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The Dark Night of the Soul

For the last several weeks I've talked about how, as people go through the developmental stages of preschool and childhood and adolescence, they express their faith and hear the good news differently. Everything I've said about these distinct faith stages has been a generalization, which means that none of it applies to every child or teenager. But generalizations can still be useful: *most* of what I've said has *mostly* fit *a lot of* people at those ages. Today, though, I begin talking about adults, and at this point I can't even say that much. With adults, we're no longer talking about typical development; we're talking about choices, which are individual. Today I want to focus on a crisis of faith that some adults experience in their early 20s, others when they are older, and that many never experience at all. Call it "the dark night of the soul" or just, doubt.

I suspect we first see this crisis of faith in young adults because that's when they are likely to leave home and begin experiencing a broader world on their own. This enables them to look with a different perspective at the faith they had unquestioningly accepted as children. Sometimes this new perspective is prompted by the college experience – learning challenging new ideas from challenging new teachers. Princeton professor and United Methodist minister Kenda Creasy Dean talks about the college "lock box of faith" – where young adults shove their childhood faith in a box and put it aside so they can focus on college, and when they take it out again after four years of new ideas find that their old faith is no longer adequate. For instance, after college science classes Christianity can feel backwards – especially when (some Christians) reject the theory of evolution in favor of a six-day creation set in an ancient Babylonian cosmology featuring a sky-dome holding back the heavenly waters.

Other times young adults find contradictions they had never noticed before, especially having to do with the church. Bluntly, young adults see for the first time how far we fall short of our own ideals. We claim to follow the example and teachings of Christ, but far too often the church behaves as if it had never read those teachings. Jesus gave himself for others; the church can seem to be interested only in what it can get. Jesus said to put others first; the church often acts first of all in its own institutional interest – for instance by quietly moving an abusive priest to a new parish to keep unpleasantness out of the papers, or by spending millions on new facilities that will benefit primarily its own middle-class members while giving only token amounts to things like housing the homeless or feeding the hungry. Young adults looking at the church from the outside for the first time are not impressed. A 2007 survey of young adults' opinions of the church gives us these top results, in order: hypocritical, manipulative, antihomosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental. Even if you really like what you know about Jesus – and most do – why would you follow a God whose representatives on earth behave like that? Untold thousands of young adults have left the church, concluding that their childhood faith was a sham.

This kind of doubt is especially common among young adults, but there is another source of doubt that can come at any age. Tragedy, too, can suddenly make a previous faith feel like a lie. And so today we turn to the Book of Job. The background of the book is this: Job was a devout, faithful man who held a fairly simple, child-like faith. He saw God as the manager of a just and orderly universe, in which the virtuous were rewarded with material blessings that were withheld from the wicked. Now the chances are that you're thinking, "Eh . . . that doesn't ring quite true," but it had always worked for Job. He was conscientious in his faith, and he was rich.

What more proof do you need? But then, in a series of disasters, Job lost everything, and he *knew* he hadn't done anything wicked to deserve it. It shook his faith, and the Book of Job is primarily the record of his doubt and reassessment.

The Gospel for Young Adults (and Other Doubters)

Job 21:1-9, 17-18; 42:1-6

We read from the Book of Job, chapter 21, verses 1-9 and 17-18:

21 Then Job answered:

*² 'Listen carefully to my words,
and let this be your consolation.*

*³ Bear with me, and I will speak;
then after I have spoken, mock on.*

*⁴ As for me, is my complaint addressed to mortals?
Why should I not be impatient?*

*⁵ Look at me, and be appalled,
and lay your hand upon your mouth.*

*⁶ When I think of it I am dismayed,
and shuddering seizes my flesh.*

*⁷ Why do the wicked live on,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?*

*⁸ Their children are established in their presence,
and their offspring before their eyes.*

*⁹ Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them.*

*¹⁷ 'How often is the lamp of the wicked put out?
How often does calamity come upon them?
How often does God distribute pains in his anger?*

*¹⁸ How often are they like straw before the wind,
and like chaff that the storm carries away?*

His eyes opened by his own tragedy – and sometimes it takes that – Job realizes that his old faith had never been adequate. In fact, there *are* plenty of wicked rich people. *And* faithful poor people. His earlier faith had been based on a lie, a willful and self-serving self-deception. The only way he would be able to retain his old faith would be to screw his eyes tightly shut and pretend very hard that reality wasn't reality. In fact, Job has three friends urging him to do exactly that.

But he won't. Job has too much integrity to fake a faith in something that he knows is false. So instead he rages at God, demanding that God explain himself, demanding the right to bring his case before the divine court, or just – in furious frustration – demanding where God is hiding. And through that doubt, Job begins to imagine a different God – one who operates in a wider scope than just our time and space and understanding, one who is not bound by human rules and expectations, who cares about something more than how comfortable we are, and who

longs for a deeper connection to humanity than just the *quid pro quo* of superficial worship. In the end, God appears to Job in all his mystery and glory, granting the doubter a glimpse of a greater God than he'd ever imagined. His three friends, by the way, still clinging to the old faith, are not included in God's revelation. And Job responds like this:

42 *Then Job answered the Lord:*

² *'I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*

³ *"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.*

⁴ *"Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me."*

⁵ *I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;*

⁶ *therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.'*

Some people find God's answer to Job unsatisfactory. He doesn't actually answer all Job's questions, after all. But that misses the point. Job's problem wasn't that he wanted explanations. His problem was that his old view of God had turned out to be superficial and his old faith impossible to hang on to. So God granted to Job what he really needed: a bigger God. When we hit that wall of doubt, when we realize that our old faith is inadequate, we have three options: we can reject our doubts and pretend there's no problem, we can either reject faith entirely, or we can imagine a deeper faith in a greater and more mysterious God.

So what does this mean for us as a church? What do we have to offer the person who is going through this dark night of rejecting and, perhaps, rediscovering God? What is the gospel for the doubter (young adult or otherwise)? How about this: *God is real – maybe not provable by science, but knowable. God is true – truer than the church, truer than theology, truer than anything. Come, meet God again for the first time – for the one who seeks will find.*

And how do we, the church – with our checkered history and new embarrassments arising almost daily – how do we proclaim this gospel. With honesty ("Yes, we have often screwed up") and with humility ("And yes, we will screw up again") and with hope. And here's the hope: We are not going to give up. Forgetting what lies behind and pressing onward to what lies ahead, we will continue seeking ways to love the world with the love of God. Jesus told us to do that, and we don't have the option of ignoring that. So as pastor I will preach and teach about real questions and things that actually matter, even when they are uncomfortable, and as a congregation we will love the unloved, receive the unwelcome, and defend the defenseless, even when *that* makes us uncomfortable. And if there are those here who are having trouble believing, that's cool. Believe as much as you can and keep looking for God. And in the meantime, walk with us.

Let's pray.

God, if you're there, I have some questions.

Why didn't you stop the Crusades?

Or the Holocaust?

Or the genocides of Rwanda and Srebrenica and Burma?

Why do the worst people have the most power?

Whatever happened to the meek inheriting the earth?
And when I pray, do you actually hear, or is it a game I'm playing with myself?

Or is it me?

When I pray, am I just trying to hold on to the idea that you're my personal attendant God,
Whose job is to make me comfortable
And who's not meeting my expectations?

Do you have something to reveal to me if I would just shut up long enough to listen?

Until I sort it out, God, stay close
And when I remember again to look for you,
And listen for you.
Be there. And speak so I can hear. Amen.