

Matthew 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24  
Isaiah 30:1-5; 30:9-15; 30:20-21

## PAST THE DOUBTS – A NEW LIFE

It will make me sad if any of you come through these Lenten sermons thinking that I love and honor doubt. Doubt is necessary, but doubt is not the goal – it is not what we are after. We are people of faith. Having heard me say that, one or two of you will doubtless spread the word that I like doubt better than faith, and that I have no faith of my own. Nevertheless, today I want to go behind any specific doubts, in the hope that we might all see more clearly the process going on behind the scenes when we are dealing with our doubts. I have urged you to spend some time this Lent looking at your doubts. We must never pretend we have no doubts, and we must never run from them. But after we get our doubts clear and out in the open, we must also learn to doubt our doubts. Fair is fair. Even out the playing field.

All important doubts are about some kind of relationship. That is not always immediately obvious to us. For illustration: A man argued hotly about politics in the Middle East. He was both intelligent and fairly knowledgeable; at least he kept up with the news available to us here. I was not a participant in the conversation, but I listened for nearly an hour while this man and three of his friends argued/debated the issue. At no time did anybody mention anything about a relationship. The three friends thought it was relatively safe to travel in Israel, but this man doubted it. The discussion itself had gone quickly to the politics and issues of the Middle East.

I suspect the real issue had been decided before this conversation ever took place. The church was planning a pilgrimage to Israel. This man's wife was not allowed to come to Israel with us. She wanted very much to come, but not enough to cause a major problem between herself and her husband. She also was quite intelligent. Nevertheless, it caused her to miss what I consider to be one of the best experiences of my life – an outer experience with endless inner dimensions. And by the way, she has survived just fine, despite this loss.

But why was this man so adamant about his doubts regarding the safety of being in Israel at that time? He could have come with her, and they would have had this amazing experience to share for the rest of their lives. He could have encouraged her to go and shared it vicariously.

But he insisted that he would not go and would not allow her to go either. So as I was listening to this conversation about the politics of the Middle East, I had the deep suspicion that what was being talked about was not the real issue. The real issue of his doubt was relational. He did not want his wife to be in danger. Statistically and rationally, at that time (1987) she was safer in Israel than driving all over Seattle, as she did when she was home. I suspect the man was concerned that if *he* went to Israel, it might get too religious. It would also cost him some money. Though he had plenty, that does not always prevent a person from wanting to save it instead of spend it. But I suspect the real issue was that he did not want to spend two weeks without the comfort, meals, and attention of his wife.

Behind the scenes, you see, doubt is serving a very useful purpose. We doubt things most adamantly when we think it will either get us what we want or prevent us from losing something we want. And it is much trickier dealing with our doubts if we do not know what they are really about. Doubt is always linked to fear. And in our illustration, you will notice that the fear is on several levels. All of them track to the real or imagined impact on very important relationships: the man's relationships with God, with his wife, with his church, with his friends, and, in some ways, even with himself. Did this man ever review or regret his doubts, as the pilgrims (all dear friends of his and of his wife) returned full of awe and delight? Did it ever cross his mind that he had deprived his wife of a remarkable experience – a high gift? I doubt it. In his own mind, he was just being protective of someone he loved.

Among other things, this should make it clear that if we argue with the outer shell of a doubt, whether our own or someone else's, it will get us nowhere. No light or resolution will come of it. In most cases, when somebody is doubting the higher authority or identity of Jesus, they are really protecting their right to live their own life in their own way. They do not want to turn their will or their life over to a higher power. And by the way, Jesus is the first to grant them this right for as long as they want to keep it. None of us should ever try to take away such a right from any person. We must remember who made this place and how it is put together. Faith by coercion is not faith – it is tyranny.

Back to the main point: Behind the scenes, serious doubt is always about important relationships. Sometimes we have to track it through a few levels to realize this. The function of doubt is to protect us from something we fear. If the fear is small, the doubt is minuscule also. Nevertheless, fear comes in more flavors than ice cream. And indeed,

many fears *are* real and rational. We get lied to a lot! This will remain true until Satan, the Father of Lies, goes out of business. There are also lots of sincere opinions and beliefs that we have good reason to doubt, though nobody means to be lying. It truly is dangerous to base our lives on falsehood or misinformation. And in a broken world, it is inevitable that at times we will. I am simply saying that doubt has a very important and rightful purpose. It tries to prevent us from squandering time and life on things that are false, whether they be people, ideas, purposes, values, or get-rich-quick schemes.

