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John 14:1-6; 20:24-29  
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### Wrestling with Faith and Doubt

This morning, I want to talk a little about Mother Teresa and her wrestling with faith and doubt. While we typically associate faith with her name, we don't typically think of doubt. But in reality, she wrestled with both throughout most of her ministry career. In her memoirs, Mother Teresa makes public this inner struggle. She described her faith life as dry, empty, lonely, tortuous, dark, and devoid of all feeling. During that time she was unable to imagine or feel God's presence or existence. What Mother Teresa experienced was what is known as the dark night of the soul.

Ronald Rolheiser in his book *Wrestling with God* writes, "The literature around the dark night of the soul makes this point: Sometimes when we are unable to induce any kind of feeling that God exists, when we are unable to imagine God's existence, the reason is that God is now coming into our lives in such a way that we cannot manipulate the experience through ego, narcissism, self-advantage, self-glorification, and self-mirroring. This purifies our experience of God because only when all of our own lights are off can we grasp divine light in its purity. Only when we are completely empty of ourselves inside an experience, when our heads and hearts are pumping dry, can God touch us in a way that makes it impossible for us to inject ourselves into the experience, so that we are worshipping God, not ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

"What happens in a dark night of the soul is that we run out of gas religiously: religious experiences that once sustained us and gave us fervor dry up or get crucified in a way that leaves us with no imaginative, affective, or emotional sense of either God's love or God's existence."<sup>2</sup>

When I first read that section of the book I underlined, starred, and wrote in the margin... "That's me."

If I were describe what has been bubbling up in my spirit over these past two years during COVID it was that...I had run out of gas religiously.

I think this is what had happened. I poured so much of my emotional self into being a pastor during the early days of COVID back in 2020 and had to sustain that energy throughout the summer when I should have been taking a sabbatical. When

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<sup>1</sup> IBID, 114-115.

<sup>2</sup> IBID, 117.

those dreams died, I put on my big boy pants and muscled on...encouraging, preaching, telling people to hold on just a little longer.

Then September hit which was a month where I was utterly out of control. The sudden loss of two very dear friends. The smoke from wild fires. Remote worship and pastoring. Toxic politics and how it had bled into the church.

My faith wasn't working for me any longer. I began to wrestle with faith and doubt.

Much like Thomas, one of Jesus twelve Apostles in our scripture story today. We are told that following Jesus' resurrection, Thomas also wrestled with believing that Jesus had really risen from the dead. I think that's why I've come to really appreciate Thomas as much as I do. Of all of Jesus' disciples, though he often gets a bad rap, Thomas displayed the maturity to not shy away from his doubt but instead leaned into it and revealed his inner struggle before Jesus and the other disciples.

Join me as I read from the Gospel of John 14:1-6, and 20:24-29. The first story comes as Jesus shared his final words with his disciples during the Last Supper. The second comes from Thomas' encounter with Jesus after his resurrection. Let us listen for God's word to us today.

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. **2** My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? **3** And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. **4** You know the way to the place where I am going."

Jesus the Way to the Father

**5** Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

**6** Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Then following Jesus' resurrection,

**24** Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. **25** So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

**26** A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said,

“Peace be with you!” **27** Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

**28** Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

**29** Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

So who was this guy named Thomas, or Doubting Thomas as we have come to know him? Well he was one of Jesus’ twelve apostles who Jesus hand picked to follow him through out his ministry. Apparently he was a twin as John also refers to him as Didymus which in Greek means “twin” though we don’t know who his twin was.

Thomas is the Patron Saint of the Blind or those who can’t see. Interesting correlation between doubt and sight.

According to 3rd century Church historian Eusebius, Thomas was sent to India and its surrounding countries to bring the Gospel there and to build Christ’s church. The Roman Catholic Church even has The Gospel According to Thomas written around 180-230 AD and is included in the apocrypha Bible though it’s not widely consider reliable enough to be included in the regular canon of scripture.

Scripture has very little recorded about him. What we do know is that Thomas was listed as one of the two apostles in Matthew who Jesus gave authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.<sup>3</sup>

In Mark he was wanted and called by Jesus to follow him who sent them out to preach.<sup>4</sup>

In Luke he was designated an apostle.<sup>5</sup>

In John we just heard about his grand appearance as the one who wrestled with faith and doubt.

