

Doubt: The Yeast of Wisdom
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Reading: Exodus 3: 1-14 (NRSV)

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He further said, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

I wonder if you have heard the story of the four lepidopterologists who were having drinks one afternoon following a long day in the field. The Englishman said, “I think that we British have the very best word for butterfly. Just listen to the sound butter-fly. You can imagine something gently cutting through butter.”

“I completely disagree,” announced the Japanese scientist. “The Japanese have a word that imitates the butterfly’s motion in air – choo, choo.”

The French collector was impatient. “Oh really,” she said. “The French word is Papillion, revealing the elegant and royal nature of the butterfly.”

At that moment the German smashed his fist down on the table. “And was ist wrong mit schmetterling?”

Isn’t it interesting how we can all have the same experience but call it a different thing. Our naming of a thing like a butterfly can have a variety of emphasis and tonal qualities. How we would describe a butterfly would be unique and different among us. There must be lots of room for descriptors and interpretations, not only of the butterfly but what it might mean to us in symbolic or poetic form.

Because experience is variously described and interpreted, I would like to propose the necessity and importance of doubt. Doubt is essential to every search for knowledge, truth, and wisdom. Doubt is vital in every scientific, philosophical, and theological endeavor. Doubt is the yeast of wisdom. An old proverb declares, “Doubt is the beginning, not the end of wisdom.”

Most of us grew up being told that doubt is antithetical to faith. The last thing a good Christian wants to be is a “doubting Thomas.” We are taught to cast off all doubt and put our full faith and confidence in God and Christ. Indeed I often encounter people who are embarrassed or ashamed to have doubts. They sometimes think they are not welcome in church and stay away for fear their doubts are not welcome.

But the truth of the matter is that Thomas was not the only figure in the Bible with doubts. Nearly every dialogue and story in the Hebrew Bible is one that springs from doubt. I read to you the story of Moses and the burning bush and his commission to march down into Egypt and demand the freedom of the Hebrew people. Despite the burning bush that is not consumed by the fire, Moses is full of questions. Behind the questions is a mind stuffed with doubt – not faith. Who shall say sent me? What kind of an answer is “I AM WHO I AM?” I am not a very

eloquent fellow; don't you think you should send a better speaker? Moses finally accepts the mission but he does not embark with a knapsack full of confidence.

When barren, old Sarai overhears that she is to have a child, she not only doubts it very seriously, she laughs out loud. Was anyone without doubts that David would slay Goliath? The Psalms repeatedly ask why faithfulness has not resulted in greater reward, or security, or peace. Jesus prays in Gethsemane, "Is my death really necessary?" And on the cross he pleads, "Why have you forsaken me?" Good old Thomas was close to the end of a long line of doubters in the Bible.

I believe it is important for us to make a distinction between doubt, disbelief, and unbelief. P. W. Pruyser makes these distinctions in the following way. Doubt, he writes, suggests uncertainty. Disbelief he limits to the selective rejection of specific religious tenets or practices. Many of us, for example, do not believe that Jesus literally walked on water or in the doctrine of transubstantiation, which holds that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper become the physical body and blood of Christ. Unbelief is a more resolute state of mind, implying a global

rejection of religious ideas and practices. Unbelief overlaps the irreligious and atheist.¹

I am using doubt this morning as the possibility that truth is not fully disclosed or understood. Because there is not certainty we may yet see truth more fully revealed or newly disclosed, or more deeply interpreted. I lean on Paul Tillich's insight that doubt is not the opposite of faith but an element of faith. As he wrote in *Systematic Theology*:

“Finitude includes doubt. The true is the whole (Hegel). But no finite being has the whole; therefore, it is an expression of the acceptance of his finitude that he accepts the fact that doubt belongs to his essential being.”²

That is to say, if the whole person is going to approach anything that we might call faith that person will necessarily bring his or her doubts. If we expect women and men to be people of God they will come with questions, uncertainties, and doubts. We have to get out of our minds the idea that to have our doubts about God does not mean we cannot trust God. In fact, doubting may lead us to deeper trust into the mysteries of life that we cannot master. It reminds me of this story.

¹ P.W. Pruyser, “Doubt and Unbelief,” *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Rodney J. Hunter, general editor (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), pp. 304-307.

² Paul Tillich, *Existence and the Christ: Volume II, Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 72.

A man is talking to his best friend about married life. “You know,” he says, “I really trust my wife, and I think she has always been faithful to me. But there is always that doubt.”

His friend says, “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

A couple of weeks later the man has to go out of town on business. Before he goes, he gets together with his friend. He says to his friend, “While I’m away, could you do me a favor? Could you watch my house and see if there is anything fishy going on? I mean, I trust my wife but there’s always that doubt.”

The friend agrees to help out, and the man leaves town. Two weeks later he comes back and meets his friend. “So, did anything happen?”

“I have some bad news for you,” says the friend. “The day after you left I saw a strange car pull up in front of your house. The horn honked and your wife ran out and got into the car and they drove off. Later, after dark, the car came back. I saw your wife and the strange man get out. They went into the house and I saw a light go on, so I ran over and looked in the window. Your wife was kissing the man. Then he took off his shirt. Then she took off her blouse. Then they turned off the light.”

“What happened next?” asked the husband.

“I don’t know,” said his friend, “it was too dark to see.”

“Darn it, do you see what I mean? There’s always that doubt.”³

I wonder if the things that are the most valuable to us, the things that have the greatest consequences for our sense of meaning and purpose are the things that we most deeply doubt.

Doubt is more than uncertainty. Doubt is the possibility that truth is not yet fully disclosed and, therefore, doubt can never assume arrogance. Doubt always moves from the position of humility. Doubt is open to the truths and insights of others. Doubt is always ready for school and eager to learn. Doubt is open and expansive. Doubt is inquisitive and serves as the doorway to knowledge and wisdom. Most of us have heard or remember Descartes famous dictum, “I think, therefore I am.” What we may not know or remember is the entire sentence. “I doubt, therefore I think. I think, therefore I am.”

Voltaire once said, “Doubt is not a pleasant condition but certainty is absurd.” I would take the next step and warn that certainty can be dangerous. I speak not of the confidence of faith, but the kind of religious expression that is absolute and unquestioned. I speak of fundamentalism of every stripe. Yes, there are religious fanatics but fundamentalism finds

³ TheLaw.com, <http://www.thelaw.com/forums/showthread.php?t=32877>, downloaded 8/29/09.

its way into secularism and scientism. There are extremes of relativism that offer little more than nihilism and social collapse that is nothing less than irresponsible. There are extremists all over the world and some are armed with dangerous weapons and tactics of fear. There is no room for doubt in their worldview. Where there can be no doubt there can be no truth. There can be no freedom.

A compelling book by Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt*, makes the case that the future of human society depends on our capacity to engage the disciplines of doubt. Given the extremism to which some factions of the world are inclined, human freedom depends on our openness to truth as emergent and the politics of moderation.⁴ It is a book that every religious person should read.

Doubt is more than uncertainty. Doubt is the possibility that truth is not yet fully disclosed. Doubt is the possibility the God is not yet fully revealed. I believe that neither truth nor God will ever be fully known to the human mind and soul. My argument with fundamentalism is its assumption that its “true believers” know truth or God in full. I dare say, what a partial truth, what a small God! Any God so contained is not a God worth worshipping. We are more likely to find God in the searching,

⁴ Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

the wondering, the questioning, and the doubting. Would it still be faith if we had absolute and certain knowledge of God?

I doubt it!

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