

Advent III

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Psalms 146:4-9

I have a complaint. When I was growing up in the Episcopal Church, the third Sunday of Advent was a time to celebrate Mary, the mother of Jesus. It's called "pink Sunday" because the candle is, well, pink – again, to remind us of joy and Mary. So why am I complaining? The Episcopal Church is on the Revised Common Lectionary – the order of readings for each Sunday – and this year we are not pondering Mary, or joy, and instead we are dealing with doubt.

Doubt and I have a special relationship. I have come to understand that doubt is a seed, if given to God, that grows into new life and understanding. Doubt that is held from God and not shared becomes disillusionment and disbelief. But, doubt shared offers new understanding and life. For those of you that read this and cringe, it might be a result of what happened in the 20th century within the evangelical and fundamentalist church traditions and within the Roman Catholic tradition. Starting with the latter, doubt can arise in the heart of Roman Catholics, but they are not asked to share it. With our brothers and sisters in evangelicalism, doubt can be seen as parallel, or in coordination with, the serpent that talked to Eve and got her to eat of the forbidden tree. Thus, if one doubts, one is entertaining the serpent and can cause one to fall. What I am telling you is from our Anglican tradition which is this: doubts are normal and are meant to be shared with God and with one another because doubt becomes a seed that grows into new life and understanding.

The Bible does not shy away from doubt. Moses doubted. But, he didn't hold it in; he shared his doubts with God. He shared them with his leadership. Then, importantly, Moses listened with his heart and ears to see what God would say. For every doubt Moses offered, he received new life and insight and wisdom. The Bible doesn't shy away from doubt because God does not shy away from doubt. One way to read the Hebrew Scriptures is to see that God invites our doubts. God wants us to share areas that we are uncertain, or flat-out have difficulty believing, because then God will help us gain insight and wisdom. Moses shared his doubts with God, and, at times, his leadership, with raw, honest dialog. God responds to raw, honest dialog – but not with anger or lightning bolts but with wisdom and compassion. Moses set a pattern of belief for us to this day – share your raw thoughts and doubts in dialog with God. Share your doubts and then read Scripture. God will answer. Don't worry, He will not smite; but He will answer.

Another person in the Bible who doubted was the prophet Elijah. His doubts are famous – they caused him to run, and run and run. I think he was running and telling God the entire time why he was running away. He shared; he ran. And, I think he was open to what God was going to say to him to relieve his doubts. Interestingly enough, Elijah didn't have a community like Moses. Elijah's community was nature itself. God responded to Elijah's doubts using nature. A raven visited him and he saw it as a sign from God. The bird brought him food to eat even though there

was a severe famine. Elijah saw it as God responding to him. Another response from God was a whisper of wind that Elijah felt. He then knew it was God speaking to him (responding to him about his doubt). Elijah had doubts but then saw a cloud off in the distance not bigger than the palm of his hand. Angels (one or more, it's hard to tell) appeared to Elijah and assisted him even while he was doubting. God was responding to him, in nature, and creating new life and understanding within the prophet himself.

Can you imagine the Bible without Moses or Elijah? They even appear in the New Testament – just to show how big they are in the faith life of those who follow Christ and people of the Jewish faith. And they doubted. God did not smite them for doubting; God grew in them new life and understanding and faith.

Speaking of the New Testament, the entire story begins with the Temple priest, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. They do not have children, and, in Zechariah's mindset, they are too old to have kids. Nevertheless, an angel shows up one day while Zechariah was doing his priestly duties in the Temple and said that they are going to have a son. He doubted... and he shared it. Now, this is the one instance where something happened – not smiting though. The angel did not allow Zechariah to speak. He's a priest. Speaking is a big part of what we do. And now he can't do it until Elizabeth gives birth and Zechariah announces – literally writes on a tablet – that the child's name will be John. Suddenly he can speak again. He had doubts but they created, quite literally, new life. That John became John the Baptizer who baptized Jesus.

In today's Gospel lesson, John the Baptizer is in prison. He sends a note to Jesus that read: *Are you the One to Come or are we to wait for another.* Yes, that's right, John the Baptizer doubted! John baptized him. He saw the angel descend from heaven, he heard The Voice that said, "This is my son, my beloved." ... yet, "Are you the One to Come or are we to wait for another," is what he wrote.

Doubt. It's that strong that even John the Baptizer can feel it. But, notice the pattern? He didn't keep it in; he shared it. He then kept his ears and heart open for the response from God. Jesus responded: Tell him what you see – the blind can see, the lame can walk, good news is being shared. And that is the pattern from Hebrew Scripture; when we doubt, we share it with God and God asks us to look around and tell what we see. A cloud in the sky. A raven with food. A rock with water pouring out of it (Moses). Leaders saying that they see the Spirit working in Moses and in those around him. *Tell him what you see.*

Do you have doubts? Have you lifted them to God in prayer and then read Scripture? Have you shared your doubts with someone at the church? Are you willing to listen with an open heart and mind?

