

Damascus, Doubt, Dismay, and Dancing

April 18, 2010

Acts 9: 1 - 20

Psalm 30

John 20: 19 - 31

She came by the church this week like so many others have come before her. Her request seemed simple enough.

Can you help me with my power bill?

I looked at it. Nearly 850.00 dollars behind with reconnect fees and what not. Months and months of no payments will do that to your power bill. She was more than 4 times beyond the maximum that we usually give. And though we try to save the majority of our assistance funds for the winter months, we still help folks 12 months out of the year.

How did you get behind?

I don't know, she told me. I was suspicious.

Who was supposed to be paying it?

My mother – then why didn't she pay it, has she lost a job – no she's still working, but she just didn't pay it. I don't know why. Can you help me?

Not for 800.00 or more dollars, no, I cannot.

Then can you help a little?

No, I can't help that much and I am not sure that your real problem is that overdue power bill.

She went on her way. I went back into my office and prayed that I had done the right thing – I never know, really. Sometimes I say yes, sometimes I say no – but I always pray. .

You see, I just doubted her story. It did not add up. Did my doubt save me from making a mistake and from giving money from someone who was either irresponsible or perhaps trying to swindle us? Or did it prevent me from helping someone in need? Did I get it right?

Strictly speaking, doubt is uncertainty, it is to consider something questionable or unlikely, it is to hesitate to believe.

Sometimes we doubt because we don't trust the source; we doubt the testimony of the story teller. We don't know enough to make an informed decision and so we play the odds and we do nothing.

Sometimes we doubt because the equation doesn't equate, or the music doesn't resolve. The numbers don't add up or the melody is incomplete, so we watch from the sidelines and we don't join the game ongoing. We doubt because the facts are fishy and person recruiting us to join the cause seems to have more motives than we can count.

And sometimes we doubt because history tells us to protect – the heart can only bear so many lies, so many letdowns, and so many failures. Repeated failure makes the soul reluctant to believe or to believe again. We hesitate to believe.

In John Chapter 20 we learn of Thomas – who does not seem to trust the source, can't make the idea of the resurrection equate, and who can't bear to be disappointed again.

Make no mistake about it, Thomas was disappointed. Good Friday was the end of his dream. And it seems by a week after Easter that his dream for Jesus is gone for sure. Remember Thomas was the inquisitive one – he was the one who had asked the follow up question, pushed Jesus to tell him more: “Lord we do not know the way,” Thomas says, “you are talking about

many rooms in your father's house, but we don't know the way." I am the way, the truth, and the light, Jesus says.

Somehow Thomas misses Easter – he misses the resurrected Christ in all his wonder. He does not get to see what the others see. Jesus appears to everyone there in the room, “but Thomas.” I can hardly imagine his dismay, or his disappointment. He must have been completely crushed.

“Unless I see and touch, I will not believe,” Thomas says. The question I have always had was who is it exactly that Thomas was doubting – the Lord, or the testimony the disciples are making about the Lord? The disciples have a less than perfect track record, don't you know? Thomas wonders, can they be trusted? He thinks, “can I believe what they are saying?”

It takes a week but then grace shows up – Jesus arrives and notice his response to ‘doubting Thomas’ – it is not anger, it is a dressing down, it is not a confrontation. It is, “Come and touch and see and believe.” Yes, it is blessed to believe and not see, it is wonderful to trust the testimony and avoid doubt all together, we don't deny Jesus this teaching moment. But it is also a blessing to have our doubts assuaged by the Lord. For Thomas it took a week. For some it might take a life time – why doesn't my son believe, why didn't my dad ever go to church, a funny thing happened, pastor, I woke up one morning and realized that I needed to pray even though I had not thought about praying in years – but the move from the dismay of disappointment into the depths of doubt is a quick one, only reversed by God grace. Our doubts are only resolved in God's time.

I am afraid we modern people make a grave error when we place God on the clock, follow God around with a stop watch, as though God were a contestant on Jeopardy and we were counting down to our final answer. We get in a hurry and demand an end to our confusion and longing when all the while it is our faith that God “has the whole world in His hands – the mummies, the daddies, the babies, you, me” – even our doubts. Even they are in the hands of God.

One of the questions that always challenges me is why do we assume our failures are rejections from God? Something goes horribly wrong in our lives and we assume that God is sending us away and denying us his favor.

