

The Biggest Question
Pastor Judy Bangsund
Advent 3, Dec 11, 2016

Matthew 11:2-15
Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-11

Do you ever doubt your faith? As Christians, we tend to think that doubts are bad. Some people might think, "I can't become a Christian because I still have doubts. I'm still not sure." But the truth is, as long as you have faith, you will also have doubts. One speaker uses this illustration. He would tell the audience that he had a twenty-dollar bill in his hand and ask for a volunteer who believes him. Usually only a few hands go up. He asks one of them to join him on stage. Then he tells the volunteer that he is about to destroy his (or her) faith. He opens his hand and shows the twenty-dollar bill. See, the reason faith is destroyed is that, seeing the bill, faith is no longer required. Faith is required only when there is room for doubt, when we cannot see with our own eyes. When knowledge comes, faith is no more. But doubts will remain until knowledge comes and we can see clearly.

All believers have doubts. I do; I imagine you do too, from time to time. Even the strongest Christians among us have doubts. So did John the Baptist. Think of it. John had preached strong messages about Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. John baptized Jesus, knowing that Jesus didn't need it. (He knew who Jesus was!) When Jesus first appeared on the scene, John pointed him out saying, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

John was given that knowledge from God, and he spoke it in faith. He had been the strongest voice in those early days, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the one Scriptures foretold. But now John was in prison, in chains and in the dark. And he began to doubt. And so he sent a message to Jesus asking, "Are you the One who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" In those dark days, even John had doubts. And in his doubt, he asked the biggest question of human history. "Jesus, are you the One?"

Now, John wasn't the only person asking. Faithful Jews of the first century – leaders and common folk alike – were also wondering. Who is the One – the One who was promised, the One who will set things right? People of the first century asked that question and talked about it often, especially in dark times. And people of the 21st century are still asking that same question. We are not only asking, "Who is the One?" We are also asking, "Is there *only* One? Can't there be many?" Many who point the way to God? Many who teach the moral life? Many to show us how to get to heaven? Is there really only one?

Nowadays, it's a very common belief that there are many paths to the same destination. Many religions put in a claim: Moses (for the Jews), Mohammed (for the Muslims), Buddha, Joseph Smith... there are many. And so people think, "Ok. There are many claims. Maybe there are many paths to the same reality," It's a very common belief nowadays.

Doubt surrounds the question: is Jesus the One? The only One? It's a really hard question. It's much easier to answer the question, is Jesus one of many? You know – a great man, good teachings (the Golden Rule, all that). But – Son of God? Savior of the World? Messiah? The thing is, Jesus is more than a prophet. He is not just a man who offers a path to enlightenment.

There are lots of those, and I'm not saying they are bad. But Jesus is unique. He not only taught; he healed. He forgave. He restored the dead to life. Jesus did amazing things – and the Gospels point to his miracles as signs – that he is the One.

It's the biggest question, because a lot is at stake. Where you place your trust, and why, is crucial. It determines your behavior, it shapes your life and your ultimate outcome. Scripture is clear: Jesus is the One. He is the only one who fulfills all the prophecies; he is the only Son of God; the only One who can wipe away your sins and give you eternal life.

Those who have come to Christianity from other systems of beliefs are often among the strongest voices who proclaim Christ. One of these is Nabeel Qureshi, a former devout Muslim, who is now a fervent Christian. I've mentioned him before; he's the author of *Seeking Allah; Finding Jesus*, a book we will be studying in Adult Ed early next year. Nabeel loved the faith he grew up in, read the Qu'ran and prayed religiously; he was very devout. I won't go into his conversion experience, because that's in his book – and I encourage you to read it. What is more to the point for us now, is that Nabeel has become well-known as a defender of the Christian faith. He's gone on to write more books; he's a popular speaker; you can find excerpts on YouTube. Recently, he also found that he has cancer. Stage 4. Although himself a physician, he never saw this coming. It's not an easy time for him and his family.

Now some of his Muslim friends are asking him, "So, Nabeel, what about your Christian faith? Admit it: it was a mistake to convert. Now God is punishing you. Be honest: don't you have doubts?" In one of his recent vlogs he responded. "Not at all. If anything, I believe in Jesus more. Because no one can forgive my sins but Jesus, the only son of God; no one else was raised from the dead and can give me eternal life." A lot is at stake! When you are facing death (and who isn't), it's the biggest question. And Nabeel boldly proclaims the answer: Jesus is the One. Jesus is the only One.

