

Un-Certain Sermon Series
Living with the Questions – Habbakuk
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As we finish out our sermon series on living with uncertainty, I want to introduce you to a person in the Bible named Diotrephes. You've probably never heard of him. He didn't build an ark or part a sea or die on a cross. In fact, he's only mentioned one time, in the incredibly obscure book of 3 John. But once you read about him, it's hard to forget him. Here's the one verse where John mentions him: "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who lives to be right, will not welcome us." Ouch. How would you like to be immortalized in the best-selling book of all time as the person who thought it was more important to be right than to be hospitable.

Unfortunately, such persons and such churches still exist today, don't they? There are churches that will close their doors to people who don't agree with them rather than welcome them in. Or, more insidiously, there are churches that will welcome them for the purpose of converting them, not accepting them for who they are and what they believe.

Pastor Scott Colglazier calls these "answer churches." Answer churches find their beliefs neatly packaged in the Bible, so that their approach to faith becomes adherence to well-defined beliefs. There is no room for questions in answer churches. Colglazier contrasts these with what he calls "journey churches." Journey churches understand faith is an ongoing discovery. They understand that listening to the Bible is a process and it takes the rest of our lives to figure out what it means to believe in Jesus Christ as the son of God. Journey churches are OK with uncertainty because they understand faith is more about asking the questions than having the answers.

Writer Anne Lamott said, "The opposite of faith is not doubt; it's certainty." I find that quote quite provocative, because I often find that those who appear most certain in their faith are also the ones who least allow their faith to be challenged and to grow through difficulties. After all, if you are certain about what you believe, why ask questions and entertain alternative ways of believing? And yet, faith is not a static thing, but a dynamic force that grows and changes and expands as we live our lives. Each new obstacle we face in life is an opportunity for our faith to increase and strengthen...if we allow room for growth.

I experienced this in a powerful way this summer. I was invited to go on a pastor's retreat near Charleston, SC. It was a strange invitation because I was not a part of the organization hosting the retreat and I didn't think I fit very well with them. Once I got there and settled in, I found out I was right. I was one of about 17 pastors. Sixteen of us were evangelical conservative church planters...and then there was me. I felt like the guy who slipped into the wedding reception at the hotel ballroom, grabbed a champagne glass, and acted like he belonged there.

During the first night of check-in, our host asked us to share a high and a low in our life. The first person to go was Alex, and after he shared his high, he hung his head and said, "My low is something I'm really struggling with. My daughter has chosen to be in a same-sex relationship." Every person around that table let out a groan and offered words of comfort like "Oh, that's horrible. You must be so sad. I hope she comes back to God."

Now, you may or may not know I have a daughter who's in a same-sex relationship and I couldn't be more thrilled. She's known her partner since eighth grade and they are incredibly happy together. So, while everyone else is commiserating about Alex's low, I'm wondering how fast Amy can get to the retreat center to get me out of there. The next morning, I shared this

experience with Amy, and she said, “Well, maybe God put you there to witness to Alex that there’s another way to see this situation.” I said I would pray about it, which I did. I prayed God would tell me to just keep my head down and my mouth shut and enjoy the retreat.

But that’s not how God works, is it? The next morning, I crossed a long bridge to sit for a while on the dock by the water. When I was done, as I started back across the bridge, guess who was just starting to come across the bridge on the other side? Alex. We literally met halfway across the bridge. OK, God, I get it! You want me to talk to him! Enough with the heavy-handed symbolism.

As we talked, I thanked Alex for sharing what he did the previous night and told him I was in a similar situation with my daughter. Then, with much hesitation, I shared with him that I had a different perspective on the situation and said that it might be possible that God is at work in this relationship in different ways than he might think. He talked about his disappointment and how he was struggling to forgive his daughter for making this choice. I said I knew he loved his daughter like I loved mine and that parenting is never easy, especially when our kids have the audacity to be their own persons.

