

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “Righteous Doubts”

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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

*15 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’<sup>2</sup> But Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’<sup>3</sup> And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’<sup>4</sup> But the word of the LORD came to him, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’<sup>5</sup> He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’<sup>6</sup> And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

*7 Then he said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.’<sup>8</sup> But he said, ‘O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’<sup>9</sup> He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.’<sup>10</sup> He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.<sup>11</sup> And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.*

*12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.*

*17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.<sup>18</sup> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.*

Currently, director James Cameron is in the news for his Academy Award nominated picture *Avatar*. But in my sermon notes this week I found a headline from three years ago with Cameron again prominently mentioned again. Do you remember? I had almost forgotten. No, it wasn't the movie *Titanic*! In 2007, Cameron had produced a controversial show that was aired on *The Discovery Channel* entitled, “The Last Tomb of Jesus.” The show claims that the bones of Jesus and his family had been discovered in a box in a suburb of Jerusalem over 25 years earlier. The claim, and the television program made the cover of *Time* magazine. The claim, and the television program sent shock waves into leaders of Christianity. Many feared the discovery would challenge the centuries' old orthodox view that Jesus body spent three days at the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem's old city before he was resurrected and then later bodily ascended into heaven. Some were afraid that such evidence would create a doubt or two about the tenets of Biblical faith and early Christian belief. When it comes to faith, people want to embrace certainties, things

upon which they can build a framework of belief. Cameron and his crew were lambasted for producing something that carried the potential to destroy faith.

Although I did not buy into the importance of the discovery, I was excited about the discussion of things in which we believe. I think it is a good thing to contemplate that which we hold as truth, to understand why we believe and what belief means, rather than simply accept it without thought. Three short years later I searched the web for anything about "The Last Tomb of Jesus," and found mostly articles three years old promoting the television show or disputing the scientific evidence of the finding. James Cameron has moved on to *Avatar*. And in a few weeks we will still celebrate the resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

There is an old story about a mother who always disciplined her children whenever they tossed their hats upon a bed. It seemed like such a small, silly rule to be enforced so strictly. Finally one of the kids got up enough courage to ask her, "Why is keeping our hats off the bed such a big deal to you?" The mother responded that her own mother never allowed hats to be put on the bed and she thought it was an important rule to be continued. One day the children's grandmother was visiting. The kids decided to take advantage of the moment and asked her, "Why did you make such a fuss about people throwing their hats upon the bed?" The grandmother didn't even know what the children were talking about. At that point the mother jumped into the conversation. "Mother, you did make a big deal about leaving hats on the bed. I remember when some neighborhood children came to play and we all tossed our hats on the bed, you told us not to do that and when we did, you grounded us for a week." "Oh," replied the grandmother. "Now I remember. That was because those neighbors usually had lice in their hair. I didn't want it spreading to our house." The mother, who had accepted the rule without questioning, suddenly learned the truth behind the rule.

In the Scripture lesson of this day, God comes to Abram and makes a rather significant promise. Abram is promised a son. From that son would come many descendants, as many as the number of stars in the sky.

It was a rather ridiculous promise. I read this week where Australian astronomers have estimated the number of stars to be 70 sextillion, or a number represented by a 7 followed by 22 zeroes! These same people said that the number is 10 times larger than the number of grains of sand on the beaches of the world. But there was something even more absurd than the vastness of the promise. Sarai, Abram's wife was well past the age of bearing a child. She even laughed at the silliness of the possibility.

Abram was a little more frank and honest in his questioning. He would not hide his doubt under a pious, smiling façade. He protested God's credibility. Stars in the sky offered no real assurance. There was no hard and fast evidence upon which to base belief in such a promise. How could anything so ridiculous be believed? God then directs Abram to follow a ceremony of covenant. In the ancient near east, before the writing of contracts, covenant were sealed by cutting animals in half, spreading the two halves apart, and they walking between them. It might sound very bloody and senseless to us but the animals represented what would happen to the covenant partners if the agreement was broken. In front of Abram, God passes between the pieces as fire, confirming God's commitment to keeping the divine promise.

Abram wasn't the only one in our spiritual family tree to react to God with questions and concerns. Thomas doubted the appearance of the resurrected Jesus because he wasn't there to see it for himself. The girl Mary doubted how a young, poor, unmarried woman from a nowhere place called Nazareth could accomplish the task the angel presented to her. Jeremiah, when asked to be a spokesperson for God, questioned his own credentials saying, "But I am just a kid!" Moses, hiding like a

fugitive in the desert, doubted the mystical call of a burning bush explaining, "I can't go talk to Pharaoh. I'm not so good with words."

Perhaps we have been taught that we are weak of faith when we doubt or question the promise of God or the presence of God in our lives. Those of strong faith seem to always have a robust certainty about things and we might be envious of that. To challenge certain beliefs is an act of considerable courage for it seems to imply that we are feeble in faith, or perhaps something worse—a godless cynic.

Psychologist James Fowler is noted for his study in faith development. He discovered that most people of faith never get much beyond the religious development of their adolescence. Most of us maintain the very same structure of belief and meaning that we had when we were teenagers. Whatever we were taught about God early in our life, that is probably still the basis of what we believe about God today. Fowler writes that to move beyond such an adolescent stage of belief, we must actively question the faith of childhood. We must doubt and wonder and create for ourselves our own religious identity and tools. According to Fowler, doubt is not a loss in faith, but an integral part of a faith journey, a sign that we are in transition toward a more meaningful relationship with God.

Indeed doubt is not the great enemy of faith that some might make it out to be. Scripture tells us that doubt is not the opposite of faith but perhaps a friend to faith. From the communication of his doubt, Abram was able to form a closer relationship with God and to build a stronger faith. From questions came covenant. Through questions, came a more meaningful sense of trust in the present. In questions, came a firmer hope in the future. Scripture teaches us that doubt is not unbelief. Doubt is about confusion and uncertainty. When unbelief says, "I will not believe," doubt says, "I'm not sure what to believe." Doubt is actually then the first step toward belief.

One of my favorite quotes concerning religion comes from theologian Frederick Buechner. Buechner says that "whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, 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." What a powerful and colorful image!

Perhaps Lent is a good time to think about those places of life where God seems absent, those questions to which you have no answers, and those worries of life which never seem to end. Perhaps it is a time not to search for certainty but to admit doubt and to be open to the struggle about those things we believe. Offer doubts to God honestly. Acknowledge ambiguity even as you search for kernels of truth. Doubt within a relationship with God is righteous and probably the best means to keep our faith relevant in a crazy and uncertain world. Doubt is the means by which we can grow closer to God, understanding God's purpose for our lives. Doubt is the means by which God can become more alive, burning through the very path of our daily living.