So, when you have doubts, when your faith is tested as Nabeel's was, you need evidence. What is the evidence for your faith? My friends, if it's just your opinion, that's pretty shaky ground. Because your opinion doesn't count for much more than anyone else's. Is your experience the evidence for your faith? Well, that's wonderful; but again, your experience really carries no more weight than anyone else's. What was Jesus' response, when he was asked, "Are you the one?" What was his evidence?

Note that Jesus didn't point to himself. He didn't say, "Because I said so." Instead, he pointed to objective, irrefutable evidence from others around him. They were primary witnesses to the blind who could now see; the deaf who could now hear; the lepers now made whole; the dead who were alive again; the hopeless who now were hopeful. Strong evidence. You see, to first-century thinkers blindness, deafness, illness and death were signs of the old, broken age. They understood that in the realm of heaven, in what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, God would release people from these curses, allowing God's original plan for goodness and well-being to take over. The Gospels proclaim Jesus' miracles and teachings as signs that God's Kingdom is already in the works, ready to reach fulfillment, through Jesus' ministry. Specifically, through Jesus himself and his work on the cross.

The evidence was all around them. And Jesus also pointed to the evidence in Scripture, for all the prophecies were being uniquely fulfilled before their very eyes: in Jesus. We read one today from Isaiah who said,

3 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 4 say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." 5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

And now all this was happening before their very eyes. The evidence was clear. Jesus *is* the One. And the message to John was also clear: put aside your doubts. Today you can know for sure.

What was true for John and others in the first century, is also true for you and me in the 21st. It is the message of Advent, as evidence grows all around us, week by week (like the light on our Advent wreath) that Jesus is the Savior of the world. Miracles still happen. People are still coming to faith -- often in hidden areas, like China and the Middle East. Like the Advent wreath: first one candle, then two, now three -- the light grows brighter every week, until on Christmas Eve, we celebrate the great Light that lifts our darkness. But that's not all. Jesus is the Light; but he has given you and me the task of sharing the light with others. He has made each of us to be little lights, each carrying the light of faith. And on Christmas Eve, as one person lights the candle of the next, the light will grow until every person's candle is lit, and the congregation will become bright with light. As little lights reflect the Great Light, we have an important job to do. We need to share our faith.

Have you seen the ad on TV where Frankenstein's monster enters a little village, full of people each going their own way, but who slow down to gawk in fear of this ugly monster? In a rather whimsical moment, he stops to screw in a Christmas lights on each side of his neck. But then, more poignantly he bravely faces the crowd and begins to sing. But he's a little shy, or perhaps afraid, and he forgets his lines, until a little girl sings with him. And one by one, all the villagers begin to sing, now no longer gawking at him but smiling with him, becoming community.

Maybe it's a little silly, but the ad gets me every time. Because like that song, faith is meant to be shared. That's the point. Like the monster, sharing your faith can be scary. Doubts come to all, even to the strongest in faith, even to people like John the Baptist. *Especially* during the dark times. Perhaps during your dark times, you might manage to get yourself to church, even though your doubt still seems stronger than your faith, so that it's difficult to sing, difficult to pray, difficult to believe. In those times you are held up on the shoulders of faith by those around you as they sing and pray and believe. And you leave encouraged, your flickering flame of faith having grown just a little steadier. When you share your faith with someone else, however fragile, it grows stronger. Faith grows stronger in you and among you, as a community in Christ. You see, it is the Holy Spirit who is making that happen, reminding you of God's Word and his promises, giving you courage and overcoming your doubts. It is the Holy Spirit who convinces you of the truth about Jesus.

Doubt and faith. We all struggle with it. So I want to end with a poem written by a Lutheran pastor named Gerhard Frost. He writes:

"Yes, doubt does keep gnawing at one's faith."
I said it to a friend,
my friend in deep distress.
I said it to encourage,
but quickly he replied,
without a moment's hesitation,
"But faith keeps gnawing at our doubts, too!"

It was a great response.
I am strengthened by it.
Intending to comfort,
I was comforted.
Today I walk more boldly as I say:
Yes, doubt does gnaw at my faith,
but faith gnaws, too,
and faith has better teeth!

So who is the One? In this Advent/Christmas season, you have a wonderful opportunity to point to Jesus. Because it *is* Christmas and Christ *is* at the center of it. Even the most hardened of secularists are putting up lights and listening to Christmas carols. So take whatever opportunity presents itself to point to Jesus. Because a lot is at stake, as Nabeel would tell you. He and countless other witnesses will proclaim the truth: that only Jesus has the power to save, to forgive, to transform. Only Jesus can dispel your doubts, giving you faith. Jesus *is* the One, and there is no other. (Prayer)