

Third Sunday of Lent

March 12, 2023

Sharon Tilbe, Worship Leader

Is there any doubt?

Our Lenten theme of the wilderness journey takes us to our Exodus reading which is a story about the Israelites who certainly walked in the wilderness. In today's story, they are thirsty. They came from a life of slavery, whereby they made no decisions as they had no choices, had no rights. They had to learn new habits without domination, and they were instructed to trust God and Moses all the way. They were thrust to wander in the desert, following a leader who didn't always have the answers. Now, things look bleak, not a new perspective for them. So they feel a bit doubtful, and testy, to say the least.

Fortunately, God had a plan, an answer for them all. He depended on Moses' trust, and we know Moses usually came through to demonstrate that God does provide, be it Manna or a pathway through high water. He had his trusty and mighty staff, which served as a conduit of God's power. And, of course, in the end, God provided the water that the people cried out for. All through our scriptures we read that our prayers are answered. The wilderness stories are useful for us in our hours of adversity. And doubt can be a nasty gnat in our hair during those times. But, the pain is the wilderness, not the doubt.

65 million adults alive in USA have dropped out of active religious attendance and this is a growing number. There is a complexity of reasons for this: Yes, some doubt God, the Bible, doctrines and practices learned from a young age. Some doubt that the body of worship is worthy of trust and support. Many leave because of differences of opinions about how their church should be run, not liking the Pastor or the sermons, or the music, or the painting of the Sanctuary. And, yes, church doesn't fit into the schedules as it once did. Religious identity has weakened for many, but I do not believe this is because people do not have any faith, or that they deny God's existence or an existence of a Supreme Being. My discussions and chats with people reveal that the organized church is the cause of the doubt more than doubting the existence of God. We need to pray for those who have lost faith due to horrendous and relentless pain and suffering. Is God vengeful, is God not listening? Actually, there is little evidence to support the premise that pain and suffering causes a loss of faith. The feeling "lost" is the wilderness that pain affords, and it is critically important that faith communities support those who are in the wilderness of pain. For those who do apparently lose faith during this time, their path back to faith will depend on the miracles that surface from tragedies, which

are found through the acts of good people who act on God's behalf. I tend to think that sometimes the only way to bring out good is to reveal the bad, and that forces the good out of us. Our first hymn assures us that God is listening, in God's own way, and we need trust, that is, have Faith.

Getting back to those of the 65 million who deep down do believe in God, but do not attend church, what is the nature of their doubt? I certainly have had doubts about what I was taught as a youngster, and even as a young adult. That led me doubt my church, my choice of religion. My story can be repeated thousands of times. This is not my faith journey, but my church journey.

When I was in first/second grade, I sat in an immovable desk in a classroom of I'd say, 45-50, taught by a nun who was very nice, who had control over the classroom despite a few hoodlums. She ruled by a ruler. Enough said. I was taught penmanship, reading (John Jean and Judy vs Dick, Jane and Sally), arithmetic, religion. Surely there were more subjects, but it beats me what they were. My take home from those early years were: You have to go to church on Sunday, no ifs and or buts. I dreaded the Monday morning grill of "Did you go to church yesterday?" Occasionally I had to say "no" (I could not lie to a nun) and then got the lecture of there are plenty of families who would be glad to bring me to church and that I should call them and ask. I was 6. The only phone numbers I knew were those of grandparents and Aunt Peg. Another rule was, you cannot go into another church other than Catholic. In fact, if a non-Catholic family friend got married in a non-Catholic Church, you can go to the reception, not the ceremony. I remember, when I was maybe as old as 8, going up to the communion rail and when administered the host, I said "Ahmen" and the Pastor loudly corrected me and shouted "Amen!" So, how did this all affect me? Doubt. I was not particularly smart, nor was precocious. I never envisioned myself being a nun or a holy church lady. I just inwardly shook my head to this, yes, even at age 7,8 and said to myself "what the heck?" "I don't think so." And there is the story about when I was 8, when in the Confessional, I confessed that I committed adultery. (7th commandment, Thou shalt not commit adultery) The priest was very kind and instructive, thank goodness. My penance was not severe.

I moved to Southampton and attended released time catechism or religious ed classes taught by a priest in the town hall. We learned from a catechism, which, I figured out pretty early, was not the same book my non-Catholic friends learned from. Was I superior? Again, my gut said, "I don't think so." I knew there were differences between the two religions, but there were quirks in the Protestant practices also. I remember standing on the top of church hill with Denise Wayne, and she taught me to sing

“Onward Christian Soldiers,” at the top of our lungs, “Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War.” All I envisioned was Joan of Arc burning at the stake... Really? I was more scared than doubtful at that one!

