

As a pastor I often encounter people who are stuck – if they are growing in their faith to them it appears imperceptible – there is this ongoing feeling of distance from God – or a struggle with the same things or the same issues over and over again with no end in sight.

And there can be lots of reasons for that sense of stuckness – but one of the contributing causes is often doubt.

Life doesn't go as we expected – and the inevitable question arises– if God is good and loves me – shouldn't things have been different here. Where is God when that happened?

Not to mention all the intellectual causes of doubt – did Jesus really do – really say – really rise – how can I believe that in this day and age.

There is probably no one listening to the sound of my voice who has not at some

point in their lives faced doubt – and as I prayerfully thought about what to preach on today I kept coming back to this.

You see as Christians we are not well equipped by our communities to handle doubt – because we often fall into two equal and opposite errors when it comes to dealing with doubt.

In more right leaning communities doubt is rarely spoken of – there are no places to safely raise questions - when doubt is

spoken of it is seen as a failure – so if you have doubts you don't admit it – you feel ashamed of it – you hide – put on a strong front – of course I believe – but you're stuck.

In more left leaning communities doubt is celebrated – of course you can't be certain about spiritual realities – doubt is seen as being intellectually sophisticated emotionally mature – but here you are stuck as well – for there is no invitation to work through that doubt – to perhaps get

to something on the other side –
something to anchor your life in – a solid
foundation to stand upon – a truth to
transform.

So how do we deal with our doubt – is
there an alternative to these poles?

Indeed there is – the bible in fact has a
rich and balanced approach to doubt – it
critiques both our right and our left leaning
tendencies – it invites us through our
doubt to something richer fuller deeper on
the other side.

Now perhaps the best place to go in the
bible when we are engaging with doubt is
the life of Abraham – his life in general –
but most specifically Genesis 15 which I
read just a moment ago – so if you have
your bible with you – or would like to grab
a pew bible I would encourage you to turn
there – because in Abraham we see four
things - the inevitability of doubt – the
fertile ground for doubt – the dialogue of
doubt – and God’s engagement with our
doubt – So the inevitability of doubt – the
fertile ground for doubt – the dialogue of

doubt – and God’s engagement with our doubt.

So first – the inevitability of doubt.

Now some of you might be surprised that I would go to Abraham at all – right – because whenever the bible speaks about Abraham it is always saying – want to know what real faith looks like – want to have an exemplar for faith – want to see what you are aiming for – look at Abraham – that is what true faith looks like.

But when you look at his life Abraham is far from consistent – his life is a roller coaster ride of sorts going from moments of profound faith – to moments of deep crushing doubt

Genesis 12 → God appears to Abram – leave all that you know – land – family – security and go to a new land where I will give you a future, a son, an heir – and Abram leaves – profound faith.

Same chapter – a famine settles upon the land – Abram and his wife Sarai go down into Egypt for survival – Sarai is a very attractive woman and Abram is worried that the Egyptians will kill him to take his wife – and so he lies – calls her his sister – and she is taken into Pharaoh’s Harem – he has no trust that God can keep him alive to fulfill his promises and Sarai suffers grievously - deep doubt.

chapter 13 – Abram trusts in God’s promise to the point that he is willing to

give up all his rights as the head of the family to let his nephew Lot take the best of the land – profound faith.

Genesis 16 – too much time has passed and still no heir, no son of promise – so they have a surrogate mother fill in – and a family mess that has echoed for 1000s of years in the Arab/Jewish conflict ensues - deep doubt.

If you are facing – or have faced doubt – Abraham being held up as an exemplar of

faith should be of great encouragement to us – should release us from any shame we may have – move us to drop the act - because his life tells us doubt is inevitable – and if Abraham – who heard the very voice of God – who saw in such powerful ways the activity of God – still had doubt – who am I to think that a life of faith must be completely free of it? There is an inevitability to doubt.

But what brings it about – what is the fertile ground for doubt - chapter 15 opens

with these words - “After these things” – after what things? – well Abraham’s nephew lot had settled in the city of Sodom – and Sodom at this point decides to stop paying taxes to the ruling Kings – and the Kings crack down on the insubordination and rout the city capturing all its riches along with Lot and his family - Abraham hears the news and flies to his nephew’s aid - attacks the conglomerate of Kings and is victorious. Not only does he retrieve Lot but captures all the spoils of war.

