

Confessions of a God-Botherer

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 6, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*O come, let us sing to the Lord;
 let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
 let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the Lord is a great God,
 and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
 the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
 and the dry land, which his hands have formed.*

*O come, let us worship and bow down,
 let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
 and we are the people of his pasture,
 and the sheep of his hand.*

*O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
 as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me,
 and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation
 and said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray,
 and they do not regard my ways.’
Therefore in my anger I swore,
 ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ (Psalm 95, NRSV)*

I was probably 10 years old when I first saw the classic Cecil B. De Mille production “The Ten Commandments.” Its grand, sweeping telling of the story of the Exodus has stayed with me ever since. I will *always* imagine Moses as Charlton Heston! And Pharaoh will *always* have the look and voice of the incomparable Yul Brynner: “So let it be written, so let it be done!”

The movie brought to life the foundational story of the Old Testament – the story of the Exodus, the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt and its march of freedom to the Promised Land. It is this narrative which is the basis of the Passover celebration and is fundamental to Jewish identity.

Almost a thousand years later in the Biblical chronology, the people had come full circle. They had lived in what had seemed to them to be peace and safety, and then had seen it all come crashing down. They had seen thousands of their own killed without mercy by Babylonian invaders. They had cried out in despair as their temple burned. They had lost their homes with no hope for recovery. They had been forced into exile – to a land far, far away, where their children would be taught the customs of the conquerors.

But as with the darkness of Egypt, so with the hopelessness of Babylon ... The Spirit of Life and Freedom found a way where there was no way, and the people were delivered. Like their ancestors before them, some in their midst lived long enough to see the coming of the Dawn, to see the Light after the long, dark night – and to know the pure elation of a Second Chance, the joy of returning Home.

The Psalm we read today comes from that experience. As Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrases it: "*Come, let's shout praises to God; raise the roof for the Rock who saved us! Let's march into his presence singing praises, lifting the rafters with our hymns!*" It then moves from celebration to the glad acknowledgement that God is *God*, and is ever worthy of our highest praise and deepest adoration.

But then, about halfway through it, something happens. The tone of the psalm seems to change entirely. Did you notice it? One moment we are lost in praise and wonder, and then in the next breath, we are warned not to harden our hearts as that Exodus generation of God's people did. Again, in the words of *The Message* –

*Drop everything and listen, listen as he speaks:
"Don't turn a deaf ear as in the Bitter Uprising,
As on the day of the Wilderness Test,
when your ancestors turned and put me to the test.
For forty years they watched me at work among them,
as over and over they tried my patience.
And I was provoked—oh, was I provoked!
'Can't they keep their minds on God for five minutes?
Do they simply refuse to walk down my road?'
Exasperated, I exploded,
'They'll never get where they're headed,
never be able to sit down and rest.'"*

Why does it do this? Why this turn from a psalm so exultant to one so ... angry? The clues to the answer to this question lie in the mysterious references that are made plain in the New Revised Standard Version. It reminds the rejoicing people of an episode in their ancestral past – an episode which is re-counted in the book of Exodus, chapter 17.

It's true in the broad sense that the story of the Exodus is a story of life and freedom, but within this larger story is the oft-told story of a wayward people with a short memory. Seeing the

action on a TV screen in the span of a few hours underscores the silliness of the people's doubt, but perhaps even as children in Sunday School we had the thought, "How can these idiot people who saw the Red Sea part in two then doubt God out in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land? They've seen so much and yet they *still* question the Almighty!"

The Exodus 17 account is but one such example. It tells of the Israelites complaining to Moses because they had come to a place without enough water. They quarreled with Moses, and Moses said that in so doing they were actually questioning *God*. Moses complained to God, and God told Moses to strike a rock and water would come out of it for the people. He did, and it did. And yet *still* they asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Their faith was fleeting and their memory weak. Even after *all* that God had done for them, they still fell into a panic when things did not appear to be going as they wished.

This is the story as it has been passed down to us, the image that we've been taught. The halting Israelites come off as pretty pathetic, worthy only of our scorn and of God's condemnation. What is needed, the Psalm *seems* to tell us, is an unquestioning faith and an absolute obedience.

Only somehow that just doesn't sit right with me. I find this psalm unsettling ... its twist disturbing ... its ending even cruel. I suppose it would be easy to condemn this people of the past when we forget our own experiences of life. Are they really so different from us? Are we really so different from them?

It's all so easy – too easy – to write off an entire generation because, over 40 long years of seemingly pointless wandering, they entertained ... some *doubts*. The more I think about it, the more I want to rush to their defense, to raise a voice of protest *with* them, even if that makes Moses – or *God* – a little upset. Speaking if only for myself, I'm too human, all *too* human, to write them off.