The apex of Catholic belief, occurred in HS when the love of my life was from a very devout Catholic family. I went to church, Religious education classes on Monday nights, I got to take the car, and I sang in folk Mass. As imaginable, this was all about being nearer to him (SMALL H.) In college I stopped attending church. When I was a Senior, Bob and I decided to marry, and this is where it all changed. He came from a family that was “mixed”. His father was Catholic, his mother was Protestant. She converted so they could be married in the church. They remained Catholic for about 10 years. When Bob was a child, the family converted to Protestant as his mother was not happy as a Catholic. So, when I wanted to marry Bob the Protestant, the Pastor of the Catholic church disapproved, not only because Bob was Protestant, but worse! He was a convert! My fiance was the devil himself. The Priest refused to marry us. I dragged my father out of the Rectory before he strangled the Priest and we ended up marrying in another Parish. My father was brought up Catholic, Catholic grammar and HS and one year of Catholic College. His legacy, according to his family, was questioning Priests all the time. Legend has it, my father was asked to leave many a religion class in Catholic HS and College. He had a bad habit of asking the Priests things like “Why did God create sin? Why does God allow children to suffer? Why did God allow free will and create temptation? Is this not a set up, a frame? Why can a woman not be a priest?” My father had faith, he was basically a good guy, but he had a lot of doubts about the religious practices he had been taught from ages 2-20. I maintained faith but believe me, I was really not happy with my Catholic Church. Too many rules to be broken. But that is church, not faith. But, then again, the Catholic church takes a lot of guff, so enough of that.

Getting back to post marriage, my sister-in-law asked me come to this church and I did, and I joined. There were not so many rules. I did the expected things, like being involved in SS, being a Deacon, the Clerk, and when I moved to FL, I felt I had the chops to join another UCC church in Ft. Myers, FL, not as a beginner, but as a leader.

At first, the church I joined was a pretty mainline protestant church, UCC of course. I did not love it at first, but I sought out a UCC church on purpose (few in FL) because I felt there was move to room spiritually due to its more progressive positions on social and cultural mores and less focus on the rules and regulations. But this church was quite traditional, and my faith was not served well in that setting for a while. Over the years I did the things needed to keep an organized church functioning: The Wellness

Committee, I served as a Deacon, Moderator, and of course the By-Laws Revision Committee, and Search Committee, Chair of Personnel. I did my duty, none of which strengthened my faith. The church started to change rapidly in 2015, and my faith took a different tact from then on. For that I thank the new Pastor and numerous retired clergy who assumed educational leadership in our church, and the Clergy Interns from Seminary who served us, also. They asked those of us who were interested, to read, research, question and find answers about faith, beliefs and church. Our retired Pastors and students led us through many discussions through book studies, Lenten series, Sermons, both in person and through zoom. The readings were too numerous to mention, although I referenced one in this bulletin. I have grappled with things that I just don't truly believe in. But it doesn't worry me, now, because I do grapple. I have struggled all my life with faith practices. I have struggled much less with faith itself.

Getting back to one of those books, "Faith After Doubt: Why your beliefs stopped working and what to do about it" by Brian McLaren. I only read this book because he joined us a couple of times in Zoom meetings, so I felt I owed it to him. I didn't feel my faith had ever been lost, but I wanted to see what he had to say. I thought it was a little interesting to see his description of the Stages of Faith.

McLaren approaches the stages of faith in four parts, three of which I understand. First, there is the Dualistic stage. This is the black and white, right and wrong, lessons we learn early on in our spiritual journey. I always had that down: Jesus was born, Jesus preached, his following grew, he was persecuted and died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and our sins were forgiven so we can, by following his teachings and loving God, be eligible to enter heaven. No matter what. **Simplicity.** Life is war; I belong to the right group; God is Supreme, Almighty, Patriarchal. What do our authority figures say? Listen to them. Be willing to sacrifice. Lots of rules. Unfortunately, with so many rules, we are very susceptible to failure at every turn, and this belief tactic can foster narrow-mindedness and being judgmental. Doubt is seen as failure and weakness and our faith was about assenting to required beliefs. Now, depending which faith tract and faith culture one subscribes to, the degree of these characteristics varies. This is a generality and tends to reflect the most conservative churches or faith communities.