And in Acts when Matthias was chosen to replace Judas as an apostle after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, Thomas was with the other disciples constantly in prayer, locked away in an upper room, fearful of what had happened to Jesus could possibly happen to them.<sup>6</sup>

So that’s what we know about him in scripture. But you gotta love Thomas. He blurts out what we are all wrestling with internally but are afraid to say.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 10:3

<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:18

<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:14-16

<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:12-26

“Lord we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

“Unless I see and touch Jesus for myself...[have concrete evidence of his resurrection]...I will not believe.”

When I think of Thomas, there are several qualities that I think that are inspiring.

First, Thomas was courageous. He stood by Jesus in his darkest hour and he was not afraid to question the status quo. Certainly many faithful people throughout the ages have likewise wrestled with whether or not something was true to believe.

Second, Thomas was a loyal follower. When Jesus spoke about returning to Jerusalem upon Lazarus’ death, Thomas knew that danger lurked in the Holy City. So Thomas boldly declared, “Let us go that we may die with him.”

Third, Thomas was an inquisitive student. He was not afraid to sit at Jesus’ feet and ask questions. Even hard questions that no one else would ask.

Fourth, Thomas was a devout missionary. As I mentioned earlier, legend has it that Thomas left and went to India where he spread the gospel to the Indian continent.

And finally, Thomas was a confessor. He was the first to declare among the disciples his profession of faith in the resurrected Jesus when he said, “My Lord and my God.”

Next notice how Jesus responded to Thomas...

Jesus was patient as Thomas wrestled with faith and doubt. He trusted the Holy Spirit as it worked within Thomas to bring him to faith. Jesus didn’t shame him. Jesus didn’t rush him. No! He provided just what Thomas needed which was the truth and then space to process it in his own way.

Ronald Rolheiser paints three examples of what he calls the cloud of unknowing as it applies to faith and doubt.<sup>7</sup>

The first is a baby growing in its mother’s womb. It is completely enveloped by the mother, breathing and floating around in her amniotic fluids, being nurtured from her body and comforted by the sound of her voice and heart beat as they resonate through her body. The baby cannot see its mother until it is born. But it clearly knows its mother, though it cannot see her. In the same way, the Apostle Paul stated that we live and move, and breathe, and have our being in God. In a sense, we are growing in God’s womb. We can know God, but we cannot see God until we die at which point we will see Jesus face to face.

The second is staring at the sun. The more one stares at the sun, the less clear the sun becomes. It’s only when we step away from the sun, or look at it indirectly through dimmed glasses, that we can actually see what is going on with the sun.

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Wrestling with God, Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggles to Be Human* (Image: New York, 2018), 100-102.

Think of a solar eclipse. It's too dangerous to look at it directly without a special device.

Do this little experiment with me. Place your hand out in front of you at about an arm's length. Now slowly bring it closer and closer to your face until it is right in front of your eyes. What happens to the clarity of your hand the closer you get to it? It becomes more blurry, unrecognizable. I know it's my hand, but I just can't see it as clearly as I could at a distance.

The third is the intimacy that we share with a friend or a spouse. Who has been married the longest in the room? Let's check. Raise your hand if you've been married 50, 60, or 70 years. Would you say that you know everything about your spouse? I hope not. The closer we become, the longer we are in relationship with one another, the more we realize there is to discover about our spouse or friend.

The same is true with our journey with God. The closer we come to God, the less clear God may become. I sure know that the more I learn about God and come to know God more intimately, the less I feel like to know God...because there is just so much to be known.

The ancient mystic "St. John of the Cross submits that the deeper we journey into intimacy [with God], the more we will begin to understand by not understanding than by understanding. Our relationship with God works in the same way. Initially when our intimacy is not so deep, we feel that we understand things and we have firm feelings and ideas about God. But the deeper we journey, the more those feelings and ideas will begin to feel false and empty because our growing intimacy is opening us to the fuller mystery of God. Paradoxically, this feels like God is disappearing and becoming nonexistent."<sup>8</sup>

"But that's precisely the beginning of real faith. In that darkness, when we have nothing left, when we feel there is no God, God can begin to flow into us in a pure way."<sup>9</sup>

I think this is important to understand because it is how young people figure out their faith. They grow up learning about God and how having faith in way God works in the world. As they mature, they begin to realize that maybe things don't operate in the same way they may have been taught. So they need to figure their faith out for themselves. While it can feel like they are losing their childhood faith, what they are actually doing is developing an adult faith.