You may need to translate a bit with this next illustration. We are not all built the same, personality-wise, and we do not come at life in the same manner. By the way, that is *not* a complaint. In any case, I never dated for the fun of it. I would only date a woman because I was searching for a wife. If this was not *always* true, at least it was true by the time I got to high school. A female was either my mate or supposed to be somebody else's. Amazing, isn't it, how even in our so-called enlightened culture, so many of us cannot figure out what belongs to us and what belongs to somebody else? Now, I don't mean to suggest that my mind never toyed with any other possibility. But other possibilities were not the truth. Making a home is not the same as making a conquest. If you are looking for a mate with whom to build a home and a life, dating is a very different deal. I never went out with a girl after I realized she would not become my wife.

Please, I am not talking about being right or noble here. I wish I could have known forty-eight years ago what I know now about trying to build a home. And by the way, trying to follow light and truth is the most selfish thing we ever do. But I am delaying my illustration ...

So if you are looking for a mate, what is the function of doubt? Sorry to keep sidetracking, but there are a lot of cute theories today about why people get married. For instance: It is just two neuroses realizing they have found a match. Or: A man marries somebody like his mother, or a woman marries somebody like her father – unless of course there was role reversal. Or: We look for somebody who will play the psychological games in a way that will allow us to be in control. Of course, if both parties are doing that, it helps explain why there is so much marital mayhem going on. In any case, the theories go on and on. But finding elements of truth does not make a truth. I know few women who do not have some qualities reminiscent of my mother. None of them, including Mariana, are really *like* her – in either gift or detriment. And if

you want a long-term relationship, one of the goals has to be to outgrow some of your patterns and approaches and expectations. You hope your mate will want to do that too. I have known *that* much, since long before I ever met Mariana.

So if you are looking for a mate, what is the function of doubt? To put it bluntly: You are trying to weed out those who would not make a good lifelong partner with you. They would very possibly be a very good match with somebody else, but that is somebody else's problem. I am, by the way, continually amazed at how many young people come from homes that give them almost no help, instruction, or preparation for finding a mate. Not all, but part of the marriage mayhem comes from choosing inappropriate partners to begin with. Just because a person is wonderful (a child of God's) does not mean they would make a good mate for you.

Speaking for myself, if I want a lifelong partner, I have to find somebody I respect; somebody with gifts and purposes of her own, and the discipline to move toward them; somebody who takes life earnestly; somebody who believes in the Christian God; somebody who is attracted to me and who will not quit on me. And of course, I have to be attracted to her.

Now, that may sound simple, but in real life it is never clear and simple. So I get home from a date – the experience of spending time with somebody I have become interested in – and the doubts help me start sorting out what I have experienced.

Sorry to take so long setting this up, but this is where I was trying to get with this illustration. At what point do I stop doubting and go for the relationship? The doubts are not my enemies, *per se*. They are essential to the process. Without them, past a certain age we would all marry the first person we saw. Actually, some people do that, and keep on doing it all their lives. But it does not work out well.

Theoretically, any intelligent person can entertain reasonable doubts forever. But if I want a home, if I want a mate, if I am ever to marry, somewhere in the process I have to turn from doubt to faith. There is not and never will be any proof that what I decide is right or any certainty that the choice is correct. We can pray and try to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Highly recommended! But even that does not guarantee we are right, in part because so much depends on what we build together,

on a daily basis, through all the years ahead. People can wreck a perfect match. Actually, we *all* blow it, but some of us find repentance and forgiveness and keep going. The point is, if I want to get married – if I want a home, children, or any of the things that can only come with a long-term, committed relationship – then at some point I have to lay the doubts aside and make the commitment – go with faith and trust – and say to her, “Will you marry me?” And of course, she has to lay *her* doubts aside in order to say, “Yes, I will marry you.”

If, after I have made this decision, I allow the doubts to go on operating, to go on trying to protect me, to go on playing in my mind – what happens to the relationship? I have turned it back into the pre-marriage dating game. The doubts will weaken, even destroy, the relationship. The doubts will prevent me from ever experiencing the reality of a real love-bond, a trust relationship – a true, committed, marriage relationship. It doesn’t make any difference how good and true my mate is. If I let the doubts go on playing, then she is not yet my mate. She never gets a fair chance. Not only that, but when we marry, we are at the beginning of our pilgrimage together. There is no way either of us can know what we will grow into or where our relationship will lead us. In short, we have lots of flaws and cannot yet know how to handle all of them. Therefore the doubts will always seem reasonable, always turn us from trust to mistrust, always tear up our love instead of building it up – if we allow that. Only trust and love can build a relationship. But trust and love can only operate after we set the doubts aside and refuse to entertain them any longer. We are not just playing word games here. Doubt and trust toward another cannot survive in the same mind at the same time. The two will always be at war and stay at war until one of them wins – in other words, until we decide which way we want to go. If it keeps going back and forth, we simply have not formed a love-bond yet. We may claim that we have, but it is not true.

