

“The Persistence of Faith”
Matthew 11:2-11
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Last week, one of my wife’s dear friends stopped by the house to deliver some homemade soup while Rose continues to recuperate from her recent shoulder surgery. But she also possessed an ULTERIOR MOTIVE for coming. She had a personal question she wanted to discuss and thought to herself, “who better to ask than DAVE, a minister who deals with such questions all the time?” The question she posed to me is one we pastors must eventually contend with- what is called “theodicy.” Theodicy is a philosophical term that asks, “If God is TRULY good, then how can such a good God allow such evil and suffering to flourish in the world?”- a question as old as man himself. (How I responded to her question will of course have to wait for another sermon.) Still, this question regarding faith and suffering remains one which I’ve spent the better part of my life and ministry trying to comprehend and answer.

Philip Yancey, a popular Christian author, understands all too well the perplexing relationship that lies between God and human suffering. He was driving down a deserted road in New Mexico one Sunday morning when something went terribly wrong- his Ford Explorer hit a patch of black ice and went fishtailing out of control. Yancey wrestled with the steering wheel, but his SUV tumbled over an embankment, shattering glass, plastic, and metal along with much of Yancey’s thin body. He was rushed to a hospital where he was strapped to a gurney for seven hours. A young doctor finally approached him with the terrible news: his neck was broken and a bone fragment may have nicked a major artery. “I must emphasize this is a life-threatening situation,” the doctor told Yancey. “Here’s a phone. You may want to contact your loved ones and tell them goodbye...” Well, Yancey lived to write another day. But the questions he asked himself as he made those phone calls hang over his book, *What Good is God?* In it, Yancey traveled to some of the grimmest locations in the world to ask people who had been broken in body and spirit the same question: Does belief in God really matter when life gets tough?

This vital question raised by a deeply committed Christian is one that most Christians are often forced to wrestle with. In this sense, it is to identify with JOB, a man who once railed against God for all the anguish in his OWN life, questioning why one as faithful as he has been was forced to suffer beyond all endurance. It was the same question Rabbi Harold Kushner sought to answer decades ago in his bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* as he tried to come to terms with the death of his son by a rare genetic disorder. When the car you are driving is struck by a drunk driver instantly killing your spouse; or a child is born with spina bifida and never given the chance to experience life first-hand; or, as so happened several years ago when a young teenager in New Jersey, innocently playing catch with his teammates and wearing all his catching gear, is struck in the chest by a pitched ball, goes into cardiac arrest and dies, one can’t help BUT become angry and protest that stuff like this is not supposed to happen. Yet it does ALL THE TIME, forcing us to ask aloud, “Why God did you let this tragedy occur? We’re supposed to be your children whom you say you love. Where WERE you when you were needed most?” Perhaps Yancey’s question IS a legitimate one- Does our belief in God REALLY matter when life gets tough?

During my first pastorate, I had to break the news to a family who lived a few houses down from me how an hour earlier, their only son had tragically died when he fell into a sawdust bin at the local mill and smothered to death. It was an unfortunate accident, and I can still hear Jane, his mother, imploring over and over again, "WHY, God? WHY did you let this happen to my son? WHY didn't you save Sam!" They never DID receive the answers they were looking for and yet they knew that where they could live WITHOUT the answers they sought, they COULDN'T live WITHOUT GOD HIMSELF. The following Sunday and then the next and every Sunday AFTERWARD, they could be found in church, praising God and thanking him for the life of their dear son Sam and the opportunity they'd been given to raise him as their own.

I suspect that this was where John the Baptist found HIMSELF, in our text for this morning. When John--a man often compared to Elijah--was thrown into Herod's dark prison, doubts began to creep into HIS heart and mind AS WELL. To satisfy them, he sent word to two of his disciples to approach Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect some other?" But even on a DEEPER level, he had to have wondered to himself, "Could such a God be just who would allow his righteous servant to sit in prison so? How could such a powerful and holy God, who promises deliverance to the faithful, allow evil to flourish on the throne while one of his honest prophets suffers? How long will he let me remain in this stinking, rotting hole- forgotten, abandoned, and alone?"

The AMAZING thing about John's question of Jesus is NOT that he asks "WHY" but rather "WHO." He seems MORE than willing to keep on hoping and waiting even if Jesus ISN'T the one he thought he was, even if he discovers that he'd been mistaken about his cousin's identity ALL ALONG. In this sense, he reminds me of Casper Gutman--the Sidney Greenstreet character in the movie *The Maltese Falcon*--whereupon discovering that the falcon statue he is in possession of is in fact a FAKE, he vows to continue his search for the REAL bird REGARDLESS of how much the cost or where the search will lead him. You see, in spite of all the frustrations and disappointments along the way, he can't give up on the search for the statue has become TOO much a part of him and his life! Well, that's the way it is with FAITH- once you've been in possession of it, it gets IN you and takes HOLD of you to where it becomes IMPOSSIBLE to shake it off or rid yourself of it, EVER. As one of my seminary professors used to put it, "I could never NOT be a Christian. I've got God too much in my CELLS."

