

Believing Thomas- April 23, 2017
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A few months back, when I just started my position at FBC Greensboro, I went to a preaching conference at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas TX. WBC is kind of the foremost Baptist Church when it comes to residencies like mine, and they want to support other programs through the pastoral residency network. What this means is that the network paid for my trip to Texas. I had never been on a business trip before, and I love Tex-Mex so I was pretty excited. Not to mention I wanted to learn some preaching methods and get creative about proclamation with peers I had never met. But there was something unusual about this preaching conference...the keynote speaker was not a preacher, but a poet. Needless to say, my tex-mex taco high was brought back down to earth. I know a little about preaching, but I know NOTHING and understand even less about poetry. But the trip was paid for so I was going, despite my doubts. Turns out the poet's name was Christian Wiman, Yale Professor and seasoned cancer and faith wrestler. His latest book, "My Bright Abyss" is subtitled "Meditation of a Modern Believer" is a testimony to the wrestling he has done and continues to do. The book opens with the poem entitled "My Bright Abyss" it goes something like this:

My God my bright abyss
Into which all my longing will not go
Once more I come to the edge of all I know
And believing nothing believe in this:

And there it ends, well kind of, the last line is punctuated with a colon, expectantly waiting a second stanza. Describing all the things he believed in, all the things drawing him into the deepest parts of the bright abyss, drawing him down into nothing more and nothing less than "My God." In the first paragraph of the book Wiman writes this..."For several years since I first wrote that stanza I have been trying to feel my way-to will my way-into its ending...I have wanted some image to open for me, to both solidify my wavering faith and ramify beyond it, to say more that I can say...

Perhaps this is where we enter into our text today with that poem.

My God my bright abyss
Into which all my longing will not go
Once more I come to the edge of all I know
And believing nothing believe in this:

We find ourselves perched on that last line, scraping desperately for any image that characterizes our belief.

And as we look for that image it is easy to compare ourselves to Thomas. His doubt comes in the dawn of that Easter Monday. Thomas, missed the glitz of the Sunrise service, the empty tomb and the flowered cross. An instrument of death, turned into a sign of new life. He could not imagine generations later, crosses adorning steeples, and altars, jewelry and car bumper stickers. How could he, it was still Good Friday for Thomas. He could not imagine a resurrected Christ as he saw him beaten, bloodied, and bruised. The man he left it all behind for spat on, speared, pierced, and hung on the tool of the Roman Government for criminals. What he thought was the hope of the world died that day and was rotting in a grave. There was no belief, only unbelief. And Utter disbelief.

I think before we move there, it may be helpful to acknowledge our baggage with this text. Like my doubts of the poet at the preaching conference we may associate Thomas with doubt. In my research I learned that this passage is not really about doubt or skepticism, but it about traversing the chasm between belief and unbelief. Between faith and unfaith. In the version that I read from today, when Jesus confronts Thomas he says, "Do not doubt, but believe." A literal translation of the verse would read, "Do not be unbelieving but believing" or as the King James puts it, "Be not faithless but believing." The word pair here, *apistos*, unbelieving and *pistos* believing is the only time that these two adjectives are used in contrast in John's gospel. Like Thomas, we must move from unbelief to belief, when we come into contact with the risen Lord. It feels like doubt is something different. Doubt is an integral part of our faith, it means that we have faith and we are wrestling within it.

So, when we hear of Thomas' request, there is nothing to criticize. He is merely requesting what Jesus offered the other disciples. It is not the glowing gowns of the mount of transfiguration. Instead he wants to know that the horror of the crucifixion was real. He wants to know that the pain he saw was not glossed over as the images replay in his mind every night before bed. This is brave, this is courageous. It reminds me of the person with PTSD who realizes that in order to live their life they must speak about the horror they saw.

Just a few chapters before, in John 11, the disciples have received news from Mary and Martha that Lazarus is sick. The other disciples say that they should not go, for fear of the Jewish Authorities. But Thomas, not hiding away in this current scripture and not hiding in John 11 says this, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas is the one who would lay down his life for his friend, he was willing to do it for Lazarus. But he has now realized that Jesus has done it for him. So, if Jesus has resurrected, Thomas needs to see it, not because he is cowardly or afraid or doubtful, but because to experience Jesus is to believe. And to experience another, wounds and all, is the bravest thing we can request.

So, eight days later, the next Sunday. (Like this Sunday) Thomas gets his request. And this is what is beautiful. It is when Thomas sees Jesus with his wounds that he confesses, "My Lord and my God." It is only when Thomas sees the remnants of Jesus's humanity, that he can confess his divinity. Thomas is the first one in the gospel to confess Jesus in this way, "My Lord and my God!" His confession brings the gospel full circle. John 1 tells us, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the Word was God." Thomas' confession makes the final connection, that the Word, Jesus, whom we have been living with is in fact divine.

The Gospel of John is also unique in that the scene of resurrection is the same as the commissioning of the disciples. When we believe, we are sent out with the Holy Spirit, representatives of Christ, who can speak like him, and say those powerful words that your sins are forgiven.

But will people believe us without our wounds? Would Thomas have believed and made such a powerful confession had Jesus come with a shiny new makeover? I'm going to say no. As scandalous as it was for Jesus to come lowly, riding a donkey instead of a steed, it is even more scandalous that he is resurrected with his wounds. Jesus shows us that being a new creation does not mean forgetting what happened to us, but leaning into the pain and testifying to it.

