

Series: **STUCK! Faith Without Traction** - January 9, 2011

STUCK IN DOUBT
John 20:19-29; Mark 9:14-29

1. Some books about God *reek* with over-confidence. On one side, Fundamentalist believers will say that anyone who doubts the existence of God is an idiot...or worse. On the other side, Neo-Atheists would say that anyone who *believes* in God is an idiot...or worse!

-Most people find themselves some where in between. We live in an age of uncertainty. Agnosticism—you *can't* know for sure—it the mantra of our culture. I mean, the evidence **does** go both ways, doesn't it?

-Someone could say, "All you have to do is look at the mountains, the trees, the sky, the sea and the animals—and you *know* that God is real and that He's good!" But, that depends on whether someone you love has been killed by a hurricane, a tsunami, a flood, a blizzard, or a grizzly bear, doesn't it? In his book, *Faith and Doubt*, John Ortberg calls Mother Nature a *dysfunctional parent who keeps sending us mixed messages!*

-So, this morning we're going to talk about doubt—and how we sometimes get stuck there. I know I'll probably raise more questions than I answer—so I would refer you to an excellent book I'm using as the basis for this message: **Faith and Doubt**. By the way—let me state what I believe right up front. I think doubt is a healthy thing. It's *doubt* that helps you be honest, figure out what's real and true—and what's *not* real and true. But for doubt to work the way it should—you need to be able to see where doubt comes from—and *doubt your doubts too!*

-So—what *are* the doubts that people commonly have about faith? Well, they tend to come in the form of both questions and exclamations! Let's just state some of them:

***Does God really exist?**

***Is there life after death?**

***There *can't* be one true religion!**

***How could a good God allow suffering?**

***Will we live forever—or does our candle just go out when we die?**

***Isn't the Bible pretty much just a set of myths and conflicting teachings**

- created by humans to manipulate others?

***Christianity is a strait-jacket!**

***If the church was created by Jesus, how come it's responsible for so much injustice in history?**

***If God is real, how come my prayers go unanswered?**

- a. September 11, 2001—followed by Dan Brown's attack on Orthodox belief in his novel, **The Da Vinci Code** unleashed a whole new brand of *gloves-off* books about the absurdity of faith in God.

The message is that faith in God of any kind is delusional—and is poisoning our world. You have probably heard of some, like **Breaking the Spell** by Daniel Dennett; **The End of Faith** by Sam Harris; **God is Not Great: How Religion**

Poisons Everything by Christopher Hitchens—and, of course, Richard Dawkins book, **The God Delusion**.

- b. Now, these authors aren't struggling with doubt. ***Au contraire!*** They are just as confident as fundamentalist street-corner preacher telling everyone that they're going to hell. But they don't speak for everyone. Others—and you may be one of them—would say, "You know—I'd like to believe in a good God who has a plan for the mess here—but I'm stuck! I just can't believe!"

-My guess is that whatever your level of doubt this morning—you have reasons for it. My intent in this talk—is not to persuade you to believe despite your doubts—but help you doubt ***well***—and find traction to move forward. Is that fair? And then we'll have some Q & A at the end.

2. Maybe the most important thing to understand is that to be human—is to doubt. God is does not write us off or put us on the ***naughty list*** when we doubt. Well-meaning believers sometimes imply that if you doubt, God can't and won't answer your prayers. Biblically, that is ***simply not true!***

-Know why we doubt? God made us with a brain; with the ability to think deeply—reason—and to wonder why things are the way they are. If you and I didn't have the capacity to doubt, we'd be suckers for every sideshow and every Conspiracy Theory that came along. We have been given by God the ability to see through lies, catch inconsistencies. ***Doubt is not a bad thing!*** Even though I've chosen to spend my life as a minister helping other people find faith—I have my doubts! I take great comfort in the fact that every great person of faith—***doubted*** at times!

-By the way, did you know that the Bible says,

Be merciful to those who doubt (Jude 1:22 NIV)

Why? Well, first, the person who wrote this book—**Jude**—was Jesus half brother—and didn't believe in Him until he'd died and risen from the dead. Second—***those who doubt*** includes all of us at some point.