Now this can be hard for us as parents when it seems like our kids reject the faith in which they were raised. Anyone who has raised an adolescent knows that sometimes kids need to figure things out for themselves. In my experience

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<sup>8</sup> IBID, 102.

<sup>9</sup> IBID, 118.

working with adolescents, I've found that one way they may do this is by negating everything they have brought up to believe and begin a process of relearning what they choose to believe themselves. Eventually they may arrive back the same point where they began. Or they may not. So some confuse this new season of unknowing as losing faith. When in reality, it is a maturing of faith.

I can't tell you how comforting this was for me as I wrestled with questions of faith during the pandemic. Was God good? Was God in control? Why wasn't God doing something about all this? All of a sudden church wasn't functioning in the way I had experienced and it really threw me for a loop. So I wondered, "Was I losing my faith in God?"

Now I still prayed and sensed that God was all around me. Like a baby in my mother's womb, I felt like I was floating in the divine amniotic fluid. I could still sense God's presence, but I couldn't see God. As I processed this with my spiritual director, he surmised that I was entering into that "dark night of the soul." A testing, a maturing, a stripping away, a letting go of the spiritual practices and beliefs that once helped me feel the presence of God.

Like Elijah I desired a noticeable sign from God like a tornado, an earthquake, or a great fire to prove that God was still there. But Elijah's story tells us that God's ways are more hidden than overt. God came to him in gentle whisper...and Elijah heard it.<sup>10</sup>

Rolheiser said that we misunderstand God and try to ground our faith in something that is loud and dynamic, not something that is hidden and obscure. "God, it seems, works in ways that are quiet and hidden from our eyes. The God that Jesus incarnates is neither dramatic nor splashy."<sup>11</sup>

God is more like that still small voice, a nudge of the Holy Spirit, a gentle whisper, a faith the size of a mustard seed, a tiny bit of yeast that can make an entire batch of dough to rise.

We may ask, "Did Jesus ever wrestle with faith and doubt?"

You bet! Take his words in the Garden of Gethsemene on the night he was betrayed. "Father if there is anyway that this cup can pass me by..." and then again on the cross as he died, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me!" Even Jesus questioned God's plan for salvation and God's presence as he needed him most. We can take comfort in that.

So my friends should we do when we or those we love wrestle with faith and doubt?

Firstly, don't panic. You're not losing your faith. Nothing's wrong with you. God or your image of God is what is wrong with you. It very well could be that

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Kings 19:11-13

<sup>11</sup> Rolheiser, *Wrestling with God*, 104.

your image of God is changing. You are maturing beyond the neophyte stage of faith...that you're leaving behind the honeymoon and entering into the long haul of a loving, vital relationship with God. This is when we must hang onto the promises of the covenant that God made with us at baptism. "Never will I leave you nor forsake you." Even when it seems like God isn't keeping his end of the deal.

Also don't listen to what the world will tell you. Be careful of well-meaning Christians who may tell you what is wrong with you. They may say that you just need to pull yourself up by your big kid pants and muscle on. Job in the Old Testament had three really good, well-meaning, friends who also tried to shake him out of his wrestling and God told them to shut up.

Don't try to manipulate your emotions in such a way to make you feel God like you used to. This is a lesson in truly letting go and letting God reach you in this unknowing space.

As with grief, don't put a timeline on it. Don't say, "Oh it's just a season, and then I'll snap out of it."

Do continue to worship and read your bible even though you don't feel like you are getting anything from them.

Do read about others like Mother Theresa, St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, C.S. Lewis, Henri Nouwen, and Ronald Rolheiser each of whom experienced the dark night of the soul.

Do continue to pray and be brutally honest with God. If Jesus was able to cry out to God when he felt abandoned and betrayed by his heavenly Father, so should we.

And finally do be still and know that God is God. God will be exalted through this journey.<sup>12</sup> Not us. Again, we aren't in control as we wrestle with faith and doubt. God will allow us to wrestle as long as God desires until what he is doing in us is completed.<sup>13</sup>

So may we know that wrestling with faith and doubt is as normal as breathing the air we breathe. May we be comforted knowing that there is nothing really wrong with us, what is wrong is our view of God in us. And may we be like Thomas who on the other side of his doubt proclaimed to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Psalm 46

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 1:6