Enter stage two: **Complexity: pragmatism enters in.** This can come as early as teen years, or in early adulthood, or should be say, the years of rebellion. There is a belief that anything is possible: we set goals and we achieve them. As we learn more Bible stories we perhaps start to raise our eyebrows, and there is an increasing independence. God wants us to succeed, help is available (Clergy, SS Teachers, School Teachers, Scout Leaders, Coaches) The pragmatism, or leaning toward facts rather than faith starts to

etch away at the firm holding on to that which were originally taught, however. Sound like young adulthood?

Next stage, stage 3 is **Perplexity**. The era of critical thought and relativism, which infers that there no absolute truth. There are a lot of ways to look at a situation, different interpretations, viewpoints. There is a need for fairness and facing inconvenient truths. Here, God is a mystery. And there is a need to sift out bias and agenda. The big mistake is not asking the questions, not challenging the status quo. The danger here is that one tends to be aloof, uncommitted, cynical and suspicious, even elitist. It's easy to be depressed. But here, doubt is a virtue to be cultivated. Faith could bean obstacle to critical thinking. This can be a fruitful phase, or a critical phase depending on choices. I fear that many people who have walked away from faith have done so when in or about at this stage. Without guidance, determination to seek answers and understanding, one could wallow in the negativity that this stage brings about. How do we reach those people and help? And can we move them on from this stage? I think so.

McLaren goes on to describe the 4th stage which is called **Harmony**. In this stage we are inclusive and transcending, whole. We recognize the importance of contribution, compassion, and seeking the common good. **We** are the fallible leaders (insinuating no organized church.) Life is a mysterious gift. God is a loving presence; the creative wisdom and we know God through our own existence and metaphor. We have a wide circle of compassion, drawing on past learning and we are capable of depth. Everything belongs, fits, and is connected. All life is sacred. Doubt is a necessary part of life, a portal from one stage to another. Faith is humble, reverent and open. A mystery of expression, Non-discriminatory love. Emerging wholeness, transformative faith through love.

Frankly, when I have read about the new “church less church”, or “Church 3.0” in other books like Beyond Resistance by John Dorhauer, I understood the principles, but not the road map. Likewise, in stage 4 of McLaren, I get the goal of reaching Nirvana, but how does one become a Mystic, as it appears, one nearly needs to be? None the less, the description of the first 3 stages have helped me to understand not only how religious practices shape us, but more importantly, how and why some people jump off and cannot find an on ramp to return.

In short, I feel revived as I was encouraged to doubt during my last several years, but also encouraged to figure out what I believe in, not told what to believe.

When I think of what has happened in our world since the 1960's it is astounding: communication technology, travel, space exploration, so much would be unrecognizable

if we saw the world from a 1980's lens, forget 1960. My kids and grandkids prefer I text rather than call. Gone is the jacket and tie, high heels and dress when we board a plane (thank goodness because I recently slept in the Denver airport!) I have written an essay for a class on my phone, I shocked myself. And is the world going to hell in a hand-basket as my mother often predicted? I don't think so. God is with us. When I see the pictures from the distance, of galaxies, of the Karina nebula which shows 100s of new stars that we hadn't seen before, I am in awe. And that pictures are from 7600 light years away is totally mind blowing. The other day, as I sat among 3 fun people in Tucson Arizona, I asked the big "what do you believe in?" A former Catholic said she saw no reason to believe in a God. Another former Catholic relayed the story that while she believes in God she tends to put more faith in the Blessed Virgin Mary. The answer that took me totally by surprise was that of my husband, Bob. You know you never see him in a house of worship unless its a wedding, funeral or Bar Mitzvah. I never point blank asked him about belief just because. I always knew he had no use for organized religion I know how he lives his life, his values, his generosity and acceptance of differences. In any case, he looked at the non-believer and said, "When I see images of distant constellations, light years away, read about the big bang, black holes I know there is something bigger at the start of all this. Why not God?"

My simplistic take-away is that growth, spiritual or human, is a lifelong journey. But remember, all who wander are not lost. There is always room for doubt, and it is not to be feared. The concern is wallowing in doubt, letting faith go dormant, without effort to learn more, ask the tough questions, discuss the issues, read various viewpoints, among ourselves and our spiritual leaders. Rabbi Steven Wernick, Senior Rabbi of the Beth Tzedec Centre for Spiritual Well-being in Toronto advises:

'Why would we think that our relationship with God, the Master of the Universe, would not be challenging? It is very challenging, because it matters so much. The people who engage in the struggle, those who acknowledge and face their doubts, are the ones who have true religion and faith.'

I have no doubt.