Faith as trust is easy when life is easy. But what about when it's not, when no matter what blessings you've known before, you find yourself lost in a wilderness – whether the wilderness of Sinai or the wilderness of loss and fear. Perhaps you too have sojourned in such a place.

Some would say that faith is only really faith when it is un-riddled by doubt ... when it stops questioning ... when it perfectly "lets go and lets God" ... and anything less earns God's condemnation. But then I remember the struggles in the lives of people I have loved ... I remember struggles in my own life.

You see, I can't quite muster up a doubt-free faith that would avoid this psalm's disapproval. Sometimes I can't quite find myself *able* to "raise the roof" in praise. No matter how much good I've seen in my life – and I have seen more than my share – my Hallelujah is still what songwriter Leonard Cohen memorably called a *broken* Hallelujah. Perhaps your Hallelujahs feel broken too sometimes.

It's not that you don't want to let it all go in the rapture of praise ... it's that you're not always sure you have it in you. That it wouldn't be honest. That it wouldn't be *real*. The wounds are real, and if we're willing to acknowledge them, the doubts are also real.

I'm not really talking about doubts of the mind – whether God is one or three persons, or in what way we might understand Jesus as divine. I mean doubts of the *heart*, of the *soul*. The kind of doubt that sometimes makes us question as the Israelites did, “whether the Lord is really among us or not” ... The kind of doubt that arises in those moments when we’re tired, or lonely, or afraid, when trust and faith are hard. We’ve all been there. Perhaps some of us are there right now. And all of us will be there again.

In this vein, the beloved author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner once wrote some words that have stayed with me for a long time about doubt and the life of faith. He said, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep.” But then in the same breath, he adds something remarkable: *“Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”*

What an image! So, doubt in the life of faith can be *good*?! Most of us were taught as young people that we should just put away our doubts ... that we should just *believe*, and if that starts becoming hard, then we should just *try harder*! Many of us were taught that whatever the question was that life posed, that the Bible has the answer, and that once you had it, you tell yourself, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!”

I don’t mean to make light of someone’s beliefs if that’s where you are. I would only push back to allow for another possibility. Because you see, my experience has been completely different. I have traveled a road that has taught me that my striving for an authentic faith *requires* the risk of less than complete certainty. It *demands* that I live in that wild, forbidding space between the way the world *is* and the way it *should be*. In a sense, my life of faith *needs* my doubts. It *needs* my uncertainty. It *needs* my anguished cries to what sometimes seems like a silent Heaven. Or as Buechner put it somewhere else, “If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”

I think that what many fear about allowing doubt is that it might halt the faith journey. And there is a form of doubt that can do this – giving us license to focus only on ourselves and our own hurt, and to give way to cynicism and despair. But there is also doubt which keeps a conversation – a relationship – alive, even as we acknowledge uncertainty. It can be a summons to journey *further*, to dig *deeper*, to seek the truth about ourselves, to grow even when it hurts ... and never finally to let go of the hope that the One whose face we seek is our ultimate Destiny, the Home which awaits us.

This season through which we have been living over the last several months – and which threatens to continue for some time longer – has tested us, and it continues to do so. Many of us are just tired. We all want life to go back to the way it was. We may have entertained some

discomfiting thoughts – some doubts? – about God and life and faith. And that's OK. What we are feeling or thinking is perfectly normal – we'd be super-human if we didn't live in that space sometimes. as doubting believers ... as believing doubters. But still we hang on.

The Scottish spiritual writer Richard Holloway calls such believing doubters *God-botherers*. I love this phrase. A God-botherer can be a faithful churchgoer or a terminal seeker, a person whose faith is usually strong or a person whose faith is on life support. Sometimes a God-botherer is even one who would tell you that they don't think they have faith anymore.

But what these sorts have in common is a dogged refusal – in the face of no small pressure – to let go of the possibility of Faith and of Hope, the possibility that what can be seen and measured and reasoned out is not all that there is ... the possibility that somewhere in the midst of the insanity, the cruelty, the unfairness of the world is a Presence which would endow our lives with meaning and make our struggles worthwhile. Like Jacob who wouldn't let loose of his divine opponent until he was blessed, God-botherers – no matter what struggles they face or questions they raise – won't walk away, haunted as they are by the crazy thought that there is a God who won't walk away either.

Nothing about this is easy. But here's some Good News: We're in this together, for the long haul. I'm not walking away. And you're not walking away. We're *family*, and whatever or whoever brought us together, we know that we do not make this journey of faith – in the face of doubt – alone. We are a community of *real* people who have covenanted to be support for the weary ... to be encouragement along the way. It can sometimes feel like a wandering through a wilderness, but even when it does, we may discover God's gracious provision if we are true to one another. And when this happens, we may discover a Strength not our own, a Love able to sustain us on our journey, and to heal those broken hallelujahs.

To the Glory of God. Amen.