my ancestors trusted you and you helped them/but I am a mess and have so many enemies/yet you kept me safe as a child and gave me a loving mother/but my bones feel like they're falling apart and my mouth is so dry that I can't speak/yet, I still want to believe you can help me."

Sound familiar?

If you have doubts about all this, that's okay, you are in a great line of ancestors who did, too. Here's what they also did: they kept open in their

minds and hearts the possibility that God did act in the past and might act now and/or in the future for good, for love, for hope, in our individual lives and in the world. Sometimes I say the words of the creed or read the scriptures and am not sure I believe it, either. But I speak it still, perhaps "faking it till you make it" describes it best. I commend that practice to you, because sometimes the words stick, and later I can see what I couldn't see when I said them. Sometimes that takes a while.

So, as we approach the Christmas story this month, a story full of unbelievable stuff, I invite you to not to banish your doubts, but to suspend them long enough to enter into a story that is so full of struggle and hope and possibility that there might just be a blessing in it for you, believable or not.

I leave you with a Mary Oliver poem that gets at this. It's called "Logos."

Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?
If you say the right words, the wine expands.
If you say them with love
And the felt ferocity of that love
And the felt necessity of that love,
The fish explode into many.
Imagine him [Jesus], speaking,
And don't worry about what is reality,
Or what is plain, or what is mysterious.
If you were there, it was all those things.
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.
Eat, drink, be happy.
Accept the miracle.
Accept, too, each spoken word
Spoken with love.

Amen.