

Preacher statement: I am preaching this sermon to my congregation on doubt in the darkest times and how we have a choice of how to respond (acknowledge God's presence or not).

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

The scripture readings today echo so many sentiments of darkness and light and doubt against hope. I invite you today to not only see the light in the darkness and the hope amongst the despair, but to be the light in the darkness and hope among those in despair. In this gospel we open with what was a grim scene. Jesus is being crucified. The term “excruciating” comes from the Latin phrase meaning “out crucifying” which gives enough context to the experience Jesus went through. This form of torture and persecution was meant to dissuade many from repeating crimes the individual who may be crucified may have committed. In the case of the two crucified beside Jesus, it was the crime of theft that is attributed to them. And what was Jesus's crime? We have many charges against

him as presented in court by the Pharisees and people of God ranging from blasphemy, violating the Sabbath, and what seemed to be the jeering crowds favorite at the end: treason. How ironic. They accused Jesus of treason as they mockingly yelled “hail king of the jews” and derided, “we have no king but Cesar.” Don’t you find it oddly placed that it is on Christ the King Sunday where we see Jesus, the savior and king for the people of God and all mankind, in what is probably the darkest moment of his ministry? Why are we not at a different point in his ministry celebrating his resurrection right now on Christ the King Sunday? Why are we here next to Jesus in his darkest moment? I invite you today to join Christ not as a spectator or a passer-byer as so many were that day, but I invite you today to stand next to Christ as the two criminals were that day in his darkest moment. We will come back to them in a moment.

In the study book we are reading within our vestry group titled, “How We Learn to be Brave” by Episcopal Bishop of Washington, Mariann

Edgar Rudde, Bishop Mariann makes a reference of the choices we make that lead us to where we are today. She reflects on the choice to “start” and commence. She reflects on Jesus’s ministry and how He not only encouraged but regularly reiterated over and over again the message of what was to come. Many scholars state that this was in preparation for others to know that the way of cross was going to be difficult, but lead to ultimate salvation. The disciples attempted to listen but never really understood. I think, like a teacher trying to teach his students 7 different ways to Sunday, Jesus tried his best through parables, lessons and acts of miracles. I now wonder in hindsight if Jesus was not only preparing the disciples, but also himself. In my only silly way, I think of the dreadful things we agonize over such as the meeting at work that we have to attend. You all are probably familiar with that one. It’s an end-of-day one that drags for too much longer than it should and you are anticipating with dread knowing that, without a doubt, it is going to be a painful meeting. Or maybe we agonize over a messy breakup. I know that recently I had

to separate from a long-time friend whose struggle with addiction was getting out of control. I know the breakup with him was going to be horrible. You want to guess how it went? It was messy and horrible. I remember agonizing over it after I decided at the beginning of the week what I had to do was best for him, for my family's safety and for myself no matter how messy and horrible it would be. I bring these silly situations up because I cannot imagine what Jesus agonized over knowing what was to come: his crucifixion at the end. In the Garden of Gethsemane at The Mount of Olives only a few hours before his kangaroo trial that would lead to his crucifixion, The Gospel of Luke mentions in Chapter 22: 39-46 how Jesus agonizes over what was to come praying for God to "remove this cup from him." The induced stress caused what the scripture described as sweat with "great drops of blood." In the modern medical world, we know this condition as hema-to-hidrosis which is known to be a condition under in which humans under extreme stress will begin to sweat blood. Here we have the incarnate Son of

God who we are revering on Christ the King Sunday showing stress and dare we say, doubt? Is that not an interesting thing. Here Jesus, who knows how this entire scenario for salvation will be played out from his crucifixion to resurrection, is showing us doubt with a thought of “maybe this is not such a good idea”. He is praying to God, “ to take this cup”. Here we are next to Jesus in his darkest hour trying to figure this out with him and why is the way to Cross like this. Should we not see a reverent God king today on Christ the King Sunday? Why are we instead seeing a doubting frightened Nazarene carpenter turned teacher doubting?

Is doubt such a bad thing though? We all know many Christians in history who were pillars of the church and founding saints. I think the mistake of many non-Christians looking from outside in is to think that faith is blind action without thought. I will regularly debate with one of my longtime high-school friends who is a self-proclaimed atheist. I know the polite etiquette rings to never discuss

“church or politics,” but he interestingly always brings up the concept of faith and how much he struggles with it. What baffles him is sometimes the concept of how one can struggle so much in their doubt with God if they already have faith? My friend looks at faith as a magic wand or “opiate of the masses”, as he unabashedly quotes Karl Mark. He sees faith as blissful ignorance of what is out there in the world with the knowledge of an existence of a god. In our readings today Jesus, struggles with his own faith and these same struggles echo so many times throughout our history. In numerous letters which she repeatedly begged her superior to destroy, Mother Teresa described her experiences for profound spiritual darkness that haunted her for 50 years. She admits that she didn't practice what she preached, and laments the stark contrast between her exterior demeanor and her interior desolation and is quoted saying "The smile is a big cloak which covers a multitude of pains My cheerfulness is a cloak by which I cover the emptiness and misery." Martin Luther, the German Monk and founder of the protestant

reformation, himself struggled despair, darkness and shall we say doubt which he coined with the German word *An-fech-tungen* to describe his chronic interior struggles with God. Scholars struggle to evoke the rich complexity of *An-fech-tungen*; it's a word that's hard to translate but easy to appreciate to its basic English translation as “delicious despair” or crisis of certainty for which the believer could only cast himself upon the mercy of God. This is how some famous founders and pillars of the church struggled with the concept of faith and doubt. I sometimes see my friend in that same light with his own spiritual and faith journey as Mother Teresa and Martin Luther sought their own faith. Not a logical atheist but an angry child of God looking for answers and struggling with doubt.

