

“Are You the One?”

John the Baptist came on the scene to prepare the way for Jesus, as the Messiah. John preached to the crowds: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). One day he baptized Jesus, and the heavens split open, and God’s voice boomed out of the sky, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Another time John boldly reveals who Jesus is: “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). You talk about experiencing some spiritual highs! Some thrilling divine encounters!

Some time has passed, and now John is in prison. Herod Antipas, who governed that area, had seduced his brother’s wife, gotten rid of his own wife, then married his sister-in-law. John had dared to confront Herod for his blatant adultery. As a result, John is thrown into prison. Sitting there, day after day, in the tiny prison cell at Machaerus, John gets to wondering. Let’s pick up the story: “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” (Matthew 11:2-3).

John had told so many people Jesus was the Messiah. Now, he’s not so sure anymore. “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Matthew 11:3).

Why does there seem to be doubt in John’s mind? The Bible doesn’t say for sure. We can guess. ***Being locked up in prison doesn’t help.*** Holed up in a dark dungeon, probably sharing space with mice and rats, his fate at the mercy of the whims of an unscrupulous ruler...it’s hard to keep a positive attitude in such an environment. I once visited a friend in prison. It was my first visit since his incarceration. My friend was a good man who did a very bad thing. When he came to the visitation area in his prison uniform, he looked haggard and distraught. During our conversation he remarked, “This is hell.” Maybe John can’t help but wonder: “If Jesus really is the Messiah, the One to deliver His people from their oppressors, *why would He let this happen to me?*”

Perhaps his whole belief about what the Messiah would be like was now shaken. Most Jews believed the Messiah would be a powerful military-like figure who would help Israel wipe out their enemies. John himself preached God’s judgment on evil people. But Jesus seemed to be doing *anything but* blasting and condemning bad people. He associated with prostitutes and hated tax collectors. He said God welcomes everyone. While John sat in prison for confronting evil, Jesus was the toast of the town with common folk. Theologian Frederick Buechner wrote of this story of John and Jesus, “Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on wild living like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn’t too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness...Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find.”

Maybe John was thinking: “Is this really the Jesus the world needs?” Some years ago I was watching a TV talk show where the host was interviewing the British actor Robert Shaw.

They were discussing the religious climate in England. Mr. Shaw said, “We need a new Jesus Christ...a Jesus real to us...(we need) more intellectual content...(we should not) be expected to believe the old simple tales any more.” Mr. Shaw was sure Jesus we need to look for another Jesus. It seems John is now wrestling with this same haunting suspicion. The lamp of John’s faith is flickering. He is struggling with doubts.

Has lamp of your faith ever flickered? Has doubt unsettled your belief in God, your faith in Jesus? Maybe you’re struggling with doubt and religious skepticism even now. Somehow life hasn’t turned out as you had hoped. You just thought things would be better than they are. I remember a lovely Christian couple in a church I served who went through a terrible time of doubt. They were having problems with their grown children, who showed little interest in the Lord. One son had gotten into trouble with the law. They felt like total failures as parents. They were so despondent I feared they would completely drift away from Christ.

Sometimes life’s disappointments and hardships can wear us down. Life just doesn’t seem to make sense, and our belief in a wise and loving God can flicker. There is this Peanuts comic strip where Lucy is speaking with Linus at the base of a hill. She says, “Someday I’m going over that hill and find the answer to my dreams. Someday I’m going over that hill and find hope and fulfillment. I think, for me, all the answers to life lie beyond these clouds and over the grassy slopes of that hill.” Linus removes his thumb from his mouth, points toward the hill, and responds: “Perhaps there’s another little kid on the other side of that hill who is looking this way and thinking that all the answers to life lie on this side of the hill.” Whereupon Lucy looks at Linus, then turns toward the hill and yells: “Forget it kid!”

Sometimes we just come to the place where the stuff we once believed, we find it hard to believe anymore. Several years ago at our Annual Conference session I was perusing through the books at the Cokesbury display. I noticed a book written by the noted evangelist and educator Tony Campolo and son Bart. As I picked it up and leafed through it I was shocked. It told how one Thanksgiving Bart came to his dad and told him he no longer believed in a God. Bart had been in ministry. I heard him preach, and he was a dynamic speaker, just like his dad. He headed up an effective inner city ministry. Now he was an atheist! The book was an accounting of how Bart and his evangelist father were working through Bart’s renouncing of his faith.

