

DOUBT AT CHRISTMAS
Third Sunday Advent –December 11, 2011 –John 14: 1-6 and 20: 24-31
The Church of the Covenant

There may have been angels all around the manger that first Christmas, but there may have been some doubt as well. Mary is informed that she will conceive and bear a Son and that His name will be Jesus. She “ponders” these things in her heart. What is pondering if it is not on some level doubt? Joseph is told his betrothed is with child of the Holy Spirit. You mean to tell me there wasn’t a bit of doubt associated with that birth announcement? The shepherds are out in the fields minding their own business when a vast array of angels appears to them and they “make haste to go over to Bethlehem to see this great thing which has been made known to them”. Do you think they immediately believed everything they heard or do you think they needed to see in order to believe? The wise men traversed afar; they were not necessarily people of faith; they were stargazers; they were the astrophysicists of their day; they didn’t see the world through the eyes of faith; they saw the world through the eyes of astrology. They left their contemplation and traveled in order to see for themselves. And at the manger’s side they were transformed from doubting astrologers to believers in the miracles of God. And they bowed down and worshipped HIM! To be sure there was great faith surrounding the manger; but there was also doubt surrounding the manger. There was doubt that first Christmas and somehow I suspect there is doubt this Christmas...

Sometimes doubt is the result of scientific skepticism, as in, prove to me the virgin birth. I wish I could but I cannot. Sometimes doubt is the byproduct of a life who has been battered and bruised by circumstance. Sometimes doubt is the result of frustration with the church, the imperfect church filled with imperfect people but always pointing to a perfect God. Sometimes doubt is the result of reaction against the faith of others, parents or an abusive judgmental pastor. But may I say as a pastor it has been my observation over the years that doubt is often a prelude to a deeper level of faith, not its antithesis. That doubt is often the way God stirs up people and leads them to Bethlehem...like Mary and Joseph ...like shepherds...like wise men before them...Maybe as you approach Christmas this year you have some doubts, some reservations, even some feelings of “whatever” where it pertains to Christmas. So what might move you from doubt to faith this Christmas?????? Come to Bethlehem and see...

I have selected the rather strange Bible passages relating to the Apostle Thomas as my scripture on this third Sunday of Advent. They are familiar but perhaps they are not familiarly used in relation to the Christmas story. Jesus is speaking about coming to God. Thomas says he doesn’t know the way; he says “*how can we know the way?*” (John 14: 5) To which Jesus replies: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me.*” (John 14: 6) Thomas asks a directional question –give me a roadmap of how to get to heaven. Jesus answers with a truth, faith and belief answer –I am the way and the truth and the life. And if God is the ultimate truth then the very thing which all of science and philosophy and the intellectual pursuit of truth is pointed toward, then Jesus is saying, I am the way to discover that ultimate truth. And no one gets to that point but by me. No one gets to Bethlehem but that I lead them there. No one gets to that point of bowing down finally and fully in the light of the truth of the Star of Bethlehem and in the presence of the One born in a manger but that they get there by God Himself. **God alone leads us to the ultimate truth, which is God. Our brain, by itself and apart from God, cannot get us to God.** Now skeptics tend to be very smart people. And here is a place where their intelligence actually gets them farther away from truth rather than nearer to it. Because my other observation as a pastor is that their skepticism and their aloofness in their embrace of God actually only produces more skepticism, not their stated desire of discovery of the truth. **Skepticism begets more skepticism. Faith begets truth.** Has skepticism ever gotten someone to ultimate truth? Show me that

please and I will become a skeptic. Prove to me that and I will not believe. One begins the trek to truth by bowing down at the manger's side in Bethlehem; one begins to understand the deepest mysteries in life by allowing God to lead us to the truth. Wise men figured that out at the manger.

Then there is the moment that "Doubting Thomas" becomes "Believing Thomas". It is right after Jesus is resurrected from the dead. And Thomas declares, *"Unless I see in (Jesus') hands the print of the nails...and place my hand in His side, I will not believe."* (John 20: 25) Personally, I think Thomas' doubt is the product of the brutal events of Calvary; the dashing of dreams when his Master is brutally killed and when his hopes that Jesus is indeed the Messiah die on the cross on Good Friday. The killing of one's dreams is often the source of doubt. He had believed almost completely in Jesus but now he was harmed by his trust. Eight days later Thomas has a direct encounter with the risen Lord and Jesus asks him to place his hand in His wounded side. Thomas does so and then declares a great and glorious statement of faith. He who was skeptical and unbelieving declares: *"My Lord and my God!"* (v. 28) He declares not only that Jesus is indeed his Lord but he declares in that moment that his Lord and Master is indeed very God of very God. Jesus as God has lead Thomas to God and in that moment Thomas believes. Thomas' skepticism, Thomas' doubt, becomes belief when he sees and when he touches, when what was a matter of something in his brain becomes something tangible and touchable and real.

The incarnation is God's offer at Christmas to come to Bethlehem and to touch and to see the face of God. The INCARNATION means that God has become the touchable God in the manger. He is "Emmanuel"; He is "God with us". He becomes real and present, touchable and tangible, capable of being seen and known and experienced in Bethlehem. "Unless I place my hands on this Christ Child I will not believe", a skeptic may say. "Unless I cradle the Son of God in my own hands I will not believe", someone may assert. Well then, do it. Come to Bethlehem and see...for yourself. Open your eyes to see God's hand at work all around you this Christmas. Reach out and touch the touchable God. Experience in a first hand way the living presence of the One born in a manger. No, no, no, I'm going to be skeptical. I'm going to keep asserting my disbelief. I'm going to keep the Christ Child at a careful mental distance away from my heart. Because I am afraid that if I allow Him to touch me, if I really do go to Bethlehem to see this great thing which God has done, if I really do embrace this Child, that I might just have to really believe in Him, I might wind up falling down in front of Him and worshipping Him. I might really come in contact with the One who is the WAY...(the pathway to ultimate truth) and who is the TRUTH (the One who IS the ultimate Truth) and who is the LIFE (whom to embrace and believe in is the truest life we have all been seeking). In coming to Bethlehem, in touching the touchable God, I might just have to come to the Father, as well.

Seeing is believing. But you have to come to Bethlehem in order to see. And then may I say that believing is seeing. The more we see the more we believe. But the more we believe the more we see. And that is why Jesus ends His exchange with the now believing Thomas by saying –*"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."* (John 20: 29)

My wish for you this Christmas is that indeed you will come to Bethlehem and see...that you will come and touch the touchable God born just for you this Christmas...and that seeing and touching...you will fall down like the skeptical wise men of old...like the simple shepherds who doubted...like Mary the Mother of Jesus who pondered...you will fall down and worship Him...and like the doubting Thomas who became the believing Thomas you will declare –*"MY LORD AND MY GOD!"* this Christmas! Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*