

Obvious

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

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John 12:20-33

“This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.”

Movement 1 – Doubts and Assurances

There is a place for doubt and skepticism in life. It is a level of caution with which we live. It can keep us safe. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* suggests that if we live with too much bravery, with too much boldness and brashness then we are putting ourselves at undue risk. On the other hand, we can be too cautious and never truly live life. So we look for that “golden mean” between overbearing caution and brashness and find a healthy amount of skepticism. When we look under the hood of a car we are considering buying, we are exercising our caution. Even if we don't know what we are looking at, we still look and consider, and try to act like we are satisfied with the mass of gears and moving parts. When we hire people, we try to check their references so we can feel confident about the individual. When we contract someone for a job, we look closely at all the fine print to make sure we are getting what we are paying for. It is like a diamond dealer looking closely at each gem, peering and scrutinizing for each and every imperfection. We go through life reading our *Consumer Reports*, comparing prices, checking our facts, and making sure that everything we are looking at is up to the quality we expect. We want to be assured that we are getting a quality product. We want to be assured that we are going to receive a good loan. We want to be assured that the faith we place in someone else will be respected and held. Our questions and doubts are held up as good values with which to live. We are labeled as foolish if we follow every phone call and Internet offer without looking closely.

For example, every other day I get an e-mail from somebody who lived a sinful life, and then had a deathbed conversion. The problem is that this particular person now has millions of dollars in a bank account from Nigeria that is frozen, and that money is sitting, gathering dust. If I would only send my own account numbers I would be able to receive that money for the sake of charity work, and take some for myself for my troubles. It is a scam, but a well-written, well-worded scam. If I did not carry a healthy amount of skepticism with me, I may fall for such a scam, and buy into whatever is being offered. But, luckily, I have not... yet.

We live with skepticism in search of assurance. We live with a kind of cautionary doubt and skepticism that does not take everything at face value.

Movement 2 – Doubts of the Christian

Yet in the church we have a difficult time with our doubts. Those of us who call ourselves Christians often see doubting and skepticism as flaws in our faith. Doubt is so often painted as a weakness, and we don't know what to do with our doubt in our faith. The doubters look for a sign of faith, and if you remember from last week, we cannot rest our faith on signs. Don't doubt but believe. Don't be Thomas and question. Don't be Ezekiel and ask if these dry bones can live. Don't be Peter and doubt the spiritual kingdom of God. Don't be Saul who was to be Paul and doubt the ministry of Jesus. Don't be Zechariah who didn't believe that he and his wife of age would have a son who was to be John the Baptist. Don't doubt but believe. Those who are naive in the faith are lifted up. Those who are innocent in the faith are held high and

seen and great examples. They are our models in prayer, in discipleship and in our relationship with Christ. We don't have room for doubt, because doubting can lead toward straying from Jesus.

But let's be realistic. We walk down the avenues of life, and the doubts, the questions, and the skepticism all come at us, like barking dogs, threatening us, scaring us, and challenging us. One barking dog is a job recently lost. Another barking dog is a loved one who is struck by illness. Another dog is a physical ailment, another is a broken relationship, another is rejection by society, and another is a sense of spiritual loss. We cry out to the suffering, "look to Job as an example," but Job questioned "why me?" We all experience doubt. We all wonder why. We may try to walk tall all the time, we may try to look down the dogs of anxiety, suffering, and questioning, but there is a time when we all fall on the floor, bring our knees to our chest and cry out, "why?" It is a moment that St. John of the Cross describes as a *Dark Night of the Soul*. It is a moment when our questions and fear overwhelm us, and we look for something to grab onto. Communities of Christians have looked for hope and truth in times of uncertainty. We have looked under the hood of the facade of the church for something that will give us assurance. We have combed through the scriptures, we look to the cross, and ask for something to give us hope.

A kernel of truth, a foundation of wisdom, yes, even a sign would be helpful in this moment of unknowing and uncertainty. But we keep our questions to ourselves because they are not the Christian way. We keep our concerns to ourselves because it is not the way of a good, strong disciple. In the church, in the community of Christianity, we have a difficult time with our doubts.

Movement 3 – The First Assurance: Jesus Tells Us

Jesus gives us some comfort for our doubts. In this passage, Jesus says, "the hour has come," the time is now, and things are going to get rocky. Jesus knows what is coming up, so he takes a moment to give us some hope and assurance for our doubts today and our doubts to come. Jesus offers hope, and in that hope we find hope in our own moments of distress and despair. He starts by sharing a parable about the wheat seed. Imagine a seed falls to the earth. Unless that seed dies, nothing will come from it. But if that seed does die, then it will produce great fruit. Christ shares with us a story of suffering and sacrifice. Christ shares with us a story of his own death, and the results of his death. He is telling us that things are going to get difficult, things are going to seem to be too much to bear, but we must press on and look for the good fruit. We must continue to be with Christ, for then Christ will continue to be with us. Like pruning a tree, limbs will fall, we will experience loss, but more will grow. This is how I understand Christ's parable. That through loss, even the loss of our own life, we will grow. Think of the ministry of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of Martin Luther King, Jr., or of Oscar Romero. These are individuals, who gave their very lives for a cause, and because of their sacrifice the cause increased, and their legacy has become embedded in the narrative of our own lives.

Or in the first *Star Wars* movie (A New Hope), Obi Wan Kenobi, when facing Darth Vader, claims that if he is struck down, he will be more powerful than ever. Christ is preparing us for his own death. He is telling us and giving us the assurance that when he falls it will be for a greater good. And then Christ calls us to walk with him, to sacrifice with him. This passage occurs in essence in all of the gospels; the idea that to save our lives we must lose them is a constant in all four gospels. One of the early martyrs and leaders of the Christian Church, Ignatius of Antioch, claimed when he was led to the stake to be burned that in dying, life is truly gained.