Doubt is a ***good*** thing—because it forces us to investigate—and it forces us to exercise ***faith!***

3. But before we congratulate Dennett, Hitchens and Dawkins--the authors I mentioned earlier—for ridiculing people who believe—let me mention something else. Faith is also ***very*** important! Have you ever met someone who made the comment, "You know, I ***wish*** I could have faith—but I can't. It's just too hard." What they're saying is that there are some people—probably a little on the gullible side--who have faith. And then there are others, like them, who live only by what can be proven; what is logical and reasonable. And that's simply not true. ***Everyone human being, no matter WHO they are, lives by faith! Atheists and theists alike,*** I might add!

-On Christmas Eve, I used the saying, ***Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift—That's why we call it the present.*** The point is--***It is great to be alive!*** Is this true? If you wait until a doctor, or mathematician or

philosopher in logic proves it to be true—you might as well die and get it over with. This is a **core belief**. A core belief is a basic convictions humans pretty much have in common. For example, that children deserve lavish love; that all human beings, no matter what color or gender—are created equal; that inflicting pain and suffering on others is wrong.

-Questions: What is it that makes these core beliefs more than just preferences—as in, “I tea, not coffee? Dogs are good, cats are evil.” None of these core beliefs can be proven scientifically, right—and yet they are common to every human—whether or not they believe in God or in what the Bible has to say about life. One of the reasons I believe what the Bible has to say about life—is that it makes sense of these core beliefs about life, about love, about value, about kindness. At creation, God declared **all** life—good. **Very** good. The Bible also explains why things are **not** always good—creation has been marred by sin.

That’s one way of understanding the way things are. This is the other—based on the tenets of atheism—put into words by Jennifer Hodge in a book called, **A History of Doubt**:

"The universe is nothing but an accidental pile of stuff jostling around with not rhyme or reason, and all life on earth is but a tiny, utterly inconsequential speck of nothing in a corner of space existing in the blink of an eye, never to be judged, noticed or remembered."

-Now, if two people have a conversation, and one says, “I think the universe just happened in some kind of cosmic accident” and the other says, “No, I think it was created by Someone—a personal God—for a reason!”—who has faith? They **both** do—because neither of these positions can be proved one way or another. Both are based on a system of beliefs. **Both are based on faith!**

- a. As you probably know, faith is a **very** important concept in the Bible. The writer of the book of Hebrews talks about faith—that faith is what the ancients were commended for. He then says:

**By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.
(Hebrews 11:3 TNIV)**

-There are two alternatives, aren’t there? Science has proved that there **was** a beginning—a Big Bang of some kind. There are basically two explanations; it just happened, or Someone caused it. We can’t **prove** either scenario; **both** require faith.

-Then this author says:

...Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6 TNIV)

- b. Now, here's the point I'd like to make. Without faith it is not just impossible to please God—it's impossible to please **anyone!**

-How do you make friends without faith—without **trust?** Has anyone here every figured out how to get married without faith? When Lori and I married, I really, really, **really** wanted to marry her! But could I be **absolutely certain** that everything would work out? That she was who I thought she was? I mean, I couldn't interview everyone. I tried with a couple of previous boyfriends—and they wouldn't cooperate. Actually...**not!**

-And having children? That may be the greatest act of faith on the planet. When you see them being born, it's pretty hard to look at that baby and **not** say "Thank you!" to Someone! When they become teens...? Now **that** requires faith! Having or adopting a child takes **faith!**

- c. An early Christian leader, Paul, made another interesting statement about faith. He said,

The righteous will live by faith...(Galatians 3:11 TNIV)

-That's true! But they're not the only ones; the **unrighteous** have to live by faith, too. It's impossible to live meaningfully without some kind of faith!

Will anyone be flying somewhere this week? If you will be, let me show you this video clip:

[video—early flight]

Now, if you'd never flown before—and I showed you this—would you fly? Or if I showed you every episode of the series, **Mayday!** Would you fly? Question—does every flight safely reach it's destination? Flying requires **faith!**

-But, before you freak out—so does everything else. So does driving home from church. Will every person who drives today make it to their destination? Heck, you can choke to death on popcorn at a movie! You can't even take a shower without **some** level of risk! Anyone remember John Glenn—one of the first astronauts, who slipped in the bathtub and almost turned the rest of his life into a **veggie tale?**

-And as long as you have **faith**, you will also have **doubts!** I need a volunteer to illustrate this. Let's say I have a \$10 bill in my hand. Who believes this is true? Why? Okay, I'm going to blow your faith right out of the water...

