

ADVENT

December 16, 2018

*Luke 7:18-28: **“As You Prepare for Christmas,
Think on This... “Help for Doubt”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

So here we are, just as we are, before a Holy God and the best we can do is cry out with the tax collector who said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner (Lk. 18:13b)!" It's all we have to offer at the throne of the only true living God - nothing more, nothing less! What we are is exactly what we just sang in the sermon hymn a few moments ago, "Just as I am, Without One Plea." And the third verse is most appropriate for this morning: "Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt..."

"Many a conflict, many a doubt!" You've got them and so do I. One of the challenges that Christians can experience in their faith life is to be plagued by doubt. That brings us to our theme for this 3rd Sunday in Advent. As **We Prepare for Christmas, think on this . . . Help For Doubt.**

Before we describe what doubt is, we need to understand what doubt is not. It is not unbelief. It can certainly lead to unbelief if it is left unresolved, but it is not unbelief. The word "doubt" means "to be double-minded, or in two minds about something." In his book, *The Christian Life: Cross or Glory?*, Steven A. Hein writes:

We experience doubt in our Christian walk not because it is inherent in faith, but rather because our faith is either malformed or malnourished. In such condition, it is vulnerable to either too much or too little tension between our experience or understanding of sin and what we believe to be true about God's mercy.

What happens is that we find ourselves standing with one foot in one boat and one foot in another. Such a situation will eventually requires a resolution as the two boats drift apart. If what is malformed or deficient about our faith is corrected or fed, we will land with both feet in one boat, but if our experience or understanding about sin takes over, we will land in the other. Hein goes on:

As our awareness and expression of faith can suffer from a variety of problems, we must recognize that doubt which can assault our faith comes in different forms. We are suggesting that doubt should be viewed as a symptom: something is wrong with faith. Different problems that faith can experience are manifested by different kinds of doubt. Doubt needs to be seen by the Christian as both threat and opportunity. If ignored and neglected, doubt has the potential to destroy faith. Yet, if understood and tended to properly by God's Word, faith can be matured and strengthened dramatically.

In our text for this morning, John the Baptist had not lost his faith. Rather, something was wrong with his faith. It says, "The disciples of John reported all these things to him (that is, Jesus' teachings and miracles). And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another (vv. 18-19)?'"

You will want to note that this report comes to John who is now in prison. Last Sunday we saw John the Baptist boldly preaching in the wilderness, now he is in lock-down. And we know what's coming for

John - his head on a platter. All of this is stunning, because when we look back at the beginning of John's ministry we come to these words of the Baptist: "I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit [the Holy Spirit] descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' [And John said] And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God (Jn. 2:33-34)."

"I have seen...borne witness...this is the Son of God." And, again, these words of our text, "Are you the one who is to come?" He moves from assurance to doubt. Why? Well, as John the Baptist read Old Testament prophecy, there were many verses that pointed to the coming of Christ in salvation, and other verses about him coming in judgment. John the Baptist not only confused the two comings of Christ, but he failed to see the gap of time between cross and judgment. He had doubt from what we might call a weak foundation. His reasons for faith were weak, and doubt began to plague him when the truthfulness of God's word was rigorously questioned by the reasoned arguments of the sinful nature. It is instructive to note how Jesus ministered to these doubts (Luke 7:20-23):

And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, *"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

John is bid to hold on to the testimony. When we have doubts like John the Baptist, our malformed or malnourished faith must rest on the witness of Scripture. In the testimony concerning the person and work of Jesus, what is malformed is made right, and what is malnourished is fed. Again, Hein:

If faith is to stand the intellectual challenges that our [unbelieving] world can raise, then it must have a firm foundation . . . Our confident trust needs more than just accuracy in the *whats* of faith. It also needs a firm foundation in the *whys* of faith, i.e. *why* it should be regarded as true. If we do not know the *why* undergirding the Gospel and the Christian world-view, then we do not know the *why not* hidden beneath some substitute.

Let's make it a little more simple. People will question the Word of God, of which they really know very little, yet readily and simplistically accept what science says with equally less or no knowledge. And that's a problem for some here - doubts about the Word, but ready and willing acceptance of human wisdom which has brought us to nothing but sin, death, and the power of the devil. As Pastor Bill has said time and time again: "Human wisdom's stellar achievements are all memorialized at the grave!"

What was it again that Jesus told the disciples of John the Baptist to take back to him? Please allow me to quote it again:

In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, *"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

Jesus anchors John the Baptist in his saving work! The disciples go back and testify to what they have witnessed, and what they have witnessed is the person and work of Jesus Christ that fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures. Everything that Jesus does was a fulfillment of the words of Isaiah (35:5-7):

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

We will always be in a battle against the powers of darkness inside of our minds and hearts. As long as we are down here, we will struggle with doubt. But, as we can see from what Jesus says to John the Baptist, there is **Help For Doubt**. It can be summarized in the words of Isaiah 8:20, "To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn." The dawn in the midst of all darkness comes from the Scriptures, and Jesus says that the Scriptures "bear witness about me (John 5:39)." And after he had risen from the grave, when the disciples on the road to Emmaus and were struggling in the darkness, Jesus began "with Moses and the Prophets, [and] he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:26)."

As we continue our Advent journey to the Manger with the sinful flesh always trying to drag us down, in the face of this unbelieving world that would challenge and destroy our faith with unresolved doubt, we have Help For Doubt in the testimony of the Scriptures that are about Jesus. Once again we are taken to the promise that was given to Joseph is there to comfort us: "[Mary] she will bear a Son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21)." And with those words our thoughts are moved to the Cross and Christ's willingness to pay for our sin and secure our everlasting life! May all doubt be daily dispelled - may it disappear!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott