

Sermon for 2 Lent
March 16, 2025
Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18
Psalm 27
Luke 13:31-35

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Today's lessons are about something that is very important in our lives, both as citizens of the world and as Christians: doubt. Doubt is something we all encounter, and live with, and sometimes run away from. We doubt when we lose a job, or when a job we want goes to someone else. We doubt when a family member dies or is lost to addiction or struggles with a long-term illness. We doubt that the world will remain a place where we and our children and grandchildren can live in safety and health. We doubt that we can do anything about these issues, or doubt that anything we do will make any difference. We deal with doubt in our secular lives on a daily basis, and accept it as part of life.

So why have we been taught to see doubt in our faith lives as a bad thing? It is normal to occasionally doubt our faith, or doubt the truth or importance of the things that have brought us to this point in our faith journey. But unfortunately many, if not most, of us have learned to see Christian doubt as a bad thing, something that means we lack faith or are insincere in our faith lives, rather than something that is just part of the journey. I believe we need to move away from that older teaching. In fact, I think it's the people who are strongest in their faith who have the most doubts! And why? Because doubters are generally people who have studied, and prayed, and wrestled with their faith, and really thought about what they are doing, rather than passively accepting what they are told. People who doubt are people who have honest questions, and this should be as acceptable in our faith lives as in other parts of our lives. Because, while we are indeed to trust God and trust that God has a plan, we are also to do our best to carry out God's plans as God makes them known to us, and that means planning, and thinking, and questions.

Let's face it: what Christians are called to do is ridiculous in the eyes of the world. I have friends who say to me, "You're so smart, how can you be taken in by something that makes no sense? You can't prove anything in your faith scientifically, so when will you grow up and stop clinging to something outmoded?" And I answer honestly, "Because that's how this system is set up. You're right – what I believe can't be completely explained. I will always have

questions. And that's where faith comes in. At some point I have to say 'I don't understand all this, but I will live my life according to my call, and trust that it will all be right in the end.' ”

The leadership of the church has done better recently at understanding this and making doubt acceptable. Former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry tells us that we're crazy to do what we do, to set ourselves against the world and behave as Jesus asks us to do. (And just as an aside, if you have not read *Crazy Christians* by Michael Curry, I encourage you to find a copy and do so.) Poll after poll tells us that people are less inclined to be part of a traditional faith community, across all denominations, and the “spiritual but not religious” portion of society is growing by leaps and bounds. Who wouldn't doubt in the face of what seems overwhelming odds against us? When we find ourselves doubting, questioning, wondering, we're not turning away from our faith, we're trying to live more deeply into it, to understand it better. And we're in good company. Because that's exactly where Abram finds himself in this morning's reading from Genesis.

This whole passage is a movement from doubt to a deeper belief and trust in God. Remember that at this point in the story, life has been one unexpected situation of endurance after another for Abram and Sarai. God has told them to pick up their household and move to a new and unknown land, and they've done so. They've also dealt with the fact that Sarai is barren, and so Abram has had a son with an enslaved woman so as to continue the line of inheritance. Can you imagine what that must have cost Abram and Sarai, to know that they are faithful people and yet they are denied the blessing of a son to inherit? This is where they find themselves this morning. And God comes to Abram and says, “Don't be afraid, I have still more good things in store for you.” Now, does Abram leap up rejoicing? Does he immediately accept God's word? No! He questions God; he asks, what reward can you give me that would be better than a son of my marriage? And after God reassures him on that point, he asks God what guarantee God can give him that he will be able to hold the land that God promises to him.

These questions are not indications of an absence of faith. Rather, these questions can only come out of a life that has been lived in faith and trust in the Lord. I invite you to remember what Father Michael said last week, about the three questions we need to ask ourselves: Who nourishes or sustains us, whom do we serve, whom do we trust to love and care for us? Father Michael said that the answer to all three questions ought to be “God.” That's Abram's answer. And he still has questions. And I submit to you that Abram can ask his questions precisely because “God” is the answer for him. It's only when we trust the Lord to listen to us, to hear us and answer us, that we can ask the hard questions like these. These questions are

Abram saying “God, I have trusted you in the past, and this has worked so far, but I need something more here in order to be comfortable and to be able to continue.” And God does not get angry with Abram. Instead, God gives Abram what he needs to go on in faith and trust.

Struggling with doubt is part of our faith life, like it or not. So it was with Abram, and so it is with us. God does not ask us to be unquestioning followers; rather, God asks us to be faithful that God is in both the question and the answer, and that God does indeed have an answer, even if it’s not totally clear to us at the present moment. And that’s a much harder situation than unquestioning obedience.

Abram’s question “How can I be sure?” is one we all face at many points in our journey, and we can only move farther along the path when we admit it and live into the tension that questions bring to our faith lives.

Look at the way the Psalm echoes these ideas. What is the first question of the psalm but “Whom shall I fear, if God is with me?” And the psalmist then goes on to say that he trusts God because he has already seen God in action, and therefore in “the day of trouble” to come God will keep him safe. He says that he has confidence that God will show him the way and sustain him. Even while he asks God not to forsake him, not to hide God’s face from him, the psalmist knows that God is there and will be there for him. And this has come out of a life lived in relationship with God. Just as with Abram, doubt and trust are mingled together, because both are essential to an authentic spiritual life. Both faith and doubt insist that we take God seriously, ask real questions, and truly depend on God rather than just giving God lip service and doing what we want.

And the Gospel is a foretaste of what happens both when we trust in God, and when we don’t. Some Pharisees come to Jesus and tell him to leave town, because Herod wants to kill him. Jesus refuses to leave, because he knows he’s doing God’s work and that God will not let anything happen until the appointed time. Jesus knows that he’s going to die for what he’s doing, but he also knows that God knows what God is doing. And Jesus knows that he needs to keep on doing God’s work as long as possible. Look at the image of God as a mother hen, trying to gather in all her chicks against danger. What would happen if Jesus ran away? How many chicks would be lost to the fox? As we are reminded in our collect, God has promised to be gracious to all who have gone astray, if they promise to change their ways and be faithful again; Jesus wants to give everyone, even the Pharisees, even Herod himself, as much time as possible to repent and return to the Lord. Even these famous doubters, those who doubt not only Jesus but God as well, even these are to be given every chance at salvation.

Lent is an opportunity to walk into the desert and deepen our faith. It's a time to wrestle with questions and know that we may not get answers. It's a time to live into the fact that life is full of insecurity, injustice, pain, and uncertainty. And it's a time to remember and reconnect with the fact that God is with us in the midst of everything, and especially our doubts and uncertainties. May God give us the ability to see and understand that our doubts are the doors to a greater faith, and to see as well that God waits with outstretched wings to gather us all close, to embrace us and hold us fast in God's mercy and grace.

Amen.