

**August 7, 2016**

**TEXT: Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16**

**TITLE: The Gospel of Doubt**

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'*

*All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.*

I must admit the sermon title, “The Gospel of Doubt” came from a TED Talk I recently heard on NPR given by Casey Gerald; a, thirty-something, Ivy-league educated, successful young man who grew up in what I discerned to be a fairly typical Black family in the 1990’s. Casey begins his talk by sharing that on December 31, 1999 he accompanied his grandmother to a New Year’s Eve, watch-night service at a Pentecostal church. A little before midnight, everyone fell to their knees in fervent prayer, in complete anticipation of Christ’s returning that night to rapture God’s true believers.

Casey said that he hung on tightly to his grandmother’s hand, because he had no doubt that she would be leaving this world with Christ, and he hoped that by holding on he would leave with her! Much to his and everyone’s surprise a few minutes after midnight when the praying ceased; Christ had not come. This was the beginning of Casey’s questioning an assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen. “Religion often gets in the way of God,” according to humanitarian and musician Bono.

After completing his education, Casey became financially successful and eventually started a program to help others realize their dreams, aspirations, and goals. However, after achieving success by society’s standards, Casey realized something was missing and that’s when he formulated his “Gospel of Doubt,” realizing his achievements and all he was doing to empower others was dialysis to a world that was in need of a transplant. Those are his words not mine.

The gospel of doubt from my perspective embraces and celebrates the fact that we don’t have all the answers, that in and of ourselves we won’t, nor can’t achieve and have it all, that without

something bigger than ourselves, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “we are of all people most to be pitied” (1Cor. 15:19b).

Some of us were taught that to doubt God was sacrilege, unfaithful; meant we weren't good, God-fearing Christians. Recently, someone I've known since childhood responded to one of my Facebook posts about the faithfulness of God by stating – “Knowing God, means you have no doubt. People who doubt don't really know or believe in God.” I didn't reply, because I no longer adhere to that supposition, nor am I in a position to discern who truly knows God or not. I don't believe that doubt and faith are in opposition to one another. Actually, there are times when doubt has informed my faith and other times when my faith has informed my doubt.

Recently, some of the staff discussed this Hebrew passage and we were all pretty much in agreement that doubt is the vehicle that sometimes helps us to let God to be God; doubt allows us the freedom to not box God in with absolutes, such as excluding people from ministry based on their gender, sexual orientation or identity; or thinking we know the mind of God in its fullness. Doubt gives us the ability to be in a reciprocal, covenantal relationship with God, getting to know God in a more intimate way, in spite of the fact that we see through a glass darkly. Doubt puts us in the position of realizing we are not the dialysis to a world in need of a transfusion, but God is the progenitor of the transformation the world is in need of.

By the time we get to the passage for today, the writer of Hebrews has established that Christ is the Son of God and the Son of Man; has warned his audience of the dangers of unbelief, and explored the power of Christ's priesthood. The initial recipients of this letter were beleaguered, stressed, and struggling, wrestling deeply with their own concerns of faith and doubt. These early Christians were being harassed by their relatives, as well as their Roman neighbors. Placing their faith in Jesus Christ was a bold undertaking that often divided families. And in spite of the early followers recognition of Jesus as the anointed one, they were emotionally fatigued, disheartened and moral was low. I would suspect many of them questioned whether their faith would endure, whether they were following an imposter or had misread the signs. In order for the followers to continue in faith, it was imperative for them to know exactly what faith is.

So the writer approaches his audience through their experience of faith in describing what faith has: “Faith is the assurance, the foundation of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” Faith already possesses in the present what God has promised and will fulfil in the future. Faith gives us the capacity to discern realities that are not yet visible. The apostle Paul wrote: “What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal; therefore, we walk by faith and not by sight” (2 Cor. 4:1; 5:7). Faith is not nurtured in our own strength or understanding, but on the sure foundation of God. Faith is already, but is also not yet. One commentator described faith as, an inward assurance, and an outward manifestation.

Faith as an inward assurance sings, “We Shall Overcome.” While, faith as an outward manifestation attends a Black Lives Matters rally, participates in a Raising Every Kid, Pre-K march or attends a vigil for those who have lost their lives to gun violence. Faith as an inward assurance trusts God's promise that ‘weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning’ (Psalm 30). While, faith as an outward manifestation stands in the public square praying boldly for those who are disenfranchised, those who mourn the death of children,

spouses, parents, and siblings whose lives were lost fighting in wars, and joyfully gives time and talents volunteering to rehab and renovate houses for others, or works tirelessly to ease the pain of those who have been wounded by society for any reason. Inwardly, faith moves hearts; outwardly faith moves mountains.

Matthew writes: "Because of your little faith, truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move...." Those words strengthen, assure and encourage us to trust in the Lord, leaning not to our own understanding, but to put all our hope and faith in God and God will direct our path.

Even when doubt rears its head, and it will, because that's human nature; the Good News about the Gospel of Doubt is that, doubt is not contrary to having faith. The opposite of faith is a failure to trust in the power, presence, omniscience and omnipotence of God. The opposite of faith is not recognizing what God has done on our behalf in the past, is doing in the present and not trusting God with our future.

Brothers and sisters, we are not dialysis for a world in need of a transfusion; we are a holy people, treasured by God, sometimes imperfect, yet still examples and conduits of the transformative, life-changing, healing power of Christ's love. Beloved, trust in God even in the midst of doubt, be strong in the Lord, let the Holy Spirit encourage your heart and something will happen. God will renew our resolve, restore our belief and lead us back to the foundation of our faith, built on the solid rock, Jesus the Christ. May we receive him this day, as we gather at Table.

Amen