To be sure it is one of the most amazing scenes in all the Bible this conversion of Saul to Paul – Saul was “breathing murder” against the church. This meant he wanted to kill them – not just stop them. Probably had been for years. He is taking his pogrom on the road, when suddenly he is blinded by Jesus. Stricken with fear and changed.

Imagine for a moment that you were categorically convinced that you were absolutely right. That's who Saul was – just absolutely right. He has not a doubt about what he is doing. Life set on a different path. Sometimes our surety is removed from us in traumatic ways. One the way to Damascus, Paul is left dismayed. Everything changes and he discovers how wrong he has been. Thomas only doubts the testimony of Jesus, Saul is trying to kill the memory of Jesus.

But in this case God is consistent, too -- notice Saul / Paul is as villainous as can be, even he is offered grace. He is allowed to see again. He is allowed to serve again. Even though the vision of Jesus makes him doubt everything he has know until that moment – the vision of Jesus throws the equation into jeopardy, the equation of faith he had been using for so long – he is offered grace and a chance to believe anew, believe again.

My friends, what if we each had our own Damascus, our own confrontation with doubt when we demand that faith fit into categories that we understand? Even Paul, who knew, then

doubted, and then spent his life trying to know “the new creation” he was in Christ, yes Paul on the way to his Damascus was offered the redirection of grace.

The next time the numbers don’t add up, or we think, the odds are not in my favor, perhaps I should not try – maybe that is a good time to think of Paul, who was told that he was practicing the wrong kind of faith and dispensing the wrong kind of justice. But who was loved anyway and welcomed home by the Lord.

As many of you know I spent New Years in Nimasac, San Adreas Xecul, Totonicapan Guatemala – that is in the Guatemalan highlands. Our mission team had gone there and we saw amazing moments of the evidence of God’s hand moving on that mountain.

One of the amazing traits we witnessed was that those folks had reason to doubt most everything. Nearly everything moment of their lives were difficult and nothing for them was assumed or guaranteed – a couple of thousand years of poverty will do that to a people. And yet, they doubt God for nothing.

They were building an addition on their church to be used as a study room, a library for children to learn beyond their 2nd or 3rd grade education because they know God has given them minds and they know education is a way to change their lives for greater good. When we left there the room was about 40% complete and they had most of the supplies to complete it. But they had no books, no shelves – in other words they were a long way from being done. They did not have God on the stop watch – they didn’t time God with the calendar.

Doubt should have told them – “we probably cannot do this” – doubt should have made them reassess their model – doubt should have stopped them dead in their tracks. Yet, they doubted nothing. They were assured that God would provide a means for completion – they only needed patience and the faith to witness God’s provision. After all, we had come from Tarboro, right?

I wonder – what is more misguided? – to begin something on faith and trust and let doubts about a project fall by the way or to never try at all because the task is too big and the journey too long? Our Presbyterian friends on top of that hillside a world away have the faith of the Psalmist, the kind we find in Psalm 30. I hope you’ll always remember that Psalm – “mourning into dancing,” “weeping for the night but joy in the morning,” dismay turned into praise.

They doubt nothing. They trust. They believe – against all odds they believe. Even though their history tells them that nothing is assured, they find surety in the almighty. Every time I go down there I am humbled by the witness of a people who trust God more than they trust their quarterly statement from Fidelity, or the Presbyterian Foundation, or whomever they are invested with. It is a predicament of our lives – we are called to be stewards and caretakers of all we have and yet we are called by God to follow and move and go to where we are called. Sometimes it takes a week; sometimes we are blinded and dismayed; and sometimes we just are to believe in spite of the odds against us.

Brothers and sisters it is true that our doubts sometime serve us well – I doubt it is wise for me to sell my house and move to New York and try to make it on Broadway; I doubt I’ll ever be a world class sprinter; I doubt I’ll ever make the PGA Tour; I doubt I should try to fly from the top of the steeple to my house after church this morning; I doubt that every person who asks me for money is telling me the truth; I doubt and sometimes my doubts are rooted in wisdom.

But it is also true that our doubts limit us from knowing the true nature of God and the fullest expressions of love between us all. Doubt is not antithetical to faith. Doubt is means of finding faith as our doubts are always resolved by grace. It is when we invest more in doubt than

we do in faith that we misstep. Doubts and dismay are turned to dancing, they really are. Sometimes, though, we miss the dance because we got tired of waiting for the tune.

May God give us his grace, that our doubts would turned to faith as surely as our souls are tuned for praise.