I have told this story before but I think this is the first time I've written it down. It happened forty years ago so it's about time I write it down. But, it has to do with doubt. I was sixteen. It was December, like the 21st or 22nd. The tree was up but it was before Christmas Eve. I was home. My parents were out shopping. My brother was probably out with friends. I remember vividly sitting in my favorite chair, staring at the tree and our manger scene near it. I was looking at the angel perched above the stable. I had doubts in angels. I thought they were figments of an

active imagination. But really, would an angel speak to Mary? Would one show up in Joseph's dream? Did the shepherds really hear the choir of angels singing? ... probably not, I thought. I then said words to the effect of, if this real, let me know.

A knock came at the front door. Now, this is back in the day when people would just stop by, unannounced, and knock on the door to see if anyone was home. It was lightly snowing in Tacoma Washington and had the usual depressing grey-afternoon sky (I'm so glad to be in Florida!). I got up expecting to see my friend Geoff or Andy. Instead, there was a stranger – a short woman with dark stringy hair, in a large over coat, with boots, clutching two bags. I had never seen her before. She said, "I am a little lost. I need a ride home. I live nearby. Can you give me a ride."

I could have. We had three cars; two were accounted for, the other waiting in the driveway. I had my license for eight months. Dad taught me how to drive in the slush and snow of Western Washington State. So, I could have, yes; to answer her question.

But I said no. I said no one else is home. I wouldn't know how to tell them I've left. Sorry. I can't help.

I closed the door.

I sat back down on the comfy chair but it wasn't so comfortable any more. I looked at the manger scene and at the angel. And then it hit me: *You idiot, what if that was your answer?!* I jumped back up, opened the door but she was not there. I saw her footprints heading up to our door but did not see the set that showed she left. I closed the door and pondered for a moment. I then did something I had never done before. I knelt at the only place I could find in the house that was an altar – our Christmas tree and the manger scene. I said: I'm sorry God. I let you down. You tell me to love my neighbor as myself and I did not. Please forgive me and, if you can, give me another chance. Amen.

Two months later, in February – the most depressing month in Washington State – I was driving back from something to do with my trombone because I remember it being in the backseat. I went by Winchell's Donuts – home of the warm and fresh donut – and saw my friend Ben was working. I stopped in. He'd always give me a day-old donut (for free) when I stopped by. I doubt that was corporate policy but hey, it's a depressing month and Ben wanted company. Anyway, I stopped in and we were chatting at the counter. The bell on the front door rang. In walked the same woman who came to my house – long overcoat, stringy dark hair, boots, and she was clutching two bags. She ambled up to the counter and asked: Did the bus already come by? (Ben shrugged his shoulders) She said: can I wait in here where it's warm until the next one. He started to say that she needed to purchase something when I interrupted him with this: "I'll take you home. You live near me." She looked at me, pondered, and then grunted something and started walking to the door. I hurried out behind her, moved my trombone to the trunk, put her bags in the backseat, and started driving. Nervous, I started chatting. She didn't respond much. I told her that just before Christmas she stopped by my house, asked for a ride, and I didn't give her one and that I was sorry.

As we entered my neighborhood she told me where to turn and then, pulling up in front of a white house with no fence, she said, “This is good, right here.” I got out, handed her bags, she mumbled something and started slowly walking around the side of the house. I thought of something when I got to the driver’s side door. I looked up to say it and... no more footsteps, she was gone.

Because of my doubt, sharing it with God, and then being open to God’s response, I now believe in angels. I’ve had many other angelic encounters. In fact, I have a sense of when one – at least of a particular type – is present. The best way to describe it is that the air pressure changes (becomes denser, like one is kind of compressing air). I know that because I believe that is what I felt when I was around the woman who needed a ride. I felt it when she ambled up to the counter with a rather annoyed teenager wearing a Winchell’s uniform.

[Speaking of which, I called Ben later that night. I told him what happened. He was mesmerized and also happy that I was still alive. I think, in retrospect, that he may have been the first person I witnessed to about my experience with God. I’m going to have to think about this some more – and, by the way, this part and the part above about the air pressure did not end up in my sermon for Sunday.]

Bring your doubts. Share them with God. I believe God can handle it. Even if your doubt is about there even being a God. Share it. Follow in Moses’s tradition and share it also, in raw and open dialog with God and with others you trust. You can follow in Elijah’s tradition of expressing your doubts, even as you are running, and then listen for the response. The best way in the 21st century to do this is to name your doubt and then to read Scripture. Not sure where to start? That’s mine. How about Matthew’s Gospel – start with Zechariah and his doubt. And be ready for God to answer. Have an open heart, mind and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying. And, who knows, maybe an angel will appear at your door or at your favorite donut shop.