

## TRYING FAITH

Scriptures: II Kings 7:3-16; Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Over the last several weeks we have received many good questions of faith that we will talk about in sermons this summer. Most of them concern *what* we believe. But several people have written questions about *why* we believe. One person said, “How do we know that religion is something we should believe in? Is there a way to prove that God made the world?” Another wrote, “There are times when I question God’s existence. How do I work through doubts in faith?” Another person said, “Some of my friends at school don’t believe in God. How do I show them that God is their Father and loves them and is watching over them?”

These are great questions. I recently read a book called *Here If You Need Me* by Kate Braestrup, a law enforcement chaplain in Maine. Early in the book she writes,

When it was clear that I was determined to enter the ministry, my younger brother sent me a congratulatory e-mail, full of concerned fraternal inquiries about minister’s pay scales and employment benefits. It wasn’t until the end of the note that he asked the pressing question: “Dear Kate,” he wrote, “you don’t really believe in God, do you?” (p. 47).

An interesting question to ask of someone entering the ministry! Kate knew that her brother had always been a skeptic and somewhat of a rebel, so she could imagine the thoughts going through his mind. She imagined him writing to her something like this:

[Recently] I came across an article about a neurological disorder called temporal lobe epilepsy. This disorder induces, among other symptoms, overwhelming, oceanic sensations of religious awe. Maybe—and don’t take this the wrong way; I offer this with purest brotherly concern—maybe you have this disorder? Present since birth, it has expressed itself under the stress of being recently widowed. But don’t panic! I’m sure this condition could be cured or controlled with medication. Visit your doctor soon, please, before you end up as pope (p. 49).

There you have it: faith as a psychiatric disorder. The brother, it seems, has a more bracing view of reality. He says to Kate,

There is no God. Gaze up at night and you will stare into a vast, black universe, a place in which our neurons spark to no effect, like signal flares no one will ever see (p. 54).

This last comment sets up the question I want to ask in this sermon. If you don’t believe in God, then what do you believe in? Trying to prove the existence of God is a losing battle. You will never convince someone to believe in God whose heart is not already open to it. Nor will you ever prove it to yourself. The better approach is to ask, What do you believe instead? If you do not believe in God, in what or whom do you believe?

That is the question Joshua asks in our first scripture lesson. He says, “Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve.” The question is not whether you have faith but in what. Do you believe in God, or do you believe in a vast, empty universe in which our neurons spark to no effect, like signal flares no one will ever see?

Now we are ready for our second scripture lesson. Turn to II Kings 7, beginning at verse 3 (OT, p. 338). This is one of my all time favorite Bible stories. One of the cities of Israel, Samaria, was under siege by the Arameans, who came from the area around Syria. The city was surrounded. All supplies were cut off, and the people inside the city were beginning to starve. But a prophet of the Lord named Elisha tells the people, “Tomorrow about this time a measure of choice meal shall be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel,” meaning that by this time tomorrow food will be cheap and abundant. The story begins at verse 3.

(Read II Kings 7:3-16)

The thing I like about this story is that God has already saved the people of Israel from the Arameans, they just don’t know it. From the city it looks like the Aramean camp is still occupied. All the tents, horses, and military hardware are still in place surrounding the city, but the Aramean troops are gone. They fled in the middle of the night. The prophet Elisha told the people of Israel that God will deliver them, but they do not believe it, so they huddle in the city starving to death while all the food they could want is waiting for them in the Aramean camp.

Meanwhile the good news is discovered by four men with leprosy. God often uses the most unlikely people to bring us the good news. The four men go back to tell the king, but the king does not believe them. Why? Because from the city he cannot see what God has done. You cannot see what God has done for you or what God can still do for you if you sit at home and wait for someone to prove it to you. The king did not believe the good news of what God had done for them. He thought it was a trick, or a neurological disorder.

But the alternative to faith is starving. That is what the king finally realized. The alternative to believing in God is a vast, empty universe in which our prayers are nothing more than signal flares that no one will ever see. You can believe that, if you want. You can believe that our universe is a vast collection of atoms and neurons devoid of any meaning, grace, or hope. But you will end up sitting in the fortress of your intellectual honesty starving to death, while outside God has wonderful gifts for you, if you will only come and see.

