

Life is full of uncertainties... Doubts, Fears, suspicions, misgivings, we all feel them every once and a while. How many times in our own lives do we doubt what we believe? How many times does our logic or reason take over and cause us to wonder if there really is a God? I would be lying if I were to say that I have never had any doubts, or that I have never questioned my faith. In fact, I would guess that most of us have moments of uncertainty from time to time.

When I was studying today's Gospel story, I found myself astonished and amazed by what I read. In fact, I found myself a bit puzzled by John's behavior as he questions whether or not Jesus was the one the people of Israel had been waiting for. Did he forget what he had been preaching in the Wilderness to all those who had come to confess their sins and be baptized? Had he forgotten what he had said about Jesus at the river Jordan? "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one coming after me is more powerful than I." Perhaps he had failed to recall the events that transpired after Jesus had been baptized, when God's kingdom opened in the sky, God's spirit descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaimed, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

So, what is it that causes John to doubt? What causes him to have a change of heart? This week's story is a complete contrast from last week's. Last Sunday John seemed so sure of himself as he was preaching for the people to repent and prepare the way of the Lord. In today's story, however, John is in prison and therefore sends his disciples to ask Jesus a question about his identity. "Was Jesus the one, or were they to wait for another?" I believe that a similar question has been asked over and over again by countless people in the world since that day. Was Jesus the one? Was he truly the Messiah, the savior of the world?

It doesn't take much for us to figure out why John is experiencing a bit of hesitation and disbelief. He has been imprisoned and will soon be executed by political powers. Can we blame him for his doubts? Imagine John sitting in his

prison cell, staring at the four walls that kept him from being free. He could no longer look upon the familiar landmarks of the country he loved. He was cut off from his friends. He was disconnected from his community, and was stranded in a place of uncertainty. Behind jail bars all John could really do is daydream about the past and the days in the wilderness when every word he spoke conveyed certainty and assurance. But those days appeared to be over, for how could John proclaim the power of the coming Messiah to bring in a new age, when he is sitting in prison? How do we proclaim Jesus as Messiah and Lord when miracles are not coming our way?

When things are going well in our lives, and we have all that we could ever desire, it can be easy to have faith in God and to give thanks for his many blessings. It can be easy during the happy times, the joyful times, to believe that God is with us. And Yet, when things get tough, or when life throws something bad our way, it can be just as easy for us to doubt our faith and question if there really is a God! The bad things can also cause us to have doubts about who Jesus really was.

This is what seems to have happened to John in today's story. Last week things were going well for him, his life was at an all-time high. Crowds of people were coming to hear him preach and were responding to his message of repentance by being baptized. This week, however, John has been imprisoned by Herod and his life is at an all time low. While he is in prison, John begins to have doubts. He becomes focused and concerned with what wasn't happening...with what Jesus hadn't done. The people of Jerusalem had not yet been freed from the oppression of the Roman Empire. The kingdom of Israel had not yet been restored to power. Their enemies had not yet been judged and justice had not yet prevailed.

Like John, I am fairly convinced that most of us, if not all of us, have had times when we have questioned our faith in Jesus. Typically, this occurs when we

are overly focused on what isn't happening in our lives. We picture the glass as half full or half empty because we aren't seeing and hearing how God is breaking into our world. We don't always see the miracles that are happening around us during the rough times. Like John, we take our eyes off Jesus and begin focusing on all the problems that are still there.

The response that Jesus gives John is the key to helping us understand today's story. Notice that Jesus did not answer John's question directly with a yes or a no. Instead, he told John's disciples to Go back and report what they heard and saw taking place. When John had first encountered Jesus, he was certain that Jesus was the one, but since then Jesus hadn't really been living up to John's expectations as to what the Messiah was supposed to bring about. And yet Jesus had been fulfilling prophecies from the Old Testament through his miracles of healing the blind, helping the lame to walk, cleansing the lepers, raising the dead, causing the deaf to hear, and by bringing good news to the poor and the outcasts.

We must remember that there is more to Jesus than the miracles and deeds that he performed. His words, the things he spoke about and preached about are also just as important! When Jesus sends his disciples out to evangelize he tells them, "If any will not welcome you, or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town" Chapters five through seven of Matthew's Gospel are concerned with the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In chapter 10, Jesus gives the disciples the same words that John the Baptist had been preaching in the wilderness. Jesus tells them to proclaim, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

Perhaps by concentrating on the deeds of Jesus, John's doubts may have arisen because Jesus –the more powerful one- hadn't released him from prison or saved him from persecution (and eventual execution). Yet, the words of Jesus are clear that arrests and persecution will happen to his followers. I would imagine

that if John had witnessed Jesus' ,crucifixion, death, and resurrection, he would have realized that Jesus had in fact saved him.

We, too, have to deal with the fact that Jesus doesn't often rescue us from our difficulties or at least in ways that we can understand. We can ask, "If Jesus is so powerful, why is my loved one still suffering from an illness? If Jesus is so powerful, why didn't he save my friend from that car accident?" "If Jesus is so powerful, why am I still struggling to find a job so I can provide for my family? We, like John, can find it easy to question and doubt Jesus when he doesn't save us (or even others) from our problems.

By concentrating on or only looking for Jesus' deeds, we may fail to notice the ways in which Jesus does in fact rescue us from our difficulties. Although it has taken a while, and also some prayer and help from God's spirit, as I look back at my wife leaving me almost a year ago, I can see that Jesus was there helping me through it, in a lot of miraculous and wonderful ways. And often times it was through the support and kind words of the people that God has placed into my life, especially you much church family.

In today's story Jesus is telling John's disciples that the Kingdom of God is breaking into the world. He demonstrates to them what God's Kingdom is all about through both his words and his deeds. We are to love one another, we are to have faith in Christ Jesus, and as we learned last week, we are to repent and accept his call to change both our hearts and our minds.

Is Jesus the one who is to come, or should we look for another? John's question is not answered with a simple "yes" or "no". The answer can only come from faith. Jesus points out to John's disciples that it is not John's deeds the people go out to see –how he is shaken by the wind or what clothes he has put on, but to hear his words. To hear his prophecies. Jesus assures them that he is the one whom John is sent as a messenger ahead of, the one who prepared the way.

So, will we believe in our hearts the reports given to us from the Gospels? Will we believe in our hearts and in our lives Jesus' call to continue his work on earth? How do we through our words and actions reveal what is in our hearts? I believe this is done by trusting and believing in God no matter how hard things get, and to always remember that God loves us. Our faith in him should not just be based on how we perceive God working in our lives, but should also come from listening to his Word of promise given to us in Scripture. And in this Advent season we hear that promise proclaimed loud and clear in the coming of our Savior, our Redeemer, our Christ. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.