We're coming up to the anniversary of my cousin's death. She wasn't even sick and yet, without warning, her heart just failed her. Well, let me tell you a little bit about this extraordinary woman. Alice had always been a special member of the Wood family. To begin with, she was my grandmother's first grandchild, the daughter of my father's oldest brother George, and the first grandchild, it seems, always has a special spot in every grandparent's heart. Another reason is that Alice was the only girl in the entire Wood family- all the rest being boys. This meant that she could be spoiled and doted upon in ways the rest of us couldn't. Fittingly, the day my grandmother died, that warm Sunday evening in September of 1969, it was with Alice and her family she had spent her last day on earth with.

But life had often been anything BUT kind to Alice. On Good Friday of 1957, she returned home from church with her mother and brother to find her father's body hanging from a pipe in the living room- he had committed suicide after being despondent over not being able to hold a job due to his drinking. In 1975, only three months after my OWN father had died, her mother--Aunt Kitty--succumbed to heart disease. Then, her only brother Butch, who had been born with a defective

heart, left home to buy a part for his car in N.Y. He never came back. For the next few weeks, his family went crazy wondering what had happened to him- they knew he would never just take off. In fact, his health was SO precarious, he had to carry an oxygen bottle with him wherever he went. Their desperate search ended when it was discovered that soon after leaving the auto parts store, he had suffered a fatal heart attack in a MacDonald's parking lot. However, due to incompetence on the part of the police who misplaced his identification, he lay in the county morgue unclaimed for more than a month. The morning his family finally learned of his whereabouts, he had been scheduled to be buried in a paupers' field as an unidentified person. But the unkindest cut of all STILL lay ahead for Alice and her family when the following year, her second son, Joey, developed stomach cancer and after four months of agonizing pain, died in a N.J. hospital. He was only 27.

Alice was truly one of the most loving, most generous, most compassionate persons I have ever known and I miss her terribly- what GREATER epitaph can there be over a person's life! Her husband Fred and four children were about as close and supportive as any family could possibly be. They never took a vacation, whether to Europe or Hawaii or around the continental United States, without also taking the entire family with them. More than once I have heard persons say over the years, "How come I couldn't have a marriage and family like Alice and Freddy's?" She was as devout a Catholic as you would ever meet- one who never missed Mass under any circumstance and remained active in all areas of her church's life. Her priest, who was also close to her son Joey throughout his illness, even came to her home and offered a private Mass in Joey's honor- one of the most beautiful, meaningful experiences she has ever had. She was in tears as she described it to me.

Not long after Joey's death, I shared a wonderful dinner at her home. After our meal, I noticed it was getting late and began preparing to leave. Alice insisted on walking me out to my car where she wanted to talk to me in private. She said, "David, I know that you are a man of God and that you love God. That's why I'm asking you to pray for me. I've been strong all my life- I've had to be, for the sake of my mother, my brother, and now my family with Joey's death. But David, my strength is now gone. Every night, I cry out to God and ask, "Why, Lord? Why did you have to take Joey? I've always loved you, served you, worshiped you, tried to be as obedient a child of yours as I possibly could be- yet my life never gets any easier." Then she said, "David, I have such anger towards God. I don't know where my faith is any longer. Yes, I still go to church but it's not out of devotion as it is for the sake of my family- I want THEM to go. Please pray that I recover my faith, Dave."

It was a very emotional moment and I again realized how much I loved my cousin- for her vulnerability as well as for her many strengths. I can't recall specifically what I said in that moment but I DO remember reassuring her that it was perfectly OK to be angry at God, that rather than FAITHLESSNESS, such anger reflects the very OPPOSITE- the presence of a vital and dynamic faith underneath it. Apathy, indifference, a complete loss of feelings- THESE are what characterize a loss of faith while anger speaks of living in relationship with the one you are angry with. Like a modern-day Job, you may feel FRUSTRATED with God; you may be ANNOYED by the lack of clear answers, yet the lines of communication STILL REMAIN OPEN. And that's really all faith IS- an OPEN SIGNAL between us and God through which we express our love and dependence.

As I drove away from her home, I prayed for her and her family wishing that I could be HALF the Christian she was. I also knew that no amount of time could ever erase the hurt of losing a loved one, ESPECIALLY a son or daughter, but with God's continuing faithfulness and presence in her life, I knew she would survive and become an even MORE beautiful flower in his garden. In

time that in fact DID happen and I know she became an empathetic presence for so many OTHERS who lost a child and had had difficulty dealing with tragedies of their OWN.