To say the least Abraham has now made enemies for himself – not only the Kings he has attacked – but the King of Sodom whose possessions he now has. He is understandably anxious and doubt inevitably sets in – how now can the promises of God be fulfilled? How can I father a child if I am dead? How can I inherit a land if I am wiped off the face the earth?

Circumstance is the fertile ground for doubt – think of the events in life that

shake our sense of security – leaving us feeling that life is outside of our control – death of a loved one, diagnosis, illness, job loss, economic downturn, unfulfilled dreams and aspirations, relational angst, the tragedy, the unanswered prayer – that lead us to entertain such thoughts as - Is there really a God? If there is, how can that God be good? Does God really have my best in mind? Am I truly loved by God? Can God be trusted?

Circumstance is the fertile ground for doubt.

Now this is where many of us get stuck – our circumstances conflict with what we believe – so we either express our doubts actively – we push God out of the way and seek to bring order back to our circumstances on our own – or if we express our doubts passively – becoming consumed with anxiety and worry

So how does Abram handle his doubt?

Actively or passively? Neither he enters into a dialogue of doubt – vs. 1 – God comes to him in a vision and says - fear not Abram – I am your shield – your reward shall be very great.

Now notice Abram doesn't just carry on - doesn't just say – thx God that's exactly what I needed to hear – Abram complains – Abram expresses his doubt – he enters into a dialogue of doubt – vs. 2-3 – about that reward – about my future – I continue

childless and when I leave this world –
which is coming sooner than I had hoped –
my heir will be my servant.

What is Abram inviting us to do with our
doubt? To enter into a dialogue of doubt -
to take it to God in all its brutal honesty –
I’m struggling to trust you – struggling to
see that you have my best in mind – these
circumstances I find myself in leave me
wondering if you are actually good or truly
love me.

Now some of you might be horrified – your
sensibilities offended – we can’t talk with
God like this – this is God – lets show
some reverence – some respect – but this
is reverence – this is respect – taking our
doubt to God – is taking God seriously.

Consider doubt in the context of a human
relationships ...think of a relationship you
are in – parent / child – marriage – deep
friendship. Now what if the other person
came to you with a doubt about your
relationship – one of the things it could say

to you is – this person cares enough about me about our relationship – respects it enough – to risk a conflict – a period of awkwardness - so that we can have the possibility to get through it to something deeper on the other side.

Expressing honest doubt to God – yearning for resolution is a lost language of faith – the bible is full of it – you can barely read a half dozen psalms without tripping all over it – you can't read the lives of the OT

prophets without overhearing the anguished dialogue of doubt.

I don't know where you find yourself this morning - Perhaps you're dealing with circumstances right now that have led you to entertain doubt – doubt about the goodness, love, or trustworthiness of God.

Perhaps your learning – your experiences – have led you to doubt the historical reality of the person and work of Jesus.

If that is you – can I invite you to give something a try (if you haven't already) – pray it out in all its honesty – and if you are stuck for words – crack open the book of psalms – and you will only have to read of handful before a line if not an entire psalm will begin to resonate with your hearts cry – Psalm 13 might be a good starting point.

What do we do with our doubt? Take it to God in all its honesty – we enter into a dialogue of doubt.

Why? – because lastly – such a dialogue invites God to engage with our doubt.

How does God engage our doubts? – Tim Keller the former pastor of Redeemer in NYC summarizes the consistent voice of scripture in this way – although not encouraged doubt is always welcomed and addressed – as I said the bible has this balanced view of doubt – critiquing both our right leaning and left leaning tendencies - although not encouraged doubt is always welcomed and addressed.

You can see that throughout the bible – right - in our reading from John – the most famous of doubters – given the nickname doubting Thomas from this one incident - the other disciples tell him that Jesus has risen from the dead – and Thomas says – I don't believe it – unless I see the nail marks – stick my finger in those wounds, and my hand in his side – I won't believe it – 8 days later Jesus appears to them all and turns to Thomas – see these wounds – stick your finger here – your hand here – do not disbelieve -believe –

Although not encouraged his doubt is welcomed and addressed.

It is the same for Abram – he expresses his doubt honestly – and it is welcomed and addressed - vs. 4 – God responds by saying - your servant will not be your heir – you will have a son – and he takes him outside his tent in vs. 5 – and I almost get this picture of God putting his arm around Abram's shoulder – come with me – look up at the expanse of the heavens – count the innumerable stars of the sky – this

God says – will be the number of your offspring – and Abram trusts God – believes God.

