

Seeing is not always believing. John 12:37 says, ***“Although he (Jesus) had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him”*** (NRSV). Some still doubt even after seeing events right before their eyes. Want to look at two famous doubters this morning: Gideon and Thomas.

Have you noticed how God often calls some of the most unlikely individuals? Gideon says of his call, *“But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family”* (NRSV). At this call Gideon is trying to winnow wheat in a wine press. He is in the wine press because of the harassment of the Midianites against Israel. Winnowing is done in the open and best when there is a light wind. The wind blows the chaff away from the grain. However, the Midianites would look for chaff blowing in the air and come and raid the crops. The Israelites are hungry. Gideon is trying to hide what he is doing – winnowing down inside the wine press where there is little if any wind. Maybe the Midianites won’t see what he is doing and he will have food for his family.

As he is in this process, and even stranger, an angel of the Lord comes and greets him, *“The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior”* (6:12 NRSV). Gideon, being honest with his thoughts and feelings responds, *“But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us...”* (6:13 NRSV). As I read Gideon’s response I am reminded of the prayer of St. Teresa of Avila at a low point in her life, “Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, it’s no wonder you have so few.” Where is God in the midst of the difficulties of life? Don’t we have a right to doubt the stories of our ancestors about the greatness of God when things are not so great in our lives?

Gideon agrees to become leader of Israel but... there is some lingering doubt whether or not this is really God’s plan. Gideon has a plan. He will put a piece of fleece on the ground and in the morning the fleece will have dew on it but not the ground. God does as Gideon requests. A full bowl of water is squeezed from the fleece. But this is not quite enough for Gideon – one more time. Only, God, this time let the ground have dew and the fleece be dry. Again, God responds. Gideon is convinced and does what God has called him to do and rescues Israel out of the oppression of the Midianites.

Our second doubter is Thomas: *“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”* (John 20:25 NRSV). The other disciples have seen the risen Christ. Some of the women have touched and held him. The two on the Emmaus road have walked with him and been with him as he broke bread with them. Thomas has heard their stories. Still he doubts. He needs to see with his own eyes the wounds of Christ. The story of resurrection is far beyond his comprehension. This is not something you believe by the stories of others.

Can you imagine the other disciples trying to convince Thomas? We were at Disney World and there were no lines to the Magic Mountain ride. This was a rare opportunity and the boys wanted their mother to go on the ride with us. I am not sure how they convinced her but she agreed (she is fearful of roller coasters). But this was under cover, how bad could it be? The ride was fine. Not sure if they have a kiddies' one and an adult one – but when we got off there was still no line – “Let's go again.” We did. However, this time instead of the one on the left we were directed to the one on the right. This time we got the real roller coaster! There was no way they could convince her to go again!

A week of doubting. A week of hearing the stories. Where is the Lord? Why does he not reveal himself to Thomas? Like Gideon Thomas needs proof. He needs to see with his own eyes. As they are gathered, Jesus appears and confronts Thomas with his wounds. Thomas now sees for himself and he believes, “*My Lord and My God*” (20:28 NRSV).

Do we still doubt? Now there are some who may not even like to hear the word doubt even mentioned in worship. To speak of doubt might indicate a lack of faith and trust. It makes us lose our superiority over others. How can anyone doubt? How can anyone question my faith? To raise questions of doubt is to doubt my faith. Or so we think.

What would we say to Thomas today? Would Thomas even feel comfortable speaking about his doubt in our presence? Would we laugh at Gideon tossing out the fleece? I took an intensive class in Seminary – we did a full semester in one week – at a retreat center. We became a little community living together for a week. One of the students raised a doubt in class. He said he did not believe in the existence of hell. At lunch we noticed he was missing. We asked about him. Our professor responded, “Oh, he is with (and named another student, an older woman) and now he believes!”

Doubt is a part of life, a part of faith.

Thomas was being honest about his feelings and his faith. Gideon was being honest about his doubt of God's calling on his life. As I look at these stories I see God and the disciples being able to handle the doubts raised. There is no indication that there was any condemnation of Thomas for his doubting. They were willing to let Thomas' faith develop at his pace and not theirs. My guess is that they loved Thomas more, embraced him closer and prayed harder for him. They gave Thomas room to doubt. A week has passed since Jesus appeared to them...maybe they too are harboring some doubts about what really happened a week ago. Did what they saw really happen?

Can we accept doubters? Can we allow people to be honest in their faith development? The church is a difficult place to raise doubts. Condemnation is often harsh and swift. How can you doubt? For me, this is a tragedy in a world filled with spiritual seekers—those who are searching for what we have and yet who need a place to be honest with their doubts, their own spiritual development. They don't always want our answers, just our listening to them and accepting them

on their journey would be enough. They seek a place where honest questions can be raised and where they feel welcome even when some of their questions are doubts. Can they search here? Could Gideon lay out his fleece here?

We need to learn to trust God. God can handle doubts. God doesn't ask that we handle the doubts of others. We need to let God do that for us. Arnie was a wonderful Christian man. He was never allowed to learn how to read and spoke with a bad stutter (although when he sang he had no problems – he would memorize the hymns – his favorite was, “He Touched Me.”). Arnie had a simple faith and he had a problem. We had just welcomed Glen into membership and Glen smoked a pipe, a mortal sin in Arnie's mind. Arnie came demanding that I make Glen quit the pipe. My response was that Arnie give this to God – pray that God will have Glen stop smoking. Why not let God handle the situation – that satisfied Arnie and it must have worked – Glen did eventually give up smoking. We need to let God handle situations and our job is to love the doubters.

Maybe Gideon's response to the angel is too true for our world today, “*But sir, if the Lord is with us why has all this happened to us.*” Or maybe Thomas, “*Unless I see the mark of the nails...*” Let us learn to trust God to open the eyes, heal the hearts and remove the doubts and until then let us just love the doubters as God so loves the world and us.