-Do you understand how I ruined their faith? When you **know** something—faith is useless; unnecessary. You only need faith when you when things are unclear; when you **doubt.** Paul puts it like this:

Now we see things imperfectly as in a cloudy mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and

incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. (1 Corinthians 13:12 NLT)

-Right now, we live at a time when...whoever you are, wherever you are...whatever you believe—or do—takes faith! And faith in what God says is always **rewarded!**

4. Something else about doubt that may surprise you. Doubt can actually lead to stronger faith. See, sometimes when people doubt, they try to muster up something inside that looks, sounds and smells like faith—mainly because they're ashamed of their doubt. And they're afraid God will put them in the penalty box—say, "**Oh, oh, oh—you DOUBTED!** And I was about to answer your prayer! **Too bad for you!** The question is—how **does** God treat doubters?

-One of the oldest books in the Bible, Job, is a book that is **filled** with white-hot doubt. Job is in pain; Job is disillusioned with God—and wonders if maybe God is just torturing him—like a 10 year old boy with an insect. Job is **wallowing** in doubt. But he has three friends who are **very** certain of precisely how God works. When they're done shaking their fingers at him—chiding him for his lack of faith, guess who's in trouble with God? It's the guys who were so **certain** of how things work. But God affirms Job—with all his doubts and questions.

-Is Abraham known for his doubt or his faith? Faith! Big-time. Yet his whole story is also riddled with doubt. He lies about Sarah being his wife—because he doubts. He has a son by Sarah's maid, Hagar—because he doubts. When God tells him, at 99, that he's going to have a son, he laughs—and Sarah loses it; I mean, she's cackling behind the tent-flaps at this outrageous suggestion! God says, "You laughed!" "Did not!" "Did too!" Yet they're **known** for their faith!

-And sometimes doubt actually **leads** to a stronger faith. There are two instances of this in Jesus' life.

- a. One comes right after a phenomenal spiritual mountaintop experience Jesus and three of his disciples had. As they were on this mountaintop—Jesus' appearance was changed to dazzling brightness, he talked with Moses and Elijah—and then **God** spoke to them—telling them to listen to what Jesus said—that Jesus was His beloved Son. Guess where they went from the place of absolute certainty--the **Valley!**

-Valleys are the messy places. The other disciples tried to heal a demon-possessed by copying what they'd seen Jesus do—only...it didn't work. And **then** they got into a public argument with a bunch of religious professionals. As a side note here, sometimes one of the biggest obstacles to faith in Jesus in our world is **still** the incompetence, complacency, and arrogance of His followers. Followers like **me**, for instance!

-Well, in the middle of this whole mess was a very hurt, disillusioned man—who lived the daily nightmare of having a young son whose affliction required attention every minute of every day. His words to Jesus are desperate: **Have mercy on us and help us if you can (Mark 9:22b NLT)**

Well, Jesus response is immediate:

“What do you mean, ‘If I can?’” Jesus asked. “Anything is possible if a person believes.” The father instantly cried out, “*I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!*” (Mark 9:23-24 NLT)

-How does Jesus respond to this *iffy* prayer from a man with *iffy* faith? Well, Jesus *doesn't* say, ‘You know, frankly I’m shocked and *appalled* that you actually have doubts. ***Too bad for you!!*** This is an insult, really—don’t you know Who I am?” No. Jesus—Son of God—does what He asks *us* to do: **“Show mercy to those who doubt.”** He blesses his life by healing his son. Completely!

