

Exodus 17:1-7, James 1:5-8  
“Is doubting a sin?”

I had a really interesting conversation on Monday that stuck with me as I prepared for today. Over a year ago I met someone in town and he invited me to call on him because he had some questions for me. I called, twice, left a message each time and never heard back. Months passed until Monday rolled around. I was cutting a few small limbs in my yard on Monday, splitting some wood, making a real mess of the place which I tend to do on Monday, when I looked up and there he was. So much time had passed that I didn't recognize him so I said very cheerfully, how can I help you? He responded: I have some questions about God. For the next hour or so I listened and we talked.

He has doubts, real deep seated doubts about God that arise not from God being able to reveal himself in his life, because he has. He said he feels God when he is out and about, in nature, but he has doubts because of the people who call themselves Christians. That's us. His doubts stem from what happens to you once you become one of us, a Christian, and he wanted no part of that. He left with doubts, hopefully with fewer than before. Then I went back to my office and looked back over the confirmation papers which had been handed in that Sunday and I took some consolation from a quote from one of the papers: “Having a strong well-built faith is putting all of your trust in God and just believing in things that we may hope, but cannot see.”

I thought the faith of a 7<sup>th</sup> grader versus the doubt of a grown man, I'd take the faith of a child any time. Today, this second Sunday in Lent we are going to ask the question which arises out of our Scriptures: is doubting a sin? It seems as if our society and our culture, even much current Christian thought in the church encourages us to embrace doubt, call it what it is, and let it shape and mold you. That's not my stance and we will see that is not the approach in our text in the Bible. We do read and understand that doubting is inevitable but not embraceable. Let's read.

**READ**

Last week we were reminded of the inevitability of suffering and we dared to say that there was even redeeming value in suffering if we were able to be open to whatever God might be teaching us in those situations. Our two Scriptures in this our second week in James, are somewhat connected. Verse 4 ends with the phrase lacking nothing and today in verse 5 it begins with that same word lacking in wisdom. So if suffering is inevitable and leads to growth,

what about doubt? Is it sinful or is it something which is inevitable and leads to our growth, kind of like suffering?

Let's hear what some well known people had to say about doubt. Paul Tillich, a well known theologian stated: "doubt isn't the opposite of faith, it is an element of faith." Renee Descartes gave even more credit and value to doubt when he stated: "if you would be a real seeker after the truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things." So two Christians who not only consider doubt a part of life, but even a necessary part of faith. Now Paul in Romans 14:23 says something quite different in relationship to doubt. He states: "But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith."

The doubter condemned. But Jude in verse 22 states the following: "have mercy on some who are doubting." The NRSV says wavering, but the Greek is the word for doubting. So, is doubting a sin? According to Tillich and Descartes, no, according to Romans when it is in the context of ethics and it affects how you live and takes you away from your principles and your relationship to your Savior, Paul says yes. But Jude says have mercy on the doubters. So what will it be? Let's look at our Scripture.

In our Exodus Scripture we find the people of Israel confronted with a reality in their life where doubt was able to find its way and permeate the thoughts and actions of the people. There is a sense of inevitability of doubt in the entire journey across the wilderness. It keeps popping up. We saw it a few weeks ago with the golden calf. How does doubt keep entering their lives, and our lives as well? Doubt creeps in whenever our needs are not being met or we foresee a situation looming in the horizon where it is possible, even likely, that our need will not be met.

The doubt in our Scripture is heard in verse 7 with the statement made by the people of Israel: "Is the Lord among us or not?" Moses' take on this stated doubt is that he responds by saying earlier, why do you put the Lord to the test? Remember testing last week? We saw it in the New Testament in James, but in the Old Testament it means literally tie in a knot. Why are you tying the Lord in a knot? But God responds to the doubt by providing water for the people.

We see this doubt reflected not only by the people on their journey across the wilderness, but we find others in the Bible questioning God. Sarah laughs at God, Zechariah loses his speech when he doubts, Gideon demands a sign, Jonah flees. But God never abandons the doubter in any of these situations.

But James doesn't embrace doubting in any way at all. Three times we find this word mentioned in our Scripture today. Let's break it down as far as what it means. The word in Greek is diakrinomenous. Stay with me, it is really interesting. Dia means through, krino means decide or decision, and menous means contrary. So the word doubt here in James means making a contrary decision. This comes out also in vs. 8 in our Scripture, we read that a doubter is double minded, the literal is dypsuchos which mean two souls. This sense of being conflicted internally is where James wants to lead us as far as understanding what doubt really is. There is nothing worse than being conflicted internally, and that is how doubt manifests itself.

Probably one of the most classic examples of doubting in Scripture could be referred to by James in vs. 6 where he speaks of the one who doubts is the one who is blown by the sea and tossed about by the waves. Remember Matthew 14:31 when Peter was walking on the water, he sees the waves and begins to sink. Save me! And Jesus responds: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" He doesn't say you of no faith, he says ye of little faith. You see doubt does not indicate a lack of faith, but rather a state of qualified faith. Doubt reflects a weakness in faith, but not its absence. This is absolutely crucial when we speak about doubt in relationship to sin.

So is it sin? We know it is inevitable, but it is not to be sought after or embraced. It will find you, is the implication. St. Augustine was the master of the stating the obvious, I see him as the Yogi Berra of the church Fathers. He had some great quotes in relationship to doubting and prayer. He once said: "O God, make me pure, but not now." Or "Lead me, O God, except in the direction I do not want to go.", and then again, "Save me, o God, from the consequences of sin, but not from the pleasures of indulgence."

James tells us candidly that while doubt may not keep us away from salvation, its result is such that when we are in doubt we ought not to expect to receive anything from the Lord. As doubt progresses we do not know to whom belongs our primary allegiance. It is the person who hesitates who cannot make up his mind as to his primary allegiance who discovers what it means to receive nothing from the Lord in the midst of that doubt.

I have heard of people of faith, actually, giants of the faith who have struggled and found themselves in times when their faith was shattered or they had a dark night of the soul. I probably should have come out clean from the beginning of this sermon, but I don't feel qualified to preach on doubt. I honestly cannot say that I have a history of doubt. Before 1986 I

was an unbeliever and I did not know Christ, it wasn't that I doubted, I knew for a fact that Christianity was made up, until the Holy Spirit grabbed me and said, no, I am for real.

But since Jesus entered my life I almost feel ashamed to say that there has not been a time that I doubted God's presence and especially his providence. I feel a bit like a phony preaching on doubt, when I can't really relate, and I don't say this to extol my faith, because it is simple and not very deep, but it is genuine.

Like all of you I have had hard, trying times, I have suffered and faced personal tragedies and God's presence has never seemed to diminish or waver. I consider myself ill-equipped to give advice on doubt so can only respect what Scripture tells me. I do not see a consistent view of it as sin, and yet James and others paint a picture of doubt not as something we ought to embrace, but rather combat with all of God's power.

We want to be able to move mountains with a grain of faith here, we want to ask and receive, we believe that God will answer our prayers. Ultimately, doubt will rob you, as vs. 8 tells us, of these incredible manifestations of God's revelations. I pray that as we continue our journey together during lent that doubt will not be a part of our relationship with our Savior, but rather an undying faith that with Christ all things are possible.