As we talked, I realized we weren’t two pastors from different ends of the theological spectrum trying to interpret what the Bible says about homosexuality. We were two dads doing our best to love our daughters as they figure out life. At the end of the retreat, when the host asked us what we were leaving behind at the retreat center, Alex said, “Unforgiveness.” I don’t know if he was talking about his daughter, but I prayed that night that Alex was moving from having answers to going on a journey.

I believe we all make that move at some point, from what we think we know to where God is calling us to go. The metaphor of journey is the best one we have for a life of faith. I like it so much because it implies constant movement. Sure, there are rests here and there, but for the most part, we are called to always be on the move spiritually, opening ourselves to new ideas, new horizons, new ways of thinking and being. Sometimes we choose to move, sometimes life forces us to do so. Just a few years ago, with all the change life brings us, we could be certain of one thing: on Sunday morning, we would be able to get up, get dressed, and go to church. We took for granted this fundamental feature of our faith. And then Covid happened. We were spiritually dislocated and had to figure out what it meant to be the church when we couldn’t be in the church. What we thought we could be certain about had changed, and that changed raise all kinds of questions for us, most of which could be boiled down to one: “Where are you, God?”

That’s not unlike Habakkuk’s questions in our reading today. The book starts with, ““O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘violence!’ and you will not save?” This is less of a prophecy and more of a lament psalm, in which the writer cries out to God for help because of suffering or persecution. This could have been written in the last few years or last week, not centuries ago.

Asking questions of God is a part of what it means to be a person of faith, because our faith is based on belief in things that can’t be explained. The two biggest events that undergird our faith as followers of Jesus Christ are the incarnation and the resurrection. At the incarnation, God chose to come down to earth in the form of Jesus Christ and dwell among us. As Eugene Peterson says, “God moved into the neighborhood.” There’s no explanation for that. There’s no way to convince someone with incontrovertible evidence that it happened. It requires faith.

And then, when we decided that the best way to handle God’s presence among us was to nail Jesus to a cross until he died, God did something even more extraordinary. God raised Jesus for the dead, showing that God has power over everything that causes us fear, even death. But we

don't have any eyewitness accounts or autopsy reports. We don't have any selfies from Jesus with the empty tomb in the background. We only have stories that ask us to put our faith in the God they reveal to us.

But they ask for more than faith as an intellectual assent. I can say I believe in the incarnation and the resurrection all day long but still act like a jerk to the waiter at lunch. What God asks from us, far more than our words, are our actions. God asks us to trust in God enough to participate in God's work here on earth. I said in the first sermon in this series that faith is trust in God that is put into action, which mirrors the Greatest Commandment to love God – that's trust – and love our neighbors – that's action. If we're doing the first but not doing the second, we're probably more focused on having the right answers than on walking the journey of faith with our neighbor.

What the prophet Habakkuk reminds us is that a necessary part of living as God's people is the waiting in between the asking of the questions and the hearing of the answers. We live as Saturday people, in between the pain and anguish of Good Friday and the answer of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday, trusting that God is indeed still here and still at work, even when God seems far away. The challenge for us is this: Do we need to have all the answers in order to be faithful? Do we need to know exactly what God's plan is before we choose to participate in it? Do we hold back on our commitment to God until we know for sure where God's calling us?

God answers Habakkuk's question by stating simply, "I am still here!" Habakkuk still did not know how long. He still did not know why. He still did not know God's timetable or what the future held. But he heard something more important that would allow him to face those unknowns. He heard God, who assured Habakkuk of God's presence and who called him to be faithful without having all the answers. He responds in Chapter 3, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior." He demonstrates that faithfulness to God is a willingness to choose to live life with hope and trust, even when answers may not be readily forthcoming.

That doesn't mean we should stop asking our questions. To the contrary, I believe asking our questions and seeking the answers are essential to our faith. But in the meantime, while we wait expectantly for God to answer us, we are called to remember that God is still here, right here with us calling us to take action, to speak love to hate, to shine a light into the darkness, to embody Easter in this endless Good Friday. I have so many questions. Author Gabriel Marcel wrote, "Life is not so much a problem to be solved as a mystery to be explored." There aren't always answers, but there is the journey. What's your next step?