I relate this story about my cousin Alice because in spite of her unresolved questions and troubling doubts and anger over the loss of a son, she never stopped looking to God for his strength and grace and love. Instead of feeling aggrieved over life and retreating within a prison of self-pity and private hurts, she CONTINUED to worship with God's people and volunteer at church functions and be the very best friend she could be to all she met. She remained obedient to her calling as a child of God REGARDLESS of how hard it was to believe at times. Her faith and its habits were so ingrained within her that this was all she COULD do while intuitively knowing that this was the only way she would ever find healing and wholeness in her life again.

But I have one last anecdote I'd like to share. While serving as a pastor in Syracuse, NY, I took my church staff to Charlotte, North Carolina to attend a special week-long conference on church transformation. Within an hour of checking into my hotel room, I ran into someone I would never have expected to see there. It was my old friend George who in addition to being an elder in my previous church, was also my organist and choir director there. It was an all-black congregation in the heart of one of the roughest neighborhoods of Newark, New Jersey, and George and I had a special bond as we were the only two whites in the entire church.

George was certainly one of the most unique individuals I had ever met. He had grown up in that church but had left it to pursue law studies some years before. He not only became a distinguished lawyer and business entrepreneur but quite an accomplished organist who has been privileged to play in some of the great cathedrals throughout the world. Two of his dear friends were former Attorney Generals Elliot Richardson and Janet Reno, and currently he serves as President of the Global Legal Information Network (GLIN), a network which provides instant access to accurate up-to-date legal information from a growing number of nations and international institutions as well as a vehicle for promoting greater education, peace, and justice especially in the developing world. His dedication to the church was SUCH that EVERY FRIDAY, he would drive all the way up to Newark from his home in Washington D.C. (a distance of over two hundred miles each way), have choir practice on Saturday, and then play for our morning worship service the following day- a routine he followed for many years before heading home again.

One night during the conference, George and I got together for dinner to discuss what was going on in our lives and to share about our changing congregations. About two hours into our dinner conversation, he told me he had a confession to make- something he hadn't told anyone about before. He said that he had lost his faith in God years earlier, that he had real questions which were yet unresolved and of which he wasn't sure he'd EVER receive the answers to. Still, he had continued to serve the church, perhaps out of HABIT more than anything else, but also because he loved it and his church family too much NOT to. I reminded him that EVERYONE who has any REAL faith wrestles with such questions and that there is a huge gulf between having intellectual reservations in one's mind about God and dismissing God altogether with one's heart. I told him that regardless of what he thought, I considered him to be one of the most dedicated Christian men I had ever met, and that whether he wanted to ADMIT it or not, I had no doubt that his feet were solidly planted in God's kingdom with Christ's Spirit firmly entrenched in his heart. One only had to look at his life and commitments to see THAT.

In fact, I found myself wishing that my OWN service and dedication to God and the church was as firm and resolute as HIS was.

Friends, it is INEVITABLE that ALL sincere persons of faith are going to confront at one time or another great and often intractable questions about God- questions of WHO God is, WHERE God is, and even IF God is. Even JESUS in the Garden of Gethsemane, with the lengthening shadow of that cross looming ever closer, had his OWN questions and fears to contend with. When I look at John the Baptist languishing in that hell hole of a prison, still trusting in the knowledge of God's presence and care DESPITE the awfulness of his situation and the questions that it raised; when I think of our Lord amid the terrors of Gethsemane and the long, dark night of the soul he had to contend with there; when I think of my late cousin Alice and my organist friend George, I have the impression that TRUE faith, GENUINE faith really has nothing to do with possessing a correct theology or understanding of God (whatever "correct" may mean), or with affirming the various tenets and confessions of the church- what we often refer to as "THE faith."

Rather, REAL faith, BIBLICAL faith is that hunger, that yearning for something that compels you to seek and hold on to that very thing that EMBRACES you and REFUSES to let you go REGARDLESS of all the trials you find yourself experiencing and all the questions your situation about God and his faithfulness may raise. This faith manifests itself as a willingness to trust God's word DESPITE all the difficulties and struggles you find yourself forced to contend with- the deep personal conviction that our Lord will be ALWAYS be present WITH you and FOR you, and how nothing, NO NOTHING will EVER separate you from either his presence or his love. Friends, we can be assured that even in our periods of GREATEST DOUBT, God promises to be there for us, to bear us up in the face of those doubts, and to carry us through to a living faith once again. As John and Alice and George and even JESUS were to discover this truth for themselves, so will US and of THAT, we can be CERTAIN! Let us pray...

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, thank you for a love that is completely undeserving, and for a presence that is not often expected or even understood. Continue to be our rock and our fortress especially during those times when our faith is tested and we find ourselves not sure where to turn or what to believe. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.