

Sunday, May 22, 2016 - Is it okay to have doubts & questions?

Isaiah 55

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

My 4 year old daughter peppers me with questions all week long, about everything from how our bodies function to God to penguins. Such a curious little mind. When God encourages us to walk through life like a child, I imagine God wants us to ask a million questions and be curious!

Some of the ones lately that I loved:

- Do fish make the fish sticks and then send them to the store?
- Can you take a picture of our prayers and send it to God?
- Mom, what happens if we didn't pay for this and just left? *I answered her.* An hour later she asks, "Mom, does Jesus know everything we do?"
- Is God in my whole body or just my heart?

Is it okay to have doubts and questions? That all depends on your view of God and faith. Do you view God as a being who can handle your questions and is growing and becoming? Or is God a defined, completed being with all the answers and once we discover "the answer," there's really no need to keep looking.

It turns out questions are powerful things. In the moment we voice a question, we're admitting we are not God. We don't have full and perfect knowledge. That alone is a hard step for some to take. I've found over and over that being willing to ask a question is a freeing, humbling, graceful moment in my relationship with others. It's me admitting I don't know something. And I'm seeking the wisdom and experience of another person. If we're not willing to put ourselves in that space, then we're probably not open to something new God wants to do in us.

Over the next two months, we'll be wondering out loud about some of these questions...

- What happens when I die?
- Does God care how I vote?
- If God loves me as I am, why would I change?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Is Jesus really the only way to God?
- What do we do about global warming?
- If life is good, why would I need God?

Learning to ask questions about what it means to be human is the foundation of what it means to live a meaningful life. You have to ask questions. We can get facts anywhere. It takes 2 seconds to google something. We don't want facts. We want things we can't find online. And the only way to get there is asking questions (Rabbi Joel). Jesus knew this. He asked questions when he could have easily given an answer, but our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, chose questions as a primary way to grow his disciples

There's a longing in our questions. A longing for knowledge...meaning. Sometimes our questions are asked out of fear of the unknown. Any answer will do, as long as something is defined. Some of our questions keep us up deep into the night. Our soul feels unsettled as the question tiptoes around in our brain.

What if what we long for isn't actually an answer? But a relationship that can hold the question?

This is what happens in many relationships. Have you ever had a rough day and you sit down to share with a spouse or friend and they jump into "fix it" mode? They want to do anything they can to make you feel better. But all you really needed was for them to say or show, "That must have felt awful. I'm sorry. I'm with you." Empathy.

Our situation...our question...who we are...just needs to be noticed, named, acknowledged. We need relationships that can hold the truth of who we are and the questions we wrestle with. Maybe we're not actually longing for all the answers.

Isaiah 55 reminds us that when we thirst, we can come to the water of God. These longings we have for clarity AND mystery can be held together in our relationship with the Creator. Verse 3: "Listen and come to me. Listen, and you will live."

There's another great part of this text with some wisdom for us today. Verse 11: "My word doesn't return empty. It does what I want, and accomplishes what I intend."

If you have questions stirring within you, honor those. They're normal, okay and good.

If you don't have a lot of questions stirring with you, honor that. It's normal, okay and good.

God sends God's word out to us and it won't return empty. It does what God wants. **We're not in control of the question in our soul.** God is. We don't need to fix and explain away and define everything. Maybe we need to more fully trust that our relationship with God can handle the question.

Brian McLaren, wrote a book called, "Generous Orthodoxy." It's a great work which I commend to you. But get a look at the full title of his book: "Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed- yet hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian."

Wow. Is it possible for all that to be true?

Brian shares an image with us that will be helpful for our journey through our hard questions in these months.

There are two dominant views of faith:

A Fortress Faith

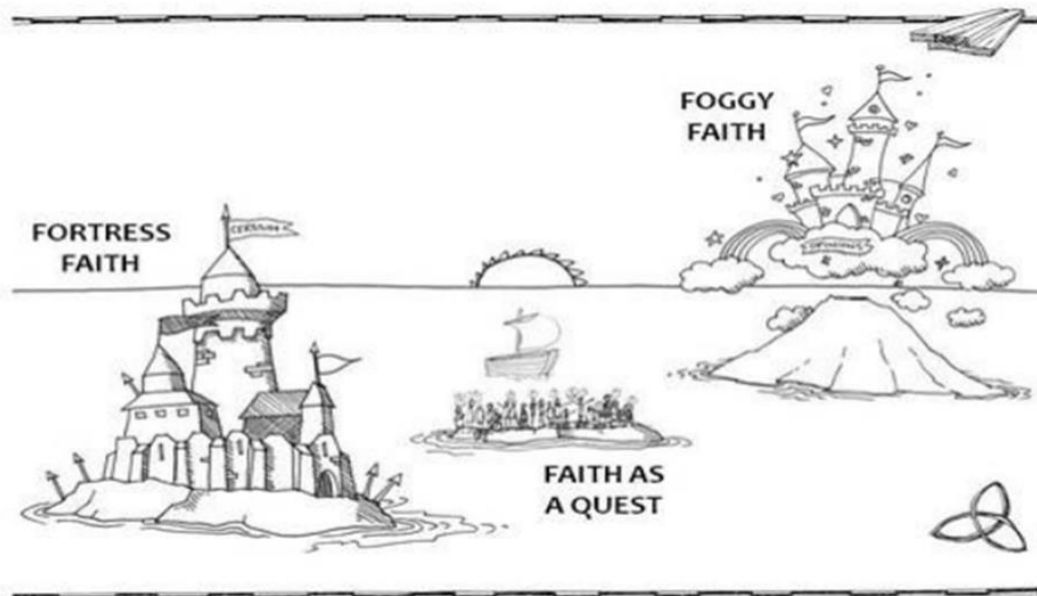
- Very clearly defined - their faith is a castle on a mountain – but in its clarity there is a sense of "nothing else is getting in here" – a propensity to see anything that is different as an attack that must be defended against.

A Castle in the Clouds

- The Castle in the Clouds seems open and inviting – affirming and accepting of many opinions – however it also hard to know what one stands for (if anything) and if faith is everything/anything – then it is nothing....why waste ones time?

But what if there's a third way? Brian calls it, **Faith as a Quest for God and with God**

- Faith is a ship that we are sailing on
- Beliefs are like planks in the hull – sometimes springing a leak and needing to be replaced.
- Trials, disappointments and enigmas of life are the storms and icebergs that threaten our journey
- God is both the goal and source of our journey, the ocean we sail upon and the wind that catches our sails
- Theology is the necessary maintenance of the hull, deck and sails of our vessel
- The point of the journey is not maintenance of the ship, the quest is: our experience of and with God



Where do you see yourself in these ideas?

Are you coming from a fortress kind of faith and finding joy in mystery?

Or do you find yourself in the clouds of inclusion and still seeking some definition and some grounding?

Maybe for you, faith is a quest. You're in the boat, making repairs as you go, understanding this life is a journey for and with God. You haven't set up camp in a fortress or the clouds.

Brian asks it this say, "Are you embarked or have you arrived?"

I want to invite a friend up to share a little of her story about what it means right now to move from the fortress to the clouds and onto a quest in her relationship with God.

Kate's story

