

Dec. 27, 2020 Christmas 1B
Worth the Wait
Luke 2:22-38

I don't remember a Christmas in my 59 years that has caused as many struggles as this one. Christmas 2020 has been challenging to Christians and non-Christians alike. We are in a period of what seems to be endless waiting. We are in a time when doubt comes easily to our minds. Today's Gospel is a great one for us.

Our scripture focuses on Simeon and Anna, two faithful servants of God who served for years in the temple at Jerusalem. We see their joy when the Christ Child was presented to them. As I read this passage, my mind took a detour around its main thrust and wondered about all those years they had waited for this event. Did they ever wonder if God would be faithful to His word to them? Did they ever wonder if they had been deceived by the teachers in the temple about the Messiah? In short, did they ever doubt? For doubt infects even the best of God's servants.

Doubting Thomas has spiritual children throughout the Bible as well as in our present day. As a pastor I have encountered more doubt during the holiday season from those who would be honest about their feelings than I have experienced during any other time of the year. The reason for this is complicated. But I would guess it is rooted in the letdown that comes after the excesses of the holiday season and the anxiety about the coming year. With this in mind, let's allow Simeon and Anna, along with Thomas and others, to help us with our struggle with doubt.

A word of caution as we begin this journey: Don't assume I have jumped to the wrong conclusion here. I am aware that I am making a case in silence, but silence speaks as loud as audible sound. Nevertheless, any experience of great joy as expressed by Simeon and Anna must be preceded by long periods of doubt, anxiety, questions--in a word, darkness. They were human and not excused from the pattern of doubt expressed throughout the Bible as well as human experience. Doubt is the back side of faith. Faith is the front side of doubt. The two are linked together as Siamese twins. Anyone as joyous as Simeon and Anna over the vindication of their faith must have had a season of doubt.

Here are a few of the situations I have seen in church members after Christmas:

- The child who did not come home from school for the holidays or the one who did and created havoc while there.
- The seismic split in the family relationships covered up all year become made very evident at this season.
- The failure of our indulgent gift-giving to bring joy to our world.
- If the Christ Child is to bring joy to the world, where is it? The aftermath of Christmas is that it has failed to bring joy or peace to my world.
- The evening news is bad, both on the TV and in my world.

Our churches reflect this also.

- Attendance is low on this Sunday--we call it *low Sunday*.
- The choir takes the Sunday off, depleted from all the holiday singing.
- Those who do show up for worship are exhausted from all the merrymaking.
- And the credit card statements start arriving in the mail.

Yet Simeon and Anna are joyous. Their long-awaited dreams have come true. Why don't I feel that way? This is not isolated to my supposition about Simeon and Anna. We see it throughout the Bible. The clearest example of this is Thomas--Doubting Thomas--the disciple of Jesus. He is the clear picture of the doubting side of faith. You will remember he was absent when Jesus made his first appearance to the disciples after the resurrection. He is the ancestor of the absentee. He expressed his feelings clearly. He felt that Jesus could not have been alive; however, when he later saw Jesus at subsequent appearances to the disciples, he believed. The first step toward doubt is to absent yourself from the people of God; in brief, it's to skip church.

When God spoke to Elijah on the slopes of Mt. Sinai, Elijah was urged to reunite himself with the faithful of Israel in order to cure his doubt.

We grill a lot in warm weather. I am the designated griller. Sometimes I will notice a couple of coals that never did burn well. Inadvertently, they had been separated from the pile of charcoal in the middle of the grill.

Because they could not receive the heat from the fire, their glow was beginning to leave them. We cannot be as close to God being away as we can being near to God's people. It is not by accident that we are connected to the family of faith at church.

I have come to the conclusion that our beliefs are more attached to our moods than we care to admit. Doubt is more an emotion than an intellectual exercise. Doubt is influenced by our experiences and by the way we feel about life. Frankly, some people go to doubt because it's a good place to hide. As long as we can live in the house of doubt, we do not have to take responsibility for many of our actions or to make a positive contribution to this world.

We must, however, admit that there's a place in the Christian life for honest doubt. Doubt is always the prelude to faith. Before Gideon was able to be used of God, he cried out, "If the Lord is with us, why has this befallen us?" Or Job in his struggle shouted, "I cry unto you and you do not answer." Later, he cursed the day that he was born. Never forget that on the cross, Jesus shouted, "My God, my God, why?" No one really possesses his faith until he has fought for it.

Doubt is like the front porch of the house. We must go through it before we can get into the house.

All of us in our hearts cry out, "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief." The capacity to doubt is one of our greatest powers. Look around you and see the beliefs and practices that ought to be doubted. The greatest servants have been distinguished by the fact that in the face of universally accepted falsehood they have dared to stand and shout, "I doubt that!" Without the capacity to doubt, there could be no progress--only unquestioned acceptance of the status quo and its established dogmatisms.

There was a time in the scientific community that the earth was considered flat and the sun rotated around it. The idea was challenged by a few brave souls who bravely dared to doubt that theory. We talk about the strong faith and the affirmative beliefs of scientific pioneers, but deeper examination shows that every scientific advance started with doubt. Galileo was right when he called doubt the father of discovery.

Jesus was a doubter. He doubted that violence was the way so he said, "Forgive one another." He doubted that the long prayers and rigid dietary laws were essential to faith. So he talked about a simple faith. He doubted that the Samaritans were an inferior race. He told the parable about the Good Samaritan and a bad priest. The capacity to doubt is the prelude to faith. Strong faith always has to be fought for.

I have known what it is to walk the floor at night, struggling as Jacob with the angel for the essentials of faith and a certainty to carry on. The answer always came to me, but in God's way and God's timing. Let's not lose sight of the fact that God is never on schedule but is always on time. Strong faith always has to be fought for.

There is no such thing as a faith without tears. A generation that wishes for a faith without tears must find it difficult to adjust to the teachings of the New Testament and the facts of life. I would suggest that you doubt your doubts. Look them straight in the eye and doubt them. This takes courage, but prevents them from controlling your life.

This is the beginning of a new year. It's a good day to move from skepticism to faith. Celebrate your doubts! See it as a prelude to a deep, abiding, and mature faith. Remember, strong faith always must be fought for.