A lot of people today in our culture are losing faith in traditional Christianity. When surveys are taken asking people about their religious beliefs and affiliation, the category growing the fastest is the “nones” – those who claim no religious affiliation. Nancy and I are in a small group, and we are currently doing Andy Stanley’s series “Who Needs God?” It is a mind-stretching, thought-provoking look at belief in God, or the non-belief in God. Andy makes the argument that some are drifting into agnosticism and atheism *not* because that is appealing, but because they find it hard to believe anymore in the God Christians say they believe in. *Doubt and skepticism pervades the religious climate of North America right now!*

John sent some of his disciples to Jesus with this question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Matthew 11:3). ***How does Jesus respond?*** Matthew tells us

“Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them’” (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus says, “Look around you! The blind see! The lame walk! Deaf people hear! Lepers are cleansed! Compare this with Isaiah 35:5-6: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” This is a Messianic prophecy. Jesus as Messiah fulfills this! Jesus says to John’s disciples, “Remind John that the poor are hearing good news.” That goes back to a prophecy in Isaiah 61:1 – also a prophecy of the Messiah to come. Jesus says, “The dead are raised.” That, too, formed a vision of the last days, when the Messiah would establish God’s rule on earth. See what Jesus is saying: *“I’m fulfilling prophecies of the Messiah! Can you look beyond your personal situation to see signs of the kingdom, where God is at work?”*

Maybe this story about John the Baptist can help us work through times in our lives when the lamp of faith flickers, and we may have doubts about God.

What can we do when times of doubt come? First of all, admit our doubts. John could have kept his doubts to himself. It must have been very humbling for him to admit his uncertainty about Jesus. He had publicly, boldly told people Jesus was the Messiah – now he backs off and admits, “I’m not so sure any more.”

Almost everyone, even the strongest Christians, can question their belief at times. Most believers experience times when the fire of our faith burns low. Did Jesus condemn John because of his honest doubts? No. Jesus paid great tribute to this man: “As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” Truly I tell you, among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he’” (Matthew 11:7-11).

There’s no shame in admitting our questions and doubts. *Often it’s out of honest doubt that greater faith can be born.* This leads me to the next point in how we can deal with our doubts. ***Seize this as an opportunity to grow.*** Maybe you need to update your faith. Maybe you need to move out of an immature, limited, unworkable view of God, Jesus, and the Bible.

For instance, some hang on to the Bible stories and faith they were taught as children in Sunday School, and never forge a more mature, adult faith. I mentioned that the small group Nancy and I are in is doing Andy Stanley’s study, “Who Needs God?” In it he speaks of people who grew up in church. When they reached adulthood, they are confronted with the *facts* of science, for example. *Facts* about real life. When they seek answers to these “fact-based” questions, often they are given “faith-based” answers. Like, “It’s in the Bible. God says it. I believe it.” Or, “Well, you just have to have faith.” And so, they walk away from the church, and from their

childhood faith, because “faith-based” answers to “fact-based” questions didn’t cut it for them.

But, our times of doubt and questioning *can become* a springboard for us to rethink and refashion our understanding of the Bible, and God, and Jesus. I mentioned actor Robert Shaw, and his saying that we need a new Jesus, a Jesus with more intellectual content. Can you imagine that! Jesus was just too little for him! Truth is, Robert Shaw was just too little for Jesus! Shaw needed to re-examine his understanding of this matchless Man of the ages – Jesus, the Christ!

Jesus says to John’s disciples: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus says go tell John to take note of all the ways I’m fulfilling these prophecies of the Messiah!

When our doubts come, and the lamp of our faith grows dim, ***don’t miss the signs of how Jesus is at work and God’s kingdom is breaking in around you.*** Two thousand years after Jesus’ life on earth, and His death and resurrection, God’s kingdom still hasn’t come fully on earth. But there are signs that God’s kingdom and rule are breaking into this world marked by sickness, suffering, evil and death. In your times of doubt, don’t miss those signs where Jesus the Messiah is at work.

For instance, someone comes to Christ and their life is transformed. A few weeks ago Nancy and I went to a Gideons Pastor Appreciation Banquet. A woman gave testimony about how she was given a Bible by a Gideon member, and she recounted an unbelievable series of events where Christ entered her life and changed her. We also saw video testimonies of how peoples’ lives were changed by Christ when they read the Bible.

Someone is healed through prayer and faith. A man came to visit one Sunday when I was preaching. He had been a member of a previous church I served. After the service he told me how he had come forward in that previous church during a healing service, and he had been healed in a remarkable way. The interesting thing is that he had not bothered to share that with me during the whole time I was at the other church. Let’s not also forget the marvels of modern medicine and surgery – are these not signs of God’s kingdom breaking in, that kingdom where there will be no more sickness.

Someone through faith is able to triumph over life’s obstacles and tragedies. In one church I served we set aside a Sunday as Disability Awareness Sunday. We explored how to minister to people with disabilities. A man came there as a guest, a quadriplegic. He moved around in a motorized wheel chair, steering it by breathing into a tube. As part of our worship he sang “I Can Only Imagine”. It brought me to tears. Around that same time, I got connected on the internet to a Christian man, also a quadriplegic. Confined to his home, he was sending inspiring stories and messages to people through email.

Or here’s a situation where people are reconciled to one another, love and forgiveness

overcomes hate. These too are signs of God's kingdom breaking in, that kingdom of love and good will that Messiah would inaugurate.

I don't know about you, but how many times over the years, when I've been discouraged, or my faith has kind of sagged, something happens, or God brings someone across my path, *where I can see God at work*, and my faith is renewed!

So don't be afraid when times of doubt seep in, and the lamp of your faith may grow dim and flicker, for these can be times when we grow, and we come to experience God and Christ in a fresh, new way.

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