

*Sermon Series: The D/F Wrestling Match: Doubt/Faith*  
*“Can Anything Good Come Out Of This?”*  
*I Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51*  
*Salem United Methodist Church*  
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We are in the season of Epiphany- the season between Christmas and Lent. In Epiphany we seek ways in which Jesus is made known to us, such as the magi discovering the baby Jesus by following a star, or how Jesus was made known as the Son of God in his baptism. But how is Jesus made known to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Many today question the existence of God, or doubt the validity of religion. What is doubt? What is faith? And why do people wrestle with the two?

Wrestling can be a sport, like Greco-Roman or Sumo. Wrestling can also be a type of entertainment, such as the WWE. In both, two people try to throw, force, or pin each other to the ground. The strongest usually over powers the other, and wins. However, neither is the type of wrestling we will be discussing the next few weeks. The type of wrestling we will be discussing is the grabbling we do with doubt and faith. Some of us might think, what? People of faith don't doubt. While others may be sitting thinking, I am wrestling with doubts. For those of us who say we don't doubt; we may not want to admit that we do. We think that admitting doubt is offensive to God. Admitting doubt is like saying we don't believe in God, or it could be seen as a spiritual weakness, so we suppress our doubts. But having doubt is like having spiritual growing pains. Doubt is a place to voice the uncertainties in life, the difficult places of faith. Instead of doubt being seen as weakness, doubt can actually prove to be beneficial. Doubt can help us grow deeper in our relationship with God, and make our faith stronger.

Doubt is not unbelief. Doubt is more like having two minds. In fact the word, doubt, comes from the Aryan word, *dubitare*, which means two. Doubt is a place in the middle of the spectrum between belief and unbelief. To believe is to be of one mind. To not believe is to be of one mind. But to doubt is to be somewhere in the middle, or on the way to nowhere. There is a concept, called Buridan's donkey. John Buridan was a fourteenth century French philosopher/ priest, who told the story of a donkey who was put exactly in the middle of a stack of hay and a pale of water. It needs to make a decision to go to one or the other. The donkey eventually dies because it can't make up its mind, so it dies of starvation and dehydration. It could have gone to either the water or the hay, but it was of two minds and couldn't choose between the two. Doubt is a little like the donkey. When we have doubts we look back and forth between belief and disbelief. When we doubt, we are of two minds.

We live in a world filled with doubt. People are not trusting institutions, politicians, or God. Our culture has stomped on and abandoned religion. Many of us, if not all of us, meet up with people on a daily basis who openly rail against Christianity. If we let it be known that we are people of faith, we are challenged, denounced, or ostracized. If we are challenged, most of us have trouble finding the words to explain or defend our faith. We fumble and stutter in the face of doubt, mostly because we are unclear of our own doubts, and our journey towards faith. Understanding our doubts and our journey will help us listen to and understand the doubts of others. Pope Frances is to have said, “Who among us has not experienced insecurity, loss, and even doubts on their journey of faith? We've all experienced this, me too. It is part of the journey of faith. It is part of our lives. This should not surprise us, because we are human beings, marked by fragility and limitations. We are all weak, we all have limits; do not panic. We all have them.”

Understanding our doubt also helps us prepare for those difficult times in our lives-those times when our faith is tested, when doubt pulls us away from faith. When we ask, “If there is a God, then this wouldn't have happened,” or when we cry out, “Why, God, did you allow this to happen?” These

are times when our faith and doubt are on the mat flipping each other and trying to pin the other down. What our faith should be and what our faith is at these junctures in life can be two different things. We may realize that our faith is not as strong as it should be, or as strong as we want it to be. During these difficult times, we have two choices. In keeping with the metaphor of wrestling, we can reach deep within to find the strength to pin the opponent, doubt, to the mat, so faith can win. Or in keeping with the metaphor of the donkey, we either give up on our faith and chose unbelief, or we run back to God with a deeper faith and stronger trust in God. Either way we have the choice.

Our three scriptures today are scriptures are examples of this choice between doubt and faith. With Samuel, we see a young boy being called by God in the middle of the night. At first Samuel thinks it is his mentor, Eli, calling him, but it's not. When Eli encourages Samuel to trust in God, Samuel does not doubt his mentor, nor does he doubt God. He does not run back to his cot and put his head under the covers with his fingers in his ears. Instead, he trusts Eli's spiritual wisdom, and returns alone to his cot in the dark with the faith that God is calling. Next, in our Gospel lesson, Philip doubts that a carpenter's son from Nazareth could be the Messiah and asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But his doubts are alleviated when Jesus not only knows him by name, but gives evidence that Jesus knows Nathanael's heart. Phillip moves from doubt to faith, and believes the guy who grew up in Nazareth is the Son of God.

So can anything good come out of this discussion about faith and doubt? My hope is that with this discussion we can come to a deeper understanding, as we wrestle with our doubts and faith. An understanding of both is healthy and necessary for our spiritual growth. If we have any belief in God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, then we have doubted somewhere on our faith journey. A person of faith is a person who understands doubts and understands the longing for God. Our culture which is filled with people who doubt is also a culture filled with people who are longing for something to trust. C. S. Lewis argued that these longings are our unknown desires for something greater than us, something pure, something holy, something worth trusting. These people, who want something to trust in, also have a need to be loved, a need to have hope, especially in the face of crisis or death, a need to break away from sin. Anne Lamott in her book, *Traveling Mercies*, wrote, "My coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then help me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear." We have yet another metaphor for faith and doubt, lily pads and a swamp! Pick the one with which you identify.

We know that our Christian faith is not a fairy-tale, make-believe, or question-free, nor is it problem-proof. We know that faith in the life, death, and risen Christ can take our doubts and transform them into real faith. On this weekend in which we honor an American hero, Martin Luther King, Jr, we will close with this quote from him. "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." In the midst of doubt we are called to take that step trusting that God has already built the landing for us to stand on. This is what I love about Psalm 139. The Psalmist realizes that God has not only built the first step, but has faith that the whole staircase is already built ready for us to climb into the heavens. From the time we are an embryo until we take our last breath into our new life in Christ, God knows everything about us, our doubts and our journey of faith. And the Holy Spirit is there with us every step of the way. Bless the Lord, O my soul, who leads me into life.

**Reflection Questions:** What are your questions about doubt and faith?

Have you ever had doubts that were resolved with faith? If so, can you share this part of your faith journey?

**Resources:** *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith* by Alister McGrath; *In Two Minds: The Dilemma of Doubt and How to Resolve It* by Os Guinness; "7 Prominent Christian Thinkers Who Wrestled With Doubt," by Jesse Carey, [www.relevantmagazine.com](http://www.relevantmagazine.com)