But his doubt does not end there - Abram in vs. 8 once again expresses his doubt – how do I know that I can trust you – how will I know that I will possess it?

And what follows are some of the most glorious verses in all the bible – where the grace of God comes through with such burning clarity that it floors us...

vs. 9 – God says – bring me a heifer, a ram, a goat, a pigeon, a turtledove – and Abram knows exactly what to do – they are about to make a covenant...

Now in our culture – a written culture – we make agreements by signing our signatures to a legal document.

Documents that outline the terms and consequences for breaking the agreement.

Let's say this summer you hire a contractor to do some work on your

cottage – more than likely you will both sign an agreement where they agree to do a certain amount of work by a certain time – and you agree to compensate them accordingly – and if either of you break that agreement your signatures allow the other to hold you to that agreement through legal means – this is the way contracts are made in a written culture.

But in the oral culture of the bible – such agreements and the consequences for breaking them were acted out –

In the time of Abram – when you wanted to establish a relationship - you acted out the covenant in this way...

A place was chosen where the ground sloped into the middle – a ditch of sorts – then these animals that God tells Abram to bring were brought to that place and sliced from nose to tail – right $\frac{1}{2}$ and left $\frac{1}{2}$ - lay the two halves across from one another – so the blood would run into the groove – a couple of inches of blood would begin to pool in that groove – cow blood, goat

blood, sheep blood, pigeon blood, and dove blood – and then each party would stand at the edge of the groove – take off their sandals – and say I give my word that if I break this agreement this is what will happen to me – may I be hacked in two like these animals – may I be cut off – may I be bled out on the ground – then to seal this covenant they would each walk through the groove of blood – if I break my word to you may this happen to me – I will give my life for my failure to keep the covenant –

Then in vs. 12 after Abram has set the scene the text says that darkness fell over Abraham – in other words he was scared to death -he was consumed by a crushing, paralyzing fear

Why? Because he was about to enter into covenant with almighty God - he knew that he could not keep his end of the covenant – because in the chapters before and after this moment God has outlined his side of the agreement – I will be your God – and you will be my people – you will

live before me blamelessly – and Abram is understandably crushed with fear – because he doubts he can live into such a covenant – he must have had such thought swimming in his head - I might as well end it here – for I am as good as splayed out on the ground.

But something quite extraordinary, shocking, stunning happens in this covenant making ceremony – Abram never walks through the valley of blood – vs. 17 – only God does in the form of a smoking

pot and a flaming torch – and by doing so God is saying - if you break this, if you fail in this covenant or I do – the result will be the same it will be my blood that will be shed – If you sin, if you're not perfect, if your descendents are not blameless, if you break the covenant in any way, you may do this to me- may I be cut off and cut up “– may my immortality suffer mortality – may my infiniteness become finite – may my life be brought to death.” (Keller)

Now the descendants of Abram – the Jewish people expressed their trust in this covenant with a system of sacrificial offerings – with the very same animals we find here – this was a way for the descendants of Abram to claim their part in this covenant agreement – in essence they would say with each sacrifice - God we remember the covenant you made with Abram - As a daily reminder of this covenant a lamb was bled out at precisely 3pm.

Centuries later – Jesus – the Son of God hangs on a cross – and a deep darkness descends over the land - and at 3pm – the same time as that daily sacrifice – he cries out – it is finished – God’s covenant promise has been fulfilled – humanity has breached the covenant by sin – but Jesus - the son of God is the one who is cut off – who gives up immortality for mortality – who gives up his life to death. This is grace – this is the gospel – this is the heart of the Christian message.

Abram's expressed honest doubt is
addressed with a glorious picture of grace
– that points us to the work of Jesus on
the cross.

I think that we are being showed here that
in our honest expressions of doubt – God
engages it – by bringing us to the glory of
his grace – reorienting our story to THE
story – bringing us by His Spirit to be
immersed in His grace - bringing our
doubts before the cross - remember my
covenant with Abraham – remember that

my Son was cut off for your sake –
remember my covenant love - remember
my power over any circumstance –
remember that ultimately your
circumstances do not have the power to
cut you off – because I was cut off for you
– remember – remember.

Let us bring out doubts before the Lord
allowing him to engage it with his grace.

Let's pray.