Am I being too obtuse for you to follow? If I want a wife, I have to say inside myself, where it really counts: “This is my love, my queen, my mate, and I no longer care what you or my parents or anybody else – what life or circumstances or even she herself – may say about it. This is my choice, my love, my mate – for life.” I have not always done this, and certainly I have not always done it well, but this I can promise you: Every time I have stopped doing it or forgotten or done it half-heartedly, it has instantly started to disrupt, then destroy, the relationship.

And every time I put the trust and love back where they belong, it starts to build the relationship. Of course, if I have spent some time in doubt and mistrust, then it takes the trust and love longer to get through and start putting things back together again.

The truth is, no amount of marriage counseling, no amount of training in communication skills, and no theories or techniques of family dynamics will do very much good unless the foundation of trust and love has been repaired or put into place *first*. If you and I have courted faithfully and concluded in prayer and personal conviction that we are mates, then we can nearly always get back to that choice and conviction if we want to. And if we do, the marriage will heal and grow strong again. And the Holy Spirit will take it to levels and dimensions we have never known before.

Now, I have spent a long time with this illustration. I have because it is a little closer to home, if you will pardon the pun. But all the principles operate in approximately the same way, even if on a different level, when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, or with the God who reveals himself in Jesus. We meet. We wonder. We are afraid we are deluded or misled. We doubt that God really loves us. The experience keeps unfolding. Somewhere along the line, if we want the relationship to lock in and bloom, we have to set the doubts aside and go for it. “You are my God. I no longer care what anybody else says about it. My life is yours for the long haul.” That does not stop the growth, the conversations, the adventure, or the challenges. It begins them! The excitement is not over – it is just starting. But if you do not set the doubts aside and go in trust and love with God, you cannot experience the Christian Life. You may think about it and play mental games with its possibilities. But none of us ever taste life in Christ Jesus until *after* the commitment – until after the trust-bond is already put in place. Some people on the outside think this is really unfair. I’m sorry; I did not build this place. But I can promise you: You will never know what it is like to have a mate until you have decided that somebody *is* your mate. And you will never know what life in Christ Jesus is like until you have decided that Jesus really is your Lord – really is the Christ of God – especially for you. Some things cannot be faked. For some things, there is no sample, no ten-day trial period. Trust is one. Love is another.

By the way, if you think my illustration is far-fetched or inappropriate, why does Scripture keep talking about the church as “the Bride of Christ”?

You may have wondered about all the cut-up passages in the Scripture reading this morning. Foolish, no doubt. But I wanted it to stand out a little. Jesus really *was and is* always inviting us: Follow me. Come with me. Trust me. He never pretended that it would not be challenging, or that it was not new and different, or that there would never be more for us to learn and grow into than we could handle by ourselves. Still, He loves us and wants us with Him. So we always associate Jesus with invitation – not command, coercion, control, or manipulation, but INVITATION. “Come with me – trust me – follow me. There is so much I have to show you. But I cannot do that unless we love and trust each other.”

And the Isaiah passages? Well, they are the backdrop, and the reminder of why it is all so important.

So what do I really hope you will go out of here knowing? Commitment, conviction, devotion (trust and love) are great gifts. The greatest gifts this life has to offer. People think of them as our adversaries, or even our enemies. Lots of people are proud of their doubts. Nobody is ever proud of trust, conviction, or love. Such things are too high for our pettiness. Yet the doubts never lead us to Light or Life. Faith does. And while we might understand the reasons for doubting, still they do not lead to Life. It is beyond the doubts that we find true Life – wondrous, beautiful, and joyful LIFE. And all of it is beyond anything this world can control or destroy. Past the doubts is a New Life. Far from being a burden, trust and love lead us out of bondage and into meaning, purpose, and possibilities we never knew existed. Life in Christ is not a prison. It *frees* us from the prison we are in. And yet, no matter how great the gift, we have to accept and receive it to get any benefit. Jesus invites us into New Life. But we *do* have to be willing to receive it or we will never know it. And that would be so incredibly sad. Yet it is true of so many people, even of many of the people all around us.

But don't worry. If you flunk Christianity, you can always come back as a Hindu, and go around and around until you are really tired of your doubts.