What it means is that as followers of Christ, sent out with the power of the Holy Spirit, that we too must show our wounds to testify to the risen Lord.

As of late I have been reading a lot of Henry Nouwen. As you may know Henry Nouwen was a respected priest and professor who later in his life decided to move into a L'arche community called Daybreak in Toronto. L'arche communities are intentional communities where folks with disabilities and folks without disabilities live together. Peacehaven Community Farm, where I split my time, and work as a chaplain is also based on the L'arche model. All that to say, I have a lot to learn from father Nouwen who teaches me that the greatest wound is isolation.

In ministerial circles Father Nouwen is well known for a model of pastoral care called "The wounded healer" and it comes from the Talmudic story that follows

Rabbi Yoshua Ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet and he asked Elijah, "When will the Messiah come? Elijah replied,

"Go and ask him yourself."

"Where is he?"

"Sitting at the gates of the city"

"How shall I know him?"

"He is sitting among the poor covered in wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, 'Perhaps I shall be needed: if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.'

Nouwen says that in this way, ministers are to act as wounded healers, modeling the messiah, tending to their own wounds and the wounds of others. This model recognizes that our wounds are a shared experience of the Christian community. Wounds are not meant to be compared to another or aired out for one's own glorification or even shown when too raw. But when we see each other as wounded we become more grounded in the human experience. When we move toward the pain, instead of trying to avoid it, minimize it or disavow it we are able to find community and in so find healing in the deepest wound of all, isolation.

In a later book, "Life of the Beloved," Nouwen writes to his secular friend about how he sees the great commonality available to humanity is recognizing themselves as the beloved of God. In one chapter, he talks to his friend about brokenness, He writes, "My own experience with anguish has been that facing it and living it through is the way to healing. But I cannot do that on my own. I need someone to keep me standing in it, to assure me that there is peace beyond the anguish, life beyond death, and love beyond fear. But I know now, at least, that attempting to avoid, repress, or escape the pain is like cutting off a limb that could be healed with proper attention."

Our brokenness reveals something about who we are. It reveals our uniqueness as no two people suffer alike. That is why it is a privilege when someone shares their pain with another. Nouwen also says, "Instinctively we know that the joy of life comes from the ways in which we live together and the pain of life comes from the ways that we fail to do that well.

When we show our wounds we are demonstrating that we are willing to fight the battle against isolation. And we demonstrate That entering into the Kingdom of God is not something that we do alone. Without showing our wounds we risk the danger of being cacti in a desert rather than trees in a forest. Storing up water for ourselves, prickly to the touch unable to provide shade for anyone, let alone ourselves. Perhaps the greatest danger is that without showing our wounds, who will believe?

If Thomas shows us anything, it is through Jesus' willingness to show his wounds that he believes. Thomas doesn't need to poke and prod anymore, he just needs to witness the humility of our savior, caring for his sheep. This passage isn't really about Thomas or the disciples but it is about Jesus always willing to meet the needs of his sheep. And as followers of Jesus we are sent out to care for the sheep, and to show our wounds as Christ did.

What I do not want to propose is redemptive suffering, meaning that redemption or salvation occurs when God causes us to suffer. Nor am I saying that one should remain in an abusive relationship so that God may bring some good in it, or that the broken relationships from addiction are a result of a masochist God. Rather, when we have experienced suffering of any kind, when the wounds have healed, will you be willing to show it? Will you be willing to move towards another, in the fullness of your human self, so that God may be witnessed?

It's not that we are wounded to be saved but that we are willing to show the humility of Jesus. We are willing to be fully human instead of hiding ourselves, no matter where the nails and spears have pierced or where the whips have landed.

In Catholicism, One of the greatest gifts that a saint is said to receive is the stigmata. If you look at an illustration of St. Francis for example, you will notice that he has the marks of the crucifixion on his body. He was never on a cross, and yet his hands and feet and side are scarred like Jesus. The thought being that when one receives the stigmata they can experience the suffering of Christ for the conversion of sinners. So that when an individual looks upon the marks of Jesus on the saint, people will come to belief.

Friends, each of us has experienced suffering, we do not need literal marks to reveal that. But how can you, and I, share our wounds with another. How can we, like Jesus, humble ourselves and share our story to meet the needs of belief for another. To help them move from unbelief to belief, from unfaith to faith? It is not in shining ourselves up, or pretended that we have it all together, but in the real ness of our lived humanity.

At the end of Christian Wiman's book he concludes with the same poem that he began with, through his journey from unbelief to belief, he ends as he started, kind of like Thomas and the gospel of John

My God my bright abyss
Into which all my longing will not go
Once more I come to the edge of all I know
And believing nothing believe in this.

As you may notice, it is exactly the same, with one nearly imperceptible change. It ends with a period instead of a colon. It ends in a period.

Wiman no longer searches for the perfect image to characterize belief. He recognizes that the beauty of the poem is that it ends there. Insufferably infinite.

And this could mean a lot of things, but what if it means this, that instead of speaking about our belief it is time to show it. What if the period marks the point where we point to our own humanity as evidence of our risen Lord?

It is time to follow Jesus' example show our nail scarred hands, the piercing of our feet, and expose the gape in our sides. It is time to recognize that God is revealed in Christ's wounds, his humanity, as his followers our wounds are our strength, our wounds are cause for belief. We just have to be willing, as Jesus was to show them.