

April 23, 2017 "What Does God Believe?"

(2nd Sunday of Easter)

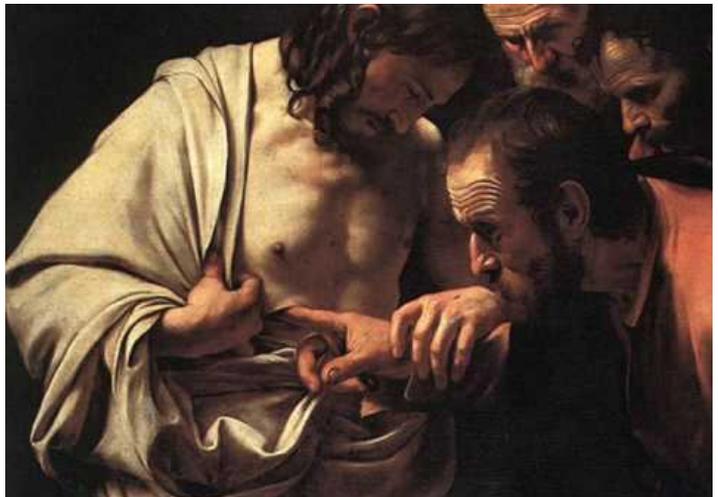
Psalm 16:1-11; John 20:19-31

Why does God have such faith in humanity that God would send Jesus?

It is one of our most central tenets: "For God so loved the world..." It's in almost every song you hear from the contemporary Christian music world. It's in the preaching of millions over the eons. It's in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his approach to Mary after his death and rising. Love. God's unwavering, abundant love.

But why?

Why does God love humanity that much? And why would God entrust faith precious as water in a desert to a humanity who has treated God (and each other) so horribly? What does God believe about humanity that makes us worth dying for?



Psalm 16

A *miktam*^[a] of David.

1 Protect me, God, because I take refuge in you.

2 I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord.
Apart from you,
I have nothing good."

3 Now as for the "holy ones"
in the land,
the "magnificent ones"
that I was so happy about;

4 let their suffering increase because they hurried after a different god.^[b]

I won't participate
in their blood offerings;
I won't let their names
cross my lips.

5 You, Lord, are my portion, my cup;
you control my destiny.

6 The property lines
have fallen beautifully for me;
yes, I have a lovely home.

7 I will bless the Lord
who advises me;
even at night I am instructed
in the depths of my mind.

8 I always put the Lord in front of me;
I will not stumble because he
is on my right side.

9 That's why my heart celebrates
and my mood is joyous;
yes, my whole body
will rest in safety

10 because you won't abandon
my life^[c] to the grave,^[d]
you won't let your faithful follower
see the pit.

11 You teach me the way of life.

In your presence is total celebration.
Beautiful things are always
in your right hand.

Footnotes:

Psalm 16:1 Perhaps "inscription"

Psalm 16:4 Heb uncertain in 16:3-4;
Heb lacks "because" and "god" in 16:4.

Psalm 16:10 Or "my soul"

Psalm 16:10 Heb *Sheol*

- Is verse 5 an observation or a desire? David's reality or his prayer?
- How much would you say God is in the life of David? How would you describe the extent to which God is in your life?
- "Psalm 16 begins by announcing that it's "A Miktam of David." There's not much scholarly agreement regarding what *miktam* means. In fact, what scholars do agree about is that the meaning of *miktam* is uncertain. It appears only six times in the Hebrew scriptures: here at the start of Psalm 16, as well as at the start of Psalms 56-60. If each of the psalms that are introduced by the phrase "A Miktam of David" had a common meter or pattern or theme, then one could come up with a decent guess about the meaning of *miktam*. For now, *miktam*'s meaning remains hidden. Still, the word is part of Holy Scripture."—Hans Wiersma

John 20:19-31

Empty tomb

Jesus appears to the disciples

19 It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." **20** After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. **21** Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." **22** Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

Jesus appears to Thomas and the disciples

24 Thomas, the one called Didymus, **[a]** one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. **25** The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe."

26 After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and

stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." **27** Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!"

28 Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

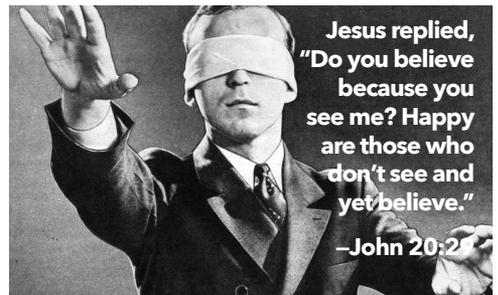
29 Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

30 Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. **31** But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

Footnotes:

John 20:24 Or "the twin"

- What stands out to you about this story? Where do you see yourself?
- Read John 11:1-16. Does this change or reframe how you view Thomas in the John 20 story? How does the passage from John 11 inform what you read in 20?



