



Saint John United Methodist Church
12700 W. Hwy. 42, Prospect, KY 40059
stjohnky.com

Message for January 19, 2020
“Faith and Doubt”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: James 1:2-8

We All Have Doubts

Let's be honest with one another, we all have doubts. It's just part of being human. The one who won't admit to doubting every now and then just simply isn't very honest. That person is neither honest with themselves or with other people.

We all have doubts. It's what we do with them that makes the difference.

I have always liked what Frederick Buechner says about such things.

In his book, *Wishful Thinking* he says, “*Whether your faith affirms there's a God or not, if you don't have doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.*”

I have often said that doubt is “*the kissing cousin of faith.*”

Faith and doubt are “*two sides of the same coin.*”

Our doubts put us at a crossroads. They either work to strengthen our faith or weaken it.

I have struggled with many people down through the years who have found themselves at that very same crossroads.

Whether because of illness, a job loss, a divorce, or some other cataclysmic event those people found themselves at the crossroads of either believing or not believing.

You may find yourself at that crossroads today.

Some say that doubt is the opposite of faith. That's just simply not true. The opposite of faith is unbelief.

Gary Parker in his book, *The Gift of Doubt* puts it this way, “*If faith never encounters doubt, if truth never struggles with error, if good never battles with evil how can faith know its own power?*”

It's in the struggles of life that we really begin to know the power of God to overcome.

The potential for our faith to grow is always possible when we hardship comes our way.

The kind of faith that eventually sees us through *“the dark nights of our souls”* rarely comes without questioning and doubt.

As we said, just a second ago, we all have doubts, it’s what we do with them that makes the difference.

So let’s look at three separate scripture passages that will help us in this regard.

Help Thou My Unbelief

Last week we talked a good deal about the account of Jesus healing the boy possessed by an evil spirit as recorded in Matthew 17:14-21

If you remember, the disciples tried to help, but to no avail. They wondered aloud why they weren’t successful. Jesus chided them for their lack of faith.

In regard to that lack of faith, Ashlee did a really great job of reminding us about how we so often *“allow our own limitations and shortcomings to govern the limitlessness of God.”*

God’s power is without limits and we’d do well to *“plug into it.”*

This we reference that same event. This time we read from Mark 9:14ff. The account is much the same.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John have just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration. They found themselves in the valley below where most of life is lived.

After having experienced the heights of a mountaintop experience with Jesus the disciples were now faced with the rigor and pain of everyday life and immediately they found themselves coming up short.

Last week we focused a good deal on the disciples and their lack of faith. This week we consider the same story, but put our focus on the father. In his desperation, he would do anything to see his son healed.

“Everything is possible for the one who believes,” said Jesus.

And with that the man responded with a reply that has rung through the ages. His response resonates with each and every one of us because we are just like him.

“I believe, help me overcome my unbelief.” (Mark 9:24)

Talk about honesty. I wish we were just as honest. Every one of us struggles with unbelief and we’d do well to seek Christ’s help with that.

The father faced his own deficiencies headlong and was not at all bashful about asking for Christ’s help—for his son, sure, but for his own life.

Just think of everything he had gone through. There he was at the crossroads of discouragement and triumph and Jesus was willing to oblige him.

“I believe, help me overcome my unbelief.”

I repeat that over and over. It resonates with my heart. I do so believe, but there are those nagging times of unbelief that rattle my soul.

And so, I cry out, *“I believe, help me overcome my unbelief,”* and every time I find Jesus right there in middle of my struggle, strengthening me to no end.

“Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen, and Yet Believe.”

In just a few weeks we will be celebrating Easter. As fast as time goes these days, it will be here before we know it.

Easter is a triumph in every way. It is the very basis of our victory in Christ—for this life and the next.

Somewhere in the mix of that celebration we will find ourselves headlong into a consideration of the disciples and how they reacted to all that went on.

Upon the death of Jesus the disciples cowered away afraid for their lives, wondering what was next.

We even see ourselves there. That’s certainly the case upon considering Thomas, the one we have come to know as *“Doubting Thomas.”*

Thomas was the one who upon hearing the news of Christ’s resurrection essentially said, *“I’ll believe it when I see it.”* And see it he did.

In the midst of all his doubts, Thomas was allowed to place his hands in the nail prints of the risen Christ and all he could do was exclaim, *“My Lord and my God!”*

The message for us is in what Jesus said next.

“Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.” (John 20:29)

Just like Thomas we want to see for ourselves before we’ll believe. Steeped so much in the empiricism of the scientific method we are continually asking God to prove himself.

We are not unlike the multitudes that followed Jesus around. They were always looking for the next *“sign and wonder.”*

We are no different than those from Missouri, better known as *“The Show Me State.”*

Jesus claims that we are blessed when our faith is not predicated on having to see or touch or feel.

True faith doesn’t need to be dazzled all the time. It simply rests in the presence of the Lord and in that there is *“peace that passes all understanding.”*

I fear though that I am somewhat like my namesake. I too want to see and touch and feel. I figure you are the same way.

I am thankful though for the blessings of faith that see me through even the hard times of this life. In and through them, I am able to experience God all the more.

Believe and Not Doubt

That leads us to our scripture for today from James 1:2-8.

It's a good word for those going through hard times.

“Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” (James 1:2-3)

We are encouraged to be faithful in spite of our doubts, to stay at it when it comes to faith, to be well-assured that God leans into our struggles and helps us live beyond them.

James reminds us to be confident when we seek God.

“You must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” (James 1:6)

The “*doubt*” that James speaks of here is more closely akin to “*unbelief*.”

The Greek word here is *dia-krino* which is akin to living a sort of double life—one of belief and unbelief.

William Barclay describes such a life as a “*civil war*,” of sorts, in which “*trust and distrust of God are constantly battling against each other*.”

That is certainly no way to live. That's why James says that “*such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do*.”

We need to make up our minds that instead of being double-minded, we will bring our doubts to God.

R. C. Sproul in his book, *Doubt and Assurance* asks, “*When does doubt become unbelief?*” He then answers his own question, “*When you let it*.”

Without A Doubt

If you are living in the middle of doubt right now, the first thing you need to ask yourself is, “*Why am I doubting?*”

Try these on and see if they fit:

- How those times when a tragedy hits and you immediately begin to doubt God's goodness?
- How about those times when you pray for something and what you pray for doesn't come to pass and you begin to doubt God's power?

- How about those times when you try to live rightly and do what God want you to do and you suffer for it and because of that you begin to doubt God's justice?

Most of the time, doubts have a common cause. In many instances doubt is borne out of hardship. James 1:2-8 seems to bear that out.

That's all the more reason to cling to God with all we are.

In the midst of the hardship of World War II, the great German theologian, Helmut Thielicke wrote, *"A Christian is not someone who doesn't doubt, but someone who doubts his doubts more than he doubts his faith."*

It behooves us then to continually face our doubts to the end that they bring us to the blessed place of faith.

God understands and will help us through our doubts and bring us to the other side, if we'd only let him.

You know the interesting thing about a question mark is that when you straighten it out you get an exclamation point.

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With God's help, may all the question marks of our lives become exclamation points proclaiming the goodness of God in every way.