So the question is what do we do with this doubt. The likes of such great Church leaders like Martin Luther and Mother Teresa struggled with it. Jesus had doubt himself in his 11th hour at the Garden of Gethsemane as he prayed for Christ to take the cup. I invite you

back again to the seen with Jesus being Crucified as the answer lies in the exchange, he has with the other two criminals next to him.

Here are two men in almost mirrored circumstances facing immeasurable pain as the death of crucifixion approaches. Despite both their circumstances, they both have very different reactions.

Reading directly as it says in the gospel of Luke, “One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding [Jesus] and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other [criminal] rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’” The first criminal scoffs and demands of God in his moment of pain and doubt. Yet the second criminal, in the same circumstance, chooses to remember and cry for mercy at Jesus asking Jesus to remember him.

I think we forget that faith is not, as my logical atheist friend would

think, a magic wand to save you from the pains of doubt and the darkness of the world. Faith is what directs us to the light and towards hope in these dark moments. I invite you to this scene with the criminals because we are them in the midst of this dark and painful world. We have two choices in our moments of doubt. We can choose darkness and despair in these moments of doubts, or we can choose faith and the light in knowing Jesus is there right beside us as He was with the criminals offering salvation even in these moments .

Easier said than done right? It feels like an empty platitude. Choose to hope over doubt. Choose lightness over dark. We are given two decisions as the criminals were given. What if there is a promise in choosing as the repentant criminal did? What if it means so much more than we can understand? What if this decision ends up being a call to action? Jesus in his moments of doubt even cried out to God in the Gospel of Mark Chapter 15: 34, “My God, My God, Why have

you forsaken me.” Jesus was facing doubt there on the cross among the two criminals, and he still showed action of promised salvation to the criminal even in his doubt. In this crucible moment challenging him, He chose light by showing the repentant criminal what hope looked like in the darkest moments by stating, “truly I tell you, you will be in paradise with me.” We are called to do more than only choose “hope and light” over “doubt and darkness” as the criminal did. We are called to, even in that doubt, be the light of Christ’s love as exemplified as Jesus showed us on the cross with the criminal. Dr. Martin Luther King is quoted saying **Darkness Cannot Drive Out Darkness; Only Light Can Do That.** That is what Christ did in this Gospel of Luke today. The darkness of His own doubt is casted out through the actions of his reassurance to the criminal in this Gospel.

The darkness Jesus experienced was immeasurable beyond doubt as he took on the ultimate sacrifice for the salvation of all. His

actions were that of light and hope for all in the doubt and dark world, and, even in this moment, he had time to show how light can drive out darkness when confronted by two criminals. We are called to do the same in the darkest hour of humanity. We are to show hope through similar actions. I see it in the CASE donations last weekend as so many church members rallied to refill food pantries when so many were being emptied. I saw it during the fires at the beginning of the year as I was driving to my office that day and seeing so many fleeing household coming with luggage to be taken in by friends and family in town. I see it in the Friendsgiving celebrated here where many of us choose the church as the body and family of Christ inviting others to join who may not have that the same love within their own family and households this holiday season. I see it in the giving to ministry of food baskets to veterans in need this Thanksgiving week. I see it in the Ottis ministry as volunteers outreach to college kids reminding them there are others

who care about them and their well-being when the world sometimes shows otherwise.

So which criminal are you when facing the darkness and doubt? Do you choose to accept the doubt and decry to God choosing darkness to drive out darkness? Or are you the other criminal who struggles with doubt and chooses light? Do you accept the light and hope during the doubt? And will you accept the call to be beacon of hope as Christ was on the cross with the two criminals once Christ or someone else shares that light of hope with you?

Having doubt does not make you any less Christian or even less faithful. Look at Martin Luther or Mother Teresa who struggled with their own faith. I also think of my logical atheist friend who I quietly acknowledge as an angry child of God who is searching and is on his own journey of doubt trying to find the light, and, for whatever reason, chooses to bring it up everytime to his "naïve friend" like me. That is his search, and my duty is to share the light and hope with

him of Christ's promise of salvation and love. I know he is searching and hoping. I see that.

Christ faced doubt in his moment of trials on his journey to the Cross. I do not find it coincidental that Christ the King Sunday falls on the weekend before Advent. A moment of waiting. A moment of anticipation. What joy and hope we can find with the promise of Christ and that of his triumphant arrival. We journey through darkness and doubt so we may find the light of Christ. Afterall, does not Christ's love shine brightest in the darkest hour? And what is the power of fiery hope if not to rage and burn against the blanket dark of doubt. Turn your light on and choose to hope as Marin Luther did, as Mother Teresa did, as the criminal on the cross did and as Jesus did for us all.