- What do you think is meant in v. 29? Is faith better “blind” or with “evidence”?
- What message do you think the writer of John was trying to give the future Church?
- How do you think you would have reacted to Jesus’ appearance behind closed doors? How do you react to the appearance of Jesus in the people around you?

Commentary on the Psalm passage by Beth Tanner

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2677

...The psalm is one of trust in uncertain times. The opening verse asks for God’s protection and refuge....

My family and I play a game with the local and national news programming. We list all of the things we were told to be afraid of in a 30-minute span. Try it; the average is 6-8 per broadcast and it ranges from races of persons, to scary multi-national terror groups, to “the dangers of sunscreen.” It is my way of showing my children just how much of the media is designed to keep them fearful. It is an inoculation of sorts because clearly, fear sells. The author of...this psalm knew that and [this text serves] as an antidote to a

culture selling fear. The theme...is to trust in the Lord and to ignore those who say otherwise. It means to trust God in the face of an uncertain future.

The psalm is written in five stanzas of 2 verses each, making it symmetric in nature. The first and last stanzas are statements of trust, providing a circular movement. The psalm begins with an imperative plea to God to “keep or guard me for I take refuge in you.” At the end of the day, nothing can protect us from danger and uncertainty is difficult and anxiety producing, but no matter what or where, one can find refuge in God. The stanza then quickly moves further declaring not only God’s protection but “I have no good apart from you.” It is more than safety then,

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

“Life comes with the blessing of choices, although some philosophers have endeavored to make us think of them as a curse.”

**–Jin H. Han
(reflection on Ps.16)**

happiness and God is found only in God or the gifts God provides.

Psalms usually provide some type of contrast. Modern folk can find this distracting, but it is simply the shape of ancient poetry and so the second stanza (Psalm 16:3-4) is just that. It contrasts the "holy ones in the land" with "those who choose another god" and a promise not to follow the latter. Scholars have tried to decipher who these holy ones are but even without an exact definition, it is clear that this stanza directly relates to the concept of what is good from above. Good is found in God and not others and this is simply a reaffirmation of the first commandment. In a similar way, Deuteronomy 10:13 implores the people to keep the commandments, not for God's sake, but because it is good for them to do so.

The next stanza returns to the good that God gives (Psalm 16:5-6). Here the psalm moves far beyond combating fear or going after other gods. There are two words in Hebrew that defy easy definition. The first is 'asher often translated as "happy" and the other is tamim or "complete." Yet this psalm serves as a good definition for both. The person who has the characteristics in this psalm is "complete" and because he/she is complete, he/she is happy and content. God has provided boundaries that are praised. God's

gifts of a portion and an inheritance are enough for the one praying and worthy of praise. We are to be content in God and the parameters placed on human existence.

This concept of contentment can be tricky to preach today because it is not about material or monetary value. A preacher must be careful not to imply that the broken systems of this world are justified and one should just be content in the face of racism, sexism, under employment, and injustice. No! The psalm is not speaking in defense of injustice, nor should we be content with broken systems, but we should be content with God and our relationship with God and our place in God's kingdom. Indeed, it is this type of personal "completeness" that provides the strength and confidence to speak out against worldly powers. Despite what we are not by the world's standards, God has given to us what we need and even our conscience is a gift for it keeps us in the ways of the Lord. The next stanza (vv 7-8) continues the confession declaring the greatness of the Lord for God's teaching and God's constant presence. The psalm blesses God for the gift of counsel and a conscience that is guided by God keeping us from the wrong paths in life.

The psalm ends with resounding praise of what is to come in the future

and that future is secure in God's hands. Here again the Gospel lesson and the psalm mesh together into a powerful message. For the Good News of God often becomes twisted into a "rapture theology" that teaches humans to get right with God or face eternal wrath. The end times from the Gospels is yet another thing we are to fear. The [psalm states that the] future is in God's hands...."In your presence is complete gladness and everlasting pleasure at your right hand." The kingdoms of the world are violent and unjust places so trust should be placed in God's right hand where our complete selves are to be found.

Commentary on the Psalm passage by Craig A. Satterlee

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=616

..."I keep the LORD always before me," the psalmist declares, "because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved" (16:8). The psalmist concentrates on the Lord; God is the focus of his undivided attention. Through the act of praise that is this psalm, the psalmist is so aware of God's presence, power, and love that he is not distracted or unsettled by other things. As the psalmist praises God, his heart is glad. His spirit rejoices. His body rests in hope

(16:9). He is open to the LORD'S counsel, which comes to his heart night after night (16:7).