One more story. In *The Silver Chair*, book four of C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, two children named Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb, along with a marshwiggle named Puddleglum set out to rescue the prince of Narnia from an underground prison where he is held by an evil witch. In reality the witch has already been defeated, just like the army of the Arameans. She has no power to force the children to stay in her underground prison. But she tries to trap them in her underground world by convincing them that her underground world is the only world—that there is no world above them with grass, trees, and sky, no real Narnia ruled by a great lion named Aslan, who is C. S. Lewis' symbol for Jesus. Here is how she does it:

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[The Witch] took out a musical instrument rather like a mandolin. She began to play it with her fingers--a steady, monotonous thrumming that you didn't notice after a few minutes. But the less you noticed it, the more it got into your brain and your blood. This also made it hard to think. After she had thrummed for a time ... she began speaking in a sweet, quiet voice.

"Narnia?" she said. "Narnia? ... There is no land called Narnia."

"Yes, there is though, Ma'am," said Puddleglum. ...

"Indeed," said the Witch. "Tell me, I pray you, where that country is?"

"Up there," said Puddleglum, stoutly, pointing overhead. "I don't know exactly where."

"How?" said the Queen, with a kind of soft, musical laugh, "Is there a country up among the stones and mortar of the roof?" ...

"Oh, don't be so silly," said Scrubb, who was fighting hard against the enchantment of the sweet smell and the thrumming. "As if you didn't know! It's up above, up where you can see the sky and the sun and the stars." ...

"What is this *sun* that you all speak of? Do you mean anything by the word?"

"Yes, we jolly well do," said Scrubb.

"Can you tell me what it's like?" asked the Witch (*thrum, thrum, thrum*, went the strings).

"Please it your Grace," said the Prince, very coldly and politely. "You see that lamp. It is round and yellow and gives light to the whole room; and hangeth moreover from the roof. Now that thing which we call the sun is like the lamp, only far greater and brighter. It giveth light to the whole Overworld and hangeth in the sky."

"Hangeth from what, my lord?" asked the Witch; and then, while they were all still thinking how to answer her, she added, with another of her soft, silvery laughs. "You see? When you try to think out clearly what this *sun* must be, you cannot tell me. You can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your *sun* is a dream; and there is nothing in the dream that was not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing; the *sun* is but a tale, a children's story."

"Yes, I see now," said Jill in a heavy, hopeless tone. "It must be so." And while she said this, it seemed to her to be very good sense. ... At last (however), with an effort that seemed to take all the good out of her, she said: "There's Aslan."

"Aslan?" said the Witch, quickening ever so slightly the pace of her thrumming. "What a pretty name! What does it mean?"

"He is the great Lion who called us out of our own world," said Scrubb, "and sent us into this to find Prince Rilian."

"What is a *lion*?" asked the Witch.

"O hang it all!" said Scrubb. "Don't you know? How can we describe it to her? Have you ever seen a cat?"

"Surely," said the Queen. "I love cats."

"Well a lion is a little bit--only a little bit, mind you--like a huge cat--with a mane. ... And it's yellow. And terrifically strong."

The Witch shook her head. "I see," she said, "that we should do not better with your *lion*, as you call it, than we did with your *sun*. You have seen lamps, and so you imagined a bigger and better lamp and called it the *sun*. You've seen cats, and now you want a bigger and better cat, and it's called a *lion*. ... You can put nothing into your make-believe without copying it from the real world, this world of mine, which is the only world" (pp. 151-157).

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Do you see how everything we might use to prove God can be dismissed as wishful thinking, as a projection of our own needs and desires? For the paranoid and the skeptic there is always an answer: temporal lobe epilepsy. But finally Puddleglum, the most pessimistic of the bunch, speaks up. He says to the witch,

"One word, Ma'am. ... All you've been saying is quite right, I shouldn't wonder. I'm a chap who always like to know the worst and then put the best face I can on it. So I won't deny any of what you said. But there's one thing more to be said, even so. Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up all those things--trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seems a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's the funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for our supper, if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we're leaving your court and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland. Not that our lives will be very long, I should think; but that's small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say" (pp. 158-159).

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Faith is not something you prove; it is something you try, just like Puddleglum, just like the men with leprosy, just like the followers of Jesus. Faith is a decision, a commitment to serve and follow the Lord, knowing that the other gods this world has to offer will leave you empty.

- Ken Onstot  
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