

Sermon 022617 Doubt
Scripture Deuteronomy 6: 4-9
Sermon Title Angry at God?

If you consider yourself a religiously committed person, if your faith in God is an important part of who you are, is it ever acceptable for you to doubt God? Do you violate your own understanding of what it means to be a person of faith if sometimes you are not sure there is a God? Can you permit yourself to wonder if the words attributed to God in the Bible actually happened? How about that Creation story of God creating the world in six days?

I've been over this territory before but in different ways. I believe that it is not only permissible but a religious obligation to question the existence of God. If you are troubled by what you might have been taught or are not so certain about things you had been certain about regarding God, then I say go on and search for answers to your questions.

The only religiously unacceptable response, in my view, is to reject religion entirely and close your mind to further speculation. I can't believe that God would bless us with critical intelligence, and areas like Science and History, then say to us, "Stop, go no further" when it comes to Theology. For me, the alternative to faith is not doubt but despair- the conclusion that we are alone in a cold and unreliable world.

To me, faith in God is like a strong marriage, which is faith in another person. It is a rock-solid commitment to giving God the benefit of the doubt, not because God needs it (I think God could get along without us if God had to) but because we need it. I believe in the reality of God, not because logic demands it or any persuasive argument. I believe because how I live my life takes on an additional dimension when God is in it. Joys become more significant and disappointments become more bearable with God in my life.

It's the same way that an intellectually honest scientist must be prepared to revise and, if necessary, discard his or her most cherished theories in the face of new information. My faith is the cornerstone of my life, but I am prepared to admit there are limits to my understanding of who God is and what God stands for.

In the same way, when scientific developments conflict with Biblical assertions, I modify my understanding of and acceptance of them accordingly. You see, this is what is called a living faith. Faith, in my view dies when one sets their list of beliefs and just clings onto them for the rest of his or her life. To doubt, to struggle, is to keep your faith alive, warm, and strong. I'm not saying that it is easy, I'm saying it is worth it.

There is no better example of doubt of God than Jesus himself. Look at the garden story then the cross.

One of my favorite questioning God stories may or may not be true, but it has been handed down. A Roman Catholic Priest was troubled by the elevation to sainthood by a Renaissance Pope who was a notorious fornicator and plunderer of church funds. Asked if he didn't believe God had the power to utilize flawed instruments for God's purposes. The priest replied, "It's not God's power I'm questioning, It's God's taste."

Doubts about God need not be seen as lapses of faith. They can be seen as manifestations of faith. It is about caring enough to be troubled by life's unevenness.

In much the same way, anger at God for the unfair things that happen in life, anger at the world for all the unfairness that sustains it, anger at what some people are able to get away with, need not be seen as a rejection of religious teaching.

This is anecdotal, but I think I'm right on this point. It is a major difference between Jews and their relationship with God, and Christians and their relationship with God.

Jews are very comfortable being angry with God. All you have to do is read the Psalms to see this. Seemingly half the Psalms start out with some angry declaration to God. For example, Psalm 60: 1 reads, "O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses, you have been angry; now restore us."

A favorite example is from a favorite Broadway show, *Fiddler on the Roof*. At the end of Act 1, Tevye's oldest daughter's wedding reception is ruined by a pogrom by local anti-Jewish troublemakers. They overturn tables, take food, and ruin some of the nicest gifts. Tevye's wordless response is to shake his fist at God in exasperation.

I can't imagine a Christian shaking a fist at God, or saying what we heard in Psalm 60. Why? There are, I think, a number of possible reasons. I'll list a few here.

- There is the idea that God is all powerful and if you tried to take on God, God will smite you, or at least find a way to punish you
- There is the idea that God has a plan and we are merely acting out that plan so God cannot be questioned
- There is the idea that God is all good so even if we don't understand what is happening, we shouldn't question it

There are plenty more, but let's move on to what Christians might and often do say. I have heard many times, "Why is God letting this happen?" or "Why is God doing this to me/us?" So, instead of an angry word or gesture, Christians settle for a miserable whine.

My favorite Rabbi, Harold Kushner, tells the story of a terrible tragedy that happened at the Jewish summer camp his

grandchildren attend. A group of 15-year-old boys went on a whitewater rafting at the beginning of the summer. The boys looked forward to it because it had the whiff of danger.

Psychologists have learned that if you don't find a slightly dangerous thing for adolescent boys to do, they will find risky behavior on their own.

Well, there was a terrible mishap and a boy drowned. They called Rabbi Kushner in to spend time with the campers and counselors. He knew that adolescents respond differently than adults and younger children to misfortune. Adults get sad; adolescents feel angry. He knew he needed to deal with the anger first.

He had them open their Bibles to the beginning of the Book of Deuteronomy to the scene where Moses is angry with God. Moses had served God faithfully and courageously and God informed Moses that his people would make it to the promised land but he would not. By showing his anger to God, he was giving his people permission to be angry with God, too.

Then, Moses shared with his people one of the most beloved passages in all of Scripture by both Jews and Christians alike. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with

all your soul, with all your might.” Of course, it is the first half of the Greatest Commandment from Jesus.

By the way, regarding this famous passage from Deuteronomy, if you ever cross a threshold of a Jewish home, you will see a small object high up on the doorframe. It is called a mezuzah. It contains that beautiful passage and is touched by the people as they enter and leave the home.

The idea is to leave anger outside and enter with love and peace in your heart. They also touch it leaving for the same reason. This passage is used as an antidote for anger.

Rabbi Kushner then gave the campers permission to be angry with God. He told them God would not punish them for being mad with God. You know why? Because God is on their side. God is just as angry and upset about what happened to the boy as they are. He said God didn't make that happen. Why would God do that? It was nature, and a lot of bad things lining up for a terrible accident to happen.

So, my Christian friends, I certainly do not hold myself as an authority such as Moses, or even Rabbi Kushner. But, as your Pastor, I give you permission to get angry at God. Trust me, God can handle it. I go back to the strong marriage that we spoke of earlier. We have many strong and long standing marriages in our

church. Meg and I are getting there. Our next anniversary will put us in double figures.

Strong, loving marriages... ask any of them if they've ever been angry at each other. Because they have faith in each other and what they have together, they survive anger. So too, is it with God.

Accepting anger, ours and that of those people close to us, has to be part of any authentic relationship. The opposite of authentic love, wholehearted love, is not anger but pretense, censoring our feelings. I don't believe God would be fooled by that. God will accept our anger, justified or not, so that we can then go on to love God.

So, go ahead and doubt God and get angry with God but when all is said and done, hold in your hearts the words of Deuteronomy "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, with all your might." AMEN