-And that’s a good thing, because we all are a mixture of faith and doubt, aren’t we? I believe *and* I doubt. I hope *and* I fear! I pray *and* I waiver. I ask *and* I worry.” And if you struggle with doubt, that’s probably a good place to start. **“*I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!*”**

- b. In case you’re thinking that the inner core disciples were rock solid after 3 years with Jesus—***they weren’t!*** On that first Easter, when Jesus was freshly risen from the dead, he appeared to his followers who were hiding in some upper room—and proved that He was ***alive!***

-But Thomas wasn’t there. And when they told him about Jesus—he absolutely refused to believe them—basically calling them all either delusional—or out and out liars. He said, “I demand proof! I’ve gotta see—no, ***stick my fingers*** into the holes left by the nails and the spear!” Here’s what’s ***amazing!*** Jesus doesn’t throw him out. He shows up eight days later—gives him proof—and ***calls him to believe! Don’t be faithless any longer. Believe!***

“My Lord and my God!” Thomas exclaimed. Then Jesus told him, “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.” (John 20:28-29 NLT)

-Thomas’ faith is one of the most direct, amazing proclamations of Jesus as God in the NT record!

- c. And that’s not the last account of close followers of Jesus who doubted! Listen to the painful honesty of this account describing Jesus’ commissioning and sending his followers out to finish his mission.

Then the eleven disciples left for Galilee, going to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him—but *some of them doubted!* (Matthew 28:16-17 NLT)

-Think about this. They’ve all seen him, talked to him, seen the holes in his hands and side. He’s about to entrust his entire mission into their hands—some worshipped, but ***some doubted!*** **And he still sends them!** It’s almost

like Jesus is saying, “You have doubts? That’s okay! I’m sending you **anyway!**”

-By the way, as a side note, one of the things that convinces me of the truth of what the Bible teaches is its brutal honesty. It’s honesty about the flaw of the people it writes about. It’s honesty about the hiddenness of God. It doesn’t try to jazz things up, make people more credible witnesses than they are. Frankly, as I read about these people—warts and all—I see **me!**

5. But it doesn’t help to just affirm that doubts are okay, does it—especially if you’re buried to your axels in it—and can’t get traction! So, where do you go? Well, like dealing with **anything**, you have to be clear about what your doubts are. What **is** the source? And I’m just going to try to cut through the mist and go after this a little, okay?
 - a. Sometimes when people say something like, “I just **can’t** believe in the kind of God who...” Sometimes as they finish the sentence, it’s clear that the God **they** are talking about is not the God that the **Bible** describes. Sometimes when people describe God and what they don’t like about Him I think, “Well, **I** don’t believe in a God like that either!”

-What happens is that sometimes people, quite honestly, get stuck with the flannelgraph God they learned about in Sunday School at the age of 8. And when that image comes up in a university philosophy class, they think, “Yeah! I’m embarrassed! That sounds so...pathetic!” You can get stuck if you try to understand an adult God who deals with adult issues—through the eyes of a kid. You may need to **re-think** God without the flannel-graph.

- b. Sometimes people dismiss what the Bible has to say—based only on what others say about it. Think about it; it’s the official record of Jesus—this amazing man who cracked history into two pieces. Brilliant people say, they’ve examined the record, found it accurate, and it’s transformed their lives. **And** there are brilliant people who dismiss it as a bunch of myths, full of errors and inconsistencies.

-Whether you have faith **or** doubts--don’t be intellectually lazy. Do some reading and thinking. Don’t accept **or** dismiss the Bible based on what someone says about it. Actually read it. Ask questions. Think deeply! But **don’t** just wallow in doubt.

- c. There’s another messy area I need to get into a little here—with your permission. The probing question is—are your doubts about God, about faith, about Jesus and about truth **honest**? Let me put it like this—is it possible that you doubt because you don’t **want** it to be true?

-C.S. Lewis, a brilliant mind and author, was originally an atheist. He says,

“Atheism wasn’t just my belief—it was my *strongest desire*. Atheism appealed to my deep desire to be left alone by the ultimate *Interferer!*”

-Doubts have to be honest. Doubts about God are sometimes produced by philosophical arguments.

But **sometimes** belief in God becomes an inconvenience to the way I want to live. I need to just get rid of Him. Because, frankly, I have no intention of changing.

-If we **want** to, we can explain away every reason for truth, the existence of creation, stories of answered prayer, the evidence for the resurrection, testimonies of changed lives, the unmatched wisdom of Jesus—and the tugging of our **own** hearts for grace, forgiveness, meaning, wholeness, transcendence and heaven. See, if you want badly enough **not** to believe—you will find a way **not** to believe.

