

*Sermon Series: The D/F Wrestling Match: Doubt vs. Faith
"Really?"*

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20; Psalm 62:5-8, 11-12a

Salem United Methodist Church

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In the church, this is the season of Epiphany which bridges the birth of Jesus at Christmas with his journey to the cross, Lent. In this time of Epiphany, Jesus is made known to us. How is Jesus made known to us in the 21st century—a time in which people are questioning everything? Some are questioning the validity of any religion, including Christianity. Even those of us who claim to be Christians can wrestle with doubt and faith. If this is the time to ask questions, let's ask them. Is this Jesus stuff for real? Can we believe in someone who gives us a directive to, "Repent, follow me?" Really?

I tried to document how many times I heard the term, "really," this week and I lost track. We use this word as a question more than we realize. But as I listened this week, I realized that we use the word in three different ways. We use it when we are interested in a subject and want to know more. I heard a news commentator tell a news story. His colleague at the news desk followed up with the question, "Really?" She used this word to show interest in the story. The one who had done the reporting began to share more and a conversation began around that one news story. The second way we use this question is when we are surprised. Someone was telling me about the impending snow storm(s) we were to have this weekend. I replied in surprise, "Really?" On that particular day the sun was shining and it was too warm for snow. The third way we use the term is to express doubt. For instance, take the story Jonah, really? We know the story of Jonah who ran away from God who called him to go to Ninevah and tell the people to repent of their evil ways and turn back to God. We know he gets swallowed by a really big fish, lives in its belly for some time, is thrown up, and goes to Ninevah. All that can seem extraordinary, but what is more extraordinary is all Jonah had to do is walk through the city preaching the shortest sermon ever, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." And the whole city, including the king, comes to believe in God! Really? Even scholars doubt that it really took place. They write that Jonah is a legend that called the Israelites, back then and us today to stop our evil ways and turn back to God. This legend also reiterates that God is the all powerful Creator of wind, sea, big fish and people. As we think on this story, we could use the term, "Really?" to show more interest, express surprise, or doubt. All three probably fit.

If Jonah is a legend, could God be a legend, too? Many are asking today, "Is God real? Is God really there?" Many of us know people who say they don't believe in God and deny the existence of God. We, too, struggle with these questions when we hit a roadblock in our spiritual journeys. We wonder if God is really there, or does God keep God's promises? Or we might ask if God who created the entire universe is all powerful, then how can God care about or love "little ole me"? I mean, "Really?" We could ask this using all three meanings of the word. There is the surprise. God loves "me"? We could ask it with interest, "Really?" wanting to know more. Or we could ask, "Really?" as in doubting that God could love "me." Alister McGrath in his book, "Doubting," claims that there is no fool proof argument that can convince anyone of God's existence and God's attributes. When we get into an argument with someone else over the existence of God, we are usually playing defense with a deflated ball. This is an argument we cannot win. We come "to believe or disbelieve in God as a matter of faith, not fact." However, the fact that God does exist is not dependent on one's belief in God. Christianity is a faith in which God believes in us. God comes searching for us. My favorite response to someone who says they don't believe in God is, "Yes, but God believes in you." God created us, loves us, and seeks us until we acknowledge God. The very existence of God often is proven when someone who claimed there is no God and was hostile to Christianity life is changed. Something has happened to them. God found them. Their heart is changed. Their life takes on a whole new meaning. They begin to live their life differently. They have become focused on caring for others with love and compassion. They may even have a desire to read the Bible, want to talk about their newborn faith, and have even more questions about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

In a culture that not only encourages doubt, but seeks to destroy the credibility of our faith, this person needs support from those who are further in their spiritual journey. Even those of us who are further along may not have all the answers, but admitting that can be reassuring.

Last week I asked for people to submit their questions about doubt and faith. One person wrote that s/he was concerned about people of faith who say they have no doubt, but claim to know the whole truth. This person found it troubling. S/he wrote, "There should always be a seed of doubt. It keeps one humble." Charles Spurgeon, a noted 19th century preacher, would agree. He wrote, "I think, when a [person] says, 'I never doubt,' it is quite time for us to doubt him." He continues that a person, who does not doubt, does not see so many things in him/herself. I would add that this person is not experiencing the highs and lows of life either. Every aspect of life is a type of test between faith and doubt-the wrestling match. In every challenge, every new experience, every crisis, every stage in life, we ask questions like these. How will I get through this? Is Jesus really with me as he claims with this word, Emmanuel, God with us? Can our faith handle the situation, or will it prove to be too much for us? At times like these, either we choose to have our faith rally, or we choose to have it recoil and slowly fade away. If we choose to have our faith rally, it will help us meet the challenge face on. The result is that our faith grows even stronger. If we choose to have our faith will recoil, slowly fade away, doubt creeps in. As doubt creeps in we begin to cease to allow faith to shape our lives. This is when doubt pins faith to the mat and wins. It is at this point, that we need someone to offer us these words of encouragement, "Keep the faith! Doubt if you must, but keep the faith!"

Jesus had faith in the two fishermen brothers, Simon and Andrew, he chose to be his disciples. The custom was for the brightest students of the Hebrew Scriptures to apply to become a disciple of a particular rabbi. The rabbi then chose from these applicants who would follow him, become his disciple, and become like him. The rabbi had faith that the young male disciples would take over for him one day. Jesus didn't pick students of the Hebrew Scriptures. He chose these two teen age boys who were apprenticing with their father to become fishermen. Jesus chose them to follow him, to be his disciple, to be like him, to take over for him. Jesus had faith that these non-biblical scholars would learn and become like him. There seems to be no doubt either in the mind of Jesus or in the minds of these disciples. The text states that "immediately they left their nets and followed him." That is not a doubt statement. That is a faith statement. Recently someone told me that it is impossible to follow Jesus today because there are just too many demands on our lives. That is a statement of doubt. This person has given up on being a disciple of Jesus, but Jesus has not given up on her or him. Jesus doesn't give up on any of us. It is we who give up on ourselves. It is we who doubt ourselves. It is we who think we can't measure up. God through Jesus has faith in each and every one of us and strives to show that to us.

Wrestling with doubt and faith is extremely normal. But ultimately we have the choice as to which will pin the other to the mat. Doubt or faith? Charles Spurgeon also wrote that those who choose the pathway of doubt are missing out on "so much glory in Christ, more than one deserves." By choosing the pathway of faith, God is made real to us. By Jesus choosing us, Jesus is saying I have no doubts about you. I have faith that you can do greater things than I. And his disciples did. By faith, twelve disciples, uneducated in the Hebrew Scriptures, really changed the world. Really? They really did. And we really can, too.

Reflection Questions: What times in your life did you choose doubt over faith? Or faith over doubt? What doubts do you have now? Can choosing faith in God in Christ be a possibility?

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