It is as if Christ is aware of the doubts we will have as we view him on the cross. It is as if Christ knows we will question when he draws his final breath. We will shout out, "why?" We will cry out, "it wasn't supposed to happen this way." We will face the largest and most

ferocious dog on the path, the one that barks, your Lord, your Savior has died, and where is your faith now? So to prepare us, to get us set, Christ gives us some comfort for our doubts.

Movement 4 – The Second Assurance: Jesus Shows Us

Jesus then shows us how to live with our doubts. After all, we approached Christ with all of our doubts, questions and skepticisms, and we are told to prepare for the Cross. We may respond, that our doubts, our questions, our concerns and anxieties are not always about a crucified Lord. We know that Christ rises again, so how does that help us when our loved one is suffering? How does that help us when we are unsure about our stability financially? How does that help us with our day in and day out doubts and uncertainties?

Because the fear of our lives will always lead to the fear of the cross. The questions of our lives will always lead to the questions of the cross. The anxieties of our lives will always lead to the anxieties of the cross. We do not know why it happens, but we do know that God can take the mess, and make it into life. Just as God takes the mess of the cross, our broken and bleeding savior and makes the cross into a sign of victory, God can take the mess in our lives, the mess in the church, and make it into something amazing and something beautiful.

But there is the moment between the mess and the beauty. There is still the wondering and the doubt, and Christ shows us a way through the doubt. This is one of the glories of the Christ that we see him troubled in the most human and most perfect way. “Lord, my soul, my life is troubled.” This is a simple and profound prayer. This is a hopeful and honest prayer, just as Christ is authentic in his relationship with the Lord. “I am troubled, my soul is troubled.” What else can we pray but that we are facing doubt, that we are facing fear, and that we are facing uncertainty? Remember King’s prayer late at night in the kitchen? Remember his prayer, “I am scared, I am concerned and I don’t know if I can do this.”

I have followed the example of my Lord, and also prayed again and again, “God I’m tired.” The other week I was thinking about all that we still need to do as a church, of all that we are called to do, of all the people who were hurting and needed to know of God’s presence, and my prayer was, “God, this is hard work, and I am tired.” You want to know what a Christian does with his or her doubts; he or she gives them to God.

Movement 5 – The Third Assurance: God Tells Us Plainly

Then we are given the assurance and the direction from God. We are given a theophany, an assurance that answers all doubt and skepticism. It is a word from God. But, listen to what Christ does, he does not just say I am troubled, but changes the prayer. “Father, glorify your name.” Lord, my soul is troubled, but I am not asking to be saved. Instead, I am asking that your name be glorified. Think about this in your own times of struggle. When you are facing your doubts and anxiety from stability to the loss of a loved one to your own *Dark Night of the Soul*, Christ gives us the example not of trying to make sense of our situation, or of asking God to make things better, but instead saying, “God may your name be glorified.” If that means celebrating the life lost that was well lived, and then may your name be glorified. If that means looking for a way to stay connected with you, Lord, then may your name be glorified. If that means going with Jesus all the way to the cross, watching Jesus persecuted and crucified, and die on the cross, and doing nothing, then may your name be glorified.

This is a moment of trust and hope that God’s name will be glorified. And we hear a voice. It is like that moment in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, when God speaks, but here it is more profound. God promises to stay with Christ even in the difficult times, even in the troubling times, and continue to make it something worthy of the divine glory. God’s name will be glorified. Think about this assurance, it is divine and direct and the most we can ask for. Think about this assurance. It is saying even in the greatest amount of despair, we God will still be with us, and will be glorified, will make something good out of the mess. It is the direction assurance,

the direct promise that we receive from God.

Movement 6 - The Obvious Hope

Can we “see” Jesus with this assurance? Can you “see” the obvious? This is the challenge we are left with as we move on from this passage; can we “see” Jesus. Remember in the beginning of the passage, some Greeks say that they want to “see” Jesus? Remember how the entire gospel of John is a back and forth of seeing and hearing about Jesus? To “see” Jesus is to believe in him as the redeemer, the hope, and the Son of God. The Greeks wanted believe, they were ready to follow Jesus. Will you also “see” Jesus for who he is; the holy Son of God? Will you stay with Jesus, giving up your own life, giving up your own glory for his? In the time of anxiety, in the time of skepticism, in the time of doubt, will you still look to “see” Jesus on the cross and know that your suffering, if it is for the glory of God, will not be in vain. Will you “see” Jesus? Because we are given all of the assurance that we can ask for. We are told that the death of Christ will lead to great things. We are told that the suffering of Christ is normal, just as our own suffering is normal. We are told that God will be with us, will work with us, and will not leave us. The mission, the person, and the hour at hand of Christ are clear, it is obvious. Grab it, seize it, hold onto it and do not let go. For the next couple of days ahead will be difficult, they will be challenging and they will pull upon your own strength.

Rest in the assurance made so obvious today that God is with you. Rest in the assurance so obvious today that your anxiety is normal, that your soul will be troubled just as Christ’s soul was troubled. Rest in the assurance that the death of Christ will lead to great things. For through Christ, a “way will be formed out of no way, the prince of darkness will fall with a flash of light, and the glory of the heavens will shine down on you and on me.” Come and see Jesus, draw to Jesus with the assurance that God’s holy name will indeed be glorified.

AMEN