

Today is the 4th Sunday in Lent. In these forty days of Lent, we, the followers of Jesus Christ at Kona United Methodist Church, imagine ourselves being with Jesus in the wilderness. So far, we have had the wilderness time in this season of Lent as a time of learning, a time of challenge, and a time of dependence. Today, we will have wilderness time as a time of doubt.

In wilderness time, just about everything is tested and called into question. Doubt is often part of the experience. Our cry in the wilderness is often the cry of the father in today's scripture, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24b). The cry of that father seeking healing for his son was not the first such cry, nor would it be the last. People of faith down through the ages—including the greatest Christian leaders—have experienced doubt in the wilderness time.

Unfortunately, we in the church have often dismissed or discounted doubts as the products of an immature faith, although sitting in any congregation on any Sunday morning are many people who hold unresolved issues of faith and belief. It is critically important that the church be a safe place where these doubts can be raised without the questioner being made to feel like a second-class Christian!

The important truth is that doubt is a part of our faith journey. Most Christians experience it at one time or another—especially in the wilderness times. Some Christians experience it a number of times throughout their lives. Doubt is part of the Christian's journey, but doubt is not a good destination—any more than the wilderness is a good destination. It is not intended to be a stopping place.

Doubt calls us to action. It moves us on and moves us forward. There is a big difference between doubting and giving up. There is an immense difference between wrestling with faith and throwing it to the side. There is a big difference between moving through doubt and getting stuck there and becoming a cynic. The healthy way of understanding doubt is to understand it as part of the faith journey. **The key to doubt being a journey and not a destination is caring about God and wanting to move to faith by saying, "I believe. Help my unbelief."**

The good news is that the doubt we experience in the wilderness times can actually be beneficial to us because doubt stimulates us and spurs us on to faith. Frederick

Buechner in his book “Wishful Thinking” stated that “If you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”¹ Interestingly, God’s most faithful servants have usually also been among the most doubtful.

We tend to think of doubt as the opposite of faith, but in reality, apathy or staunch disbelief is the opposite of faith. Paul Tillich, a German-American Christian theologian, defined faith as “the state of being ultimately concerned.” In other words, what we are most concerned about is what we really have faith in. We are called to be ultimately concerned with God—to have faith and trust in God. The opposite of being ultimately concerned is not caring at all. If I am ultimately concerned about God and my life in God, then my doubt will not destroy my faith, but deepen my concern and spur me on to resolve it.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a part of faith. If we look at the lives of those we consider most faith-filled down through the ages, it would be difficult to conclude that doubt is destructive of faith and is something to be avoided. Rather, we would have to conclude that one of the marks of a strong faith is a struggle with doubt. Perhaps that struggle is essential to a strong mature faith in the same way the struggle of a butterfly emerging from a cocoon is essential to the strength of the new creature.

So, if doubt is a part of the wilderness experience, what do we do with our doubts? First of all, we should not suppress them. Authentic faith begins with intellectual honesty, and doubt is the foundation of honesty. Ask the questions and continue to search. Don’t let your doubts stop up the channels to God. Let doubts open the channels in new ways with new insights and new understandings. Pray to God, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.”

Second, we should stay involved with other Christians. We could learn a lesson here from the disciple Thomas, who voiced his serious doubts and yet continued to remain in the company of the other disciples as he worked through those doubts. Group support and sharing is a powerful way we can share our burdens and find support for moving through the periods of doubt.

Third, we should continue to seek Christ and faith in Christ. The issue for us is never, therefore, one of avoiding our doubts as if that will cure us of them. Rather,

¹ Buechner, F. (1987). *Wishful Thinking*. New York, NY: Harper & Row. p. 20.

it is continuing in honest relationship to God. The prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God, says, “When you search for me, you will find me” (Jeremiah 29:13). Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matthew 7:7). When we do these things, our periods of doubts and questions can lead us to faith.

In the early days of John Wesley’s ministry, when he was experiencing a particularly difficult time of doubts and uncertainties, he went to his Moravian friend Peter Bohler and laid his soul bare. Bohler told Wesley, “Preach faith until you have it, and then because you have it you will preach faith.” In other words, act as though we have already moved past doubt to faith; then, as we act in faith, faith will come. Let us befriend with our doubt and let it move us toward God today. Amen.