

Advent Lutheran Church  
Embracing Doubt  
October 13, 2024  
Genesis 17:17-22, 18:10-15  
John 20:24-29

I'm amazed when individuals, churches, or even denominations try to fully explain God. It feels so – well, unsatisfying. Ultimately it diminishes the divine.

Any faith that requires strict adherence to narrow understandings is one that expects full assent and total commitment. It leaves no room for doubt and has no patience for questions. Perhaps that kind of a religion is part of your story. Or perhaps you have bumped into it a few times along your spiritual journey.

In contrast, today we begin a new sermon series titled “A More Spacious Christianity.” The overall big idea of what’s ahead today and for the next several weeks is this: there’s room for you here.

Today, we focus on doubt. If you are a doubter, you are in the right place. There is room for you at Advent Lutheran Church. And, you are in a good place as a follower of the Way of Jesus. In fact, the Christianity I know, love, and seek to follow is a religion with room enough for lots of questions. It also welcomes doubt.

I was blessed to meet Debie Thomas last month in Minneapolis when she gave a book talk to the Preaching Justice Fellows. She shared with us about her new book, which is deeply personal in nature. It tells parts of her story while inviting the readers to explore their own.

If you don't know any of Debie's story, let me give you a little background. As a young child she immigrated to the United States from India with her family. Her father and grandfather were evangelical pastors. And she was raised in Boston in churches that wanted her to learn from the example of Doubting Thomas so that she would not become a Doubting Debie.

Reflecting on her view of Thomas growing up, she writes

He was everything I wanted not to be. He was everything I was instructed not to be. Curious. Skeptic. Stubborn. Daring.<sup>1</sup>

Many years later, as a graduate student studying creative writing, Debie experienced a crisis of faith. To help sort it out, she planned a summer trip to India that included a Thomas focused pilgrimage.

According to the story in apocryphal and pseudepigraphal The Acts of Thomas, the disciples gathered in the upper room after Jesus's ascension to figure out how to carry out the Great Commission. The disciples cast lots to see who would go where and India fell to Thomas. Rather than gladly accepting his assignment, Thomas asked to go anywhere but India. This refusal made Thomas a double doubter: he doubted Jesus and then questioned his role in spreading the Gospel.

Ultimately, however, he accepted this assignment. The journey changed him and his evangelism changed India. And, as Debie Thomas made her way from site to site as part of her pilgrimage, she found herself coming to more deeply appreciate Thomas.

She writes:

. . . I wonder if Thomas represents the best we might become . . . I see a man who yearned for a living encounter with Jesus – an encounter of his own, unmediated by the claims and assumptions of others. A man who wouldn't settle for hand-me-down-religion but demanded a first-hand experience of God . . . <sup>2</sup>

Personally, this is what I have always longed for and sought after. In fact, just around the time Debie was taking her Thomas pilgrimage in India I was launching a blog called So What Faith. I started 15 years ago as a way of writing about matters of faith

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas. A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity (Broadleaf Books, 2024), 1.244

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.244

that matter and inviting others to join the conversation. Early on, what made my blog unique was its focus on questions rather than answers.

Whatever the hot topic was in the news at any given time, I sought to learn about it so I could present it to my readers. I did so not in so I could present data and share my perspective, but rather to summarize the data available and ask hard questions to encourage my readers to form their own opinions. Nearly all of those early posts ended with a series of “so what questions?”

Then and now, I believe that there are no simple answers. I also believe that struggling with the big questions of faith is essential.

- Who do you say that Jesus is?
- How do you believe in a God you cannot see?
- What does it mean to you love God and love your neighbor?
- How does your faith inform how you vote?
- Why do bad things so often happen to good people?

There is room enough to ask these hard questions here. And, there is safe space in which to navigate developing your own answers.

The often-quoted Presbyterian pastor and prolific author Frederick Buechner writes

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. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.<sup>3</sup>

Doubt isn't something to fear; it is one of the ways we explore our faith and truly make it our own.

Looking at this morning's Old Testament lesson, we see two of the biggest names – Abraham and Sarah – caught in an episode of doubt. Doubting Abraham and Doubting Sarah doubt that God

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<sup>3</sup> Available at [www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/26/doubt](http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/26/doubt) (originally published in *Wishful Thinking* and later in *Beyond Words*).

can bring about new life through their old bodies. In effect they tell God, "God you are good and your power is great, but you must have forgotten that we are senior citizens." And then they followed these remarks with laughter – lots of laughter.

This was the beginning of their story of doubt. The end was much different. The end – the birth of their son Isaac – was another new beginning. And, we know that Isaac would become the grandfather of the twelve tribes of Israel – more new beginnings.

Doubt abounds. In the more familiar Scripture reading about doubt from John's Gospel, Doubting Thomas doubts that Jesus is walking around in a new body. His mind cannot believe something that is so outside of his lived experience it seems nonsensical.

This was the beginning of his story of doubt. The end was much different. The end – touching Jesus and confirming his identity – was another new beginning. And following this, Thomas spread the Gospel to places near and far, including India. His impact was so significant that he is now known as the patron saint of India. Many more new beginnings followed.

Doubt is everywhere. In Debbie Thomas's story, she doubted that doubt had a constructive role to play in her own story of faith. She was raised to believe that the only way to be Christian was to live free from all doubts

This was the beginning of her story of doubt. The end was much different. The end – embracing doubt as a normal, healthy, and helpful part of faith – was another new beginning. And, in claiming the title of Doubting Debbie for herself, she has opened many new doors for herself and for others. Now, she is a candidate for ordination in the Episcopal church.

I thank God for doubt and for doubters:

- Doubting Abraham and Doubting Sarah
- Doubting Debbie and Doubting Thomas
- Doubting You and Doubting Me

Doubt isn't something to be avoided; doubt should be embraced and embodied.

Doubt should be celebrated for the gift it is: the ants in the pants of our faith.

Siblings in Christ, may we

- persist in doubting,
- continue questioning, and
- keep on wiggling.

Amen.