-Someone said, ***There are no atheists in foxholes—and there are no theists in whorehouses!***

- d. Sometimes doubts come, like Job's did, in an excruciating, painful era of life. C.S. Lewis went through this when he lost the love of his life to cancer. In his book, **A Grief Observed**, he wrote, in the middle of his anguish, "It's not that I don't believe in God—it's that I wonder what kind of a monster He is!"

-When life gets **very** dark, we lose hope. We lose perspective. We think, "I would **never** treat one of my children like this—why is God treating **me** like this?" Job asked that question, too. The problem is that we can **read** the end of his story, but we can't read the end of ours.

- e. Sometimes doubts come because we simply can't **stand** the arrogance and smugness of people who call themselves believers in Jesus. I get that. It's possible to so back yourself into a corner with your doubts and debates—that there's no way out. Martin Luther said, "The opposite of faith is **not** doubt; it's **pride!**" As hard as it may be, sometimes you have to look beyond **know-it-all** believers—and look at the One they say they believe in. Jesus. But I know how hard that is! If you've ever owned a Pinto—it may be hard to believe in automobiles! My point? God has lemons too—for example, **Judas!**

6. I think faith makes more sense than doubt. I'll tell you why. **Neutral** is not a good option. Death kinda forces the decision to decide one way or another. Ortberg says, "Putting off the decision about God is like jumping off a diving board and then deciding whether or not you'll enter the water." You and I **have** to live. We **have** to make choices. I have to either pray—or not pray; worship—or not worship. My life has to be guided by **some** set of rules and desires. You and I have one ballot; it's called **life!** And you have to vote—one way or the other.

-You can't go through life and make doubt your official strategy—you know, never vote, never take a stand on poverty or capital punishment—simply because smart people disagree on those issues. People talk about **blind** faith and **honest** doubt.

The truth is that both faith and doubt can be blind—and both faith and doubt can be honest.

-It could be that everything **did** just somehow happen—and if there **is** no purpose—and everything **is** meaningless. It could be. Have you ever met anyone who lives as if there is absolutely **no** purpose to life—or anything? As if it **doesn't** matter, really, whether you love your kids or beat them? Even the most bitter, chronic atheist doesn't live like that.

-A summary of what Bertrand Russell said would go like this:

You are the product of causes that have no purpose or meaning. Your origin, your growth, your hopes, fears, loves, beliefs are the outcome of accidental collections of atoms. ...[Nothing] can preserve your life from beyond the grave. All the devotion, inspiration, labour of the ages are destined to extinction in the vast death of the universe. The whole temple of human achievement will be buried in the debris of a universe in ruins. That's what you're headed for. Music? Beauty? Love? Awe? Doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

-That can be your mantra, your core conviction. **Or...** "You are the uniquely designed creation of a thoroughly good and unspeakably creative God.

Made in his image—with the capacity to reason, choose, love—sets you above other life forms. Not only will you **survive** death, you yourself were made to bear an eternal weight of glory you cannot now fathom as you will one day know!"

- a. You have to decide which of these you're going to bet your life on. And you have to ultimately make your decision—commit yourself 100%--with **less** than 100% certainty.

-But, then, the most important, weighty decisions in life are **less** than 100% certain—but demand 100% commitment. As I mentioned earlier, when I married, I was less than 100% certain of how things would turn out. Can you imagine me saying, "Lori—I promise to be 95% faithful to you!" I wouldn't live to tell **you** about it! Having a child is, by definition, an iffy thing. They might step on your heart—but they **require** 100% commitment.

-The leap of faith is **not** being stupid or believing something you **know** isn't true. But then, ultimately, everybody jumps. Even atheists!

Q & A

- b. You may be struggling this morning with doubt and uncertainty that just won't go away. You need to know—you're in good company. After she died, there were a whole series of letters from a nun named Agnes—absolutely devoted to God and helping the poor. What you discover is that for 50 years she struggled with doubt, wondering where Jesus was. We know her as Mother Theresa. Martin Luther struggled. The struggle is part of life. Part of being

human. What **matters** is who is waiting for you—when you let go of the trapeze on this side of eternity!

-Everybody jumps; but not everybody has someone to catch them!