...According to Psalm 16, we cultivate trust in God by keeping God as the focus of our undivided attention, worshiping God, being attentive to God's counsel, recognizing God as our one and only LORD, and receiving good things as coming from God as tokens of our destiny in God. Cultivating trust in God by living and acting in these ways, we may find ourselves responding to God's call as Elisha did – no turning back....

Commentary on the John passage by Jaime Clark-Soles

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3222

...Presumably "the disciples" (again, unspecific) we meet in verse 19 heard [Mary] at least. And what do the disciples do in response to Mary Magdalene's proclamation of the risen Jesus, of abundant life, of a world forever changed and open with possibility? They hide in fear behind locked doors. Sound familiar?...

Note one of John's favorite motifs: light versus darkness. Like the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene is a person of the day, the light, out in

the Garden. Like Nicodemus, the disciples are huddled in the darkness that comes from “hiding out” for one reason or another.

As a “church” (they are, after all gathered disciples meeting where they usually met, verse 19), they have locked the doors out of fear (verse 19)....

Jesus seeks out these unnamed disciples and meets them where they are, offering them peace in place of fear (verse 19). He shows them his hands and his side, and they know it's Jesus. It never stops being the case that we have this treasure in clay jars, that we experience the world, both inner and outer, through our bodies. What do you make of the fact that the body of the risen Jesus still carries the marks of lived experience? Certainly, from a doctrinal perspective, it emphasizes that Jesus was really human and his body was essential to his personhood, and that the risen Christ is, in fact, Jesus of Nazareth. But what does it mean for you and your people at a more personal level?

He then reiterates (verse 21, *palin*, “again”) his offer of peace. As far as I'm concerned, he can never remind us enough. He also does to them what he did with Mary Magdalene earlier -- he sends them on mission (*apostello*, *pempo*, verse 21). But Jesus never sends us without equipping us for it, spiritually. And I

mean that literally. Just as he bestowed the Spirit on the newly formed church at the foot of the cross (19:31), he now breathes on them with the Holy Pneuma (spirit/breath). He then reminds them that with great power (the Holy Spirit) comes great responsibility (discerning God's confrontation of sin and offer of forgiveness).

...Thomas is a straight shooter, a practical guy. He may not have much imagination or sense of mystery, but he does have an enquiring mind. Thomas asks the tough questions that others may be scared or embarrassed to ask. Thomas is a no-nonsense guy, and I can appreciate that. So maybe we shouldn't be so surprised at what happens in John 20-- Thomas stays in character.

When Jesus appears to the disciples in the locked room, where's Thomas? The text doesn't say, so we are free to imagine where he is, what he's doing, and what he may be thinking and feeling, based on what we know about Thomas. We don't know where his friends find him, but they tell him the news. And how does Thomas react? Is he overjoyed and comforted? No. He reacts just as the disciples do when Mary tells them the same thing. Are they overjoyed? Do they run out to the garden to find Jesus? No, Jesus the Good Shepherd must find his sheep.

Thomas then makes his dramatic statement: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and shove my finger into the mark of the nails, and shove my hand into his side, I absolutely will not believe" (20:25, my translation). The verb is a forceful one (*ballo*), as is the emphatic negative (*ou me*). Not a simple, "I'll believe it when I see it" --Thomas has lot of conditions. And this may make him relatable for the people you preach to and for. He puts conditions on his faith. He wants hard evidence, unquestionable eyewitness fact that Jesus is risen. I can't blame him. You know why? Two reasons: First, he's asking to see at least what all the other disciples already saw. Second, who doesn't love a solid sign in a moment of crisis and vulnerability? No, I can't blame Thomas. So, what happens?

Eight days after Thomas makes this pronouncement, his wish comes true. And then some. Jesus appears and speaks directly to Thomas. Scripture doesn't tell us that Thomas ever even touched the wounds. Again, you are free (invited, required?) to use your imagination. Once Thomas got a look at and felt the presence of the risen Lord, perhaps he forgot all his conditions. Perhaps the only thing he could spit out was, "My Lord and my God." In other words, perhaps the presence of the risen Lord blotted out Thomas's petty skepticisms and puny

proofs and arrogant arguments. This was the glory of the risen Lord, and the only appropriate response was to confess him as Lord and God.

And that's another reason I like Thomas. He knew when he was beat. He knew there was a time to shut up and bow down....

Additional Thoughts

- So, it may be understatement to say that the mood of this Psalm is happiness and satisfaction. If you were to write a Psalm right now, what would your mood be? What is the state of your relationship with God?
- What do you think is motivating God to keep trying? After Peter denied him (three times), and the disciples ditched him at the cross, and now, hidden in this room, the disciples are ignoring Mary's plain example. Why do you think God keeps trying with the disciples? With us?

