



“Living in the Shadows: Doubt”

Exodus 17:1-7

March 24, 2019

In the summer of 2006, just a few months into our dating relationship, Sara and I took a road trip together from Atlanta to Tucson, Arizona, a journey of 1,700 miles. We loaded the car with tents and supplies and left before sunrise on a Monday morning, driving thirteen hours to Fort Worth on the first day. The second day took us to Carlsbad, New Mexico but on day three, we moved a bit slower, and by dinnertime, we were somewhere in western New Mexico or eastern Arizona. We had not seen a town for some time and were on the lookout for a place to camp, or eat, or both. Finally, we drove by a general store, part hardware, some groceries, live bait, and bullets. When we walked into that tiny store and the screen door slammed behind us, four sets of eyes turned our way. We were still squinting from the bright desert sun when the man behind the counter spoke up, “Are you lost?” he asked. “Well, yes and no,” I lied, “we are looking for a campground near here.” The man looked at his friends and chuckled, then explained that there was nothing like a campground we might have in mind, he continued “but you could camp in the wilderness area. It’s about forty miles from here, but (he looked out the window at our Toyota Camry) the road is rough.” Two hours later, just as it was getting dark, Sara and I arrived in the wilderness. Ours was the only car we had seen since the general store. The night was dark and quiet and eerie, as we set up our tents we couldn’t say where we were. Very early the next morning, I stepped out of my tent and looked around. As my eyes adjusted, they took in a vision so beautiful it stole my breath. The sun had just risen over the burnt orange cliffs around us. The sky was impossibly blue. The air was cool and dry. The wonder of it overtook me. I felt somehow much smaller and more fully alive than I had in a long time. An epiphany. It occurred to me that the wilderness can be a frightening place to lose your way, but is often a wonderful place to find yourself.

So it was for the people of God who wandered aimlessly for forty years in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. The wilderness was not a hospitable home. Food and water were scarce and often came only by miracles. The people were weak, weary, afraid, and frustrated.

And then they came to Rephidim, deep in the wilderness—a place which shows up on no maps. They were nowhere. And, in the middle of nowhere, they set up camp. And, there was no water. And the people were not pleased. They were filled with fear and doubt. Fear for their lives. Doubt in their leader’s ability to provide. “Did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us?” In the middle of the wilderness, overcome by doubt and fear, the question makes a lot of sense.

The people cry out to Moses. He hears their demand for water, but he turns the frustration back on to the people. “Why are you arguing with me?” he asks. “Why are you testing God?” Moses sees that the need for food and water reveals a deeper necessity. Beyond the physical needs, there is a crisis of faith. Is God really there? Can God really do something?

The people cry out to Moses. Moses cries out to God. And then, for the first time in the wilderness of Rephidim, God shows up. No anger or frustration; just a simple order. “Go on ahead of the people. There you will find me waiting. The people may doubt my presence here, but I’ll be there. Strike that rock and water will come out and the people can drink.” Though this morning’s story does not record it, we know that water flowed from the rock of Horeb and the people’s thirst was quenched. It is a powerful story, repeated several times in the book of Exodus, of God’s provision, mercy, and compassion.

But before the journey continues, Moses does one more thing. It is this final act in the wilderness of Rephidim that caught my eye this time. He names the place where this episode occurred. He calls the place Massah, which means testing, and Meribah, which means quarreling. No doubt this was an accurate name, but why name it all? Moses insists that the people of God remember this place where they put God to the test, where they doubted, where they asked, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

It is a good question to ask in the middle of the wilderness. It is an understandable response to our experiences of emptiness and of God’s apparent absence. How many of us have raised our voices in the wilderness, crying out to God even while doubting God’s ability or willingness to

respond—posting letters to a non-existent address, as CS Lewis wrote? When we are in the wilderness, the power of doubt is present and tangible, while the power of God is distant and vague. Which of us has not been in the place of the Israelites this morning, questioning God when all seems most hopeless? Which of us has not been overcome by the shadow of doubt?

Though it may surprise some of you, I want to say a word in praise of doubt this morning, a word rooted in the message of this story. I believe that the experience at Rephidim, preserved by the community of faith for generations, was a critical moment in the life of God's people. I believe that in the wilderness of doubt, the people found themselves. I also believe that doubt can have the same effect on us if we have the courage to remember.

The writer and theologian, Philip Yancey has a great deal to say about the power of doubt. He writes, "I'm an advocate of doubt because that's why I became a Christian in the first place. I'm also impressed that the Bible includes so many examples of doubt. Evidently, God has more tolerance for doubt than most churches. I want to encourage those who doubt, and also encourage the church to be a place that rewards rather than punishes honesty."

Yancey continues, "As a child, I attended a church that had little room for inquisitiveness. If you doubted or questioned, you sinned. I learned to conform, as you must in a church like that. Meanwhile, those deep doubts, those deep questions, didn't get answered in a satisfactory way. The danger of such a church like that—and there are many—is that by saying, "Don't doubt, just believe," you don't really resolve the doubts. They tend to resurface in a more toxic form. Inquisitiveness and questioning are inevitable parts of the life of faith." Inevitable, yes. And, I believe, filled with potential for revelation. In the Gospels, Jesus himself experiences moments of doubt—according to Mark his final words from the cross were these: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words of doubt reveal a deep relationship, "My God," Jesus cries even in the midst of his darkest hour. Of that moment, Fredrick Buechner writes, "I think he had looked into the abyss itself and found there a darkness that spiritually, viscerally, totally engulfed him. I think God allows that kind of darkness to happen only to God's saints. The rest of us aren't up to doubting that way — or maybe believing that way either."

Still, for all of us, it is true. A faith that does not question is a faith that does not deepen over time. A church that stamps out all uncertainty with pedantic and simplistic

answers is one that seeks sycophants and not disciples. I love what the theologian Paul Tillich wrote late in his life, "Sometimes I think it is my mission to bring faith to the faithless and doubt to the faithful."

Is this Lord among us or not? The question is as current as the latest family devastated by senseless violence, as personal as our most intimate prayers of desperation, as universal as the experience of God's absence. Each of us faces the question in our own wilderness moments. Is God really with me? Is God's love strong enough? Is God's grace persistent enough? Is the Lord among us or not? Whatever it is that causes you to ask these questions, please hear this—you are not alone. Your faith is not weak. Your doubts are not an offense to God's sovereignty or a rejection of God's love.

The truth of life on this side of eternity is this: we will never experience faith that is utterly beyond the shadow of doubt. There will always be questions that fill our minds, and moments that test our trust. That's because faith is a relationship, and like all relationships, contains uncertainty, periods of struggle, and moments of doubt. In the wilderness of doubt, you may lose your way, but you can also find yourself. When we have the courage to doubt, we acknowledge that true faith is not about our effort but God's embrace of our humanity. All of our humanity. The Israelites remembered their struggle with faith because through it they found their identity as God's beloved children, they discovered their total reliance on God's providence, they awoke to God's reassuring presence even when vision is blurry. Like all virtues, our trust in God grows strong when it is put to the test. We discover our true identity when we stumble through the darkness together until the sun rises and points the way home. And so, my sisters and brothers, doubters are welcome on the journey to the cross.

ⁱ <http://www.philipyaney.com/q-and-a-topics/faith-and-doubt>