

Advent Lutheran Church  
Welcoming Doubt  
February 16, 2025  
Luke 7:18-23

About a decade ago a story made the rounds on social media. Variants of it still pop up now and again. I share it with you this morning knowing that it is more legend than historical account while also trusting it has much to teach us.

It was a special Sunday in the life of this congregation – the Sunday their new minister would be introduced. As folks arrived for worship, they noticed a homeless man lingering near the main entrance. This was unusual – very unusual.

People did what they so often do in uncomfortable situations – they tried to escape it. Most people avoided eye contact and hurried by the man. The few who stopped to engage were made even more uncomfortable when he asked if they could spare a few dollars.

Finally the newcomer decided to make his way inside. He found the sanctuary and selected a seat close to the altar. Ushers, noticing the concerned look of the regulars, redirected him to a much less noticeable spot in the back. The safety team kept their eye on him to make sure he didn't bother anyone.

The man everyone sought to ignore worshipped quietly alongside them. The service went on normally until the new pastor was introduced. After the chair of the search committee finished sharing the story of the search process and a bit about the congregation's new pastor, he invited the pastor forward.

Everyone present was shocked when the man they assumed was homeless came forward. Many were embarrassed by how they had treated or avoided their new pastor when they had wrongly assumed he was a homeless visitor.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A quick Google search of Pastor Jeremiah Steepok will yield stories, memes, and blog posts about this account. For more on how it overlaps with actual behavior of real pastors see "Pastor Disguises Himself as Homeless Man" on Snopes, available at <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/pastor-present-2/>

I share this story today not because I think this is how your next settled minister will behave on their first Sunday at Advent. Instead, I offer it to invite you to think about your expectations. Place yourself in the story and be honest about how you would have reacted.

Just as good church members – of actual congregations as well as fictitious ones – know what to expect of a prospective pastor, John the Baptist knew what to expect of Jesus.

Remember siblings in Christ, this is the same John the Baptist who has been as strongly supportive of Jesus' ministry as anyone. He is the one who was preaching in the wilderness. He is the one who baptized Jesus. He is the one who has prepared the way.

And, now, from a prison cell, he's questioning it all. He's asking, did I get this all wrong? Is Jesus not who I thought he was?

John the Baptist is so unsure of himself that he sends two of his disciples to Jesus to demand answers.

How did John the Baptist get to this point? The honest answer is "we don't know." Scholars advance a number of possibilities.

I have to believe part of the answer is situational. John was in prison. He wasn't there because he was violent. John was imprisoned because he spoke the truth to power.

You might remember that John was a very blunt preacher. While his directness was a strength, it was also what landed him in jail and would later get him beheaded.

John spoke ill of a politician. He told anyone who would listen that Herod Antipas was anything but a moral man. He questioned the ruler's marriage and, according to Luke, he also questioned "all of the other evil things" Herod had done.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:19.

Now, after spending some time in prison, John is questioning everything. He's remembering all that he had learned about the Messiah and he's wondering why things are not yet going as he imagined. He and others have expectations for the Messiah that Jesus hasn't fulfilled. They were looking for someone who was more of a conquering King and less of an itinerant preacher and healer.

Imprisoned indefinitely and beginning to second guess himself and question the value of his life's work, he sends a couple of disciples to ask Jesus what he wishes he could ask himself. They look Jesus in the eye and ask, "Jesus are you the one we've been waiting for or not?"<sup>3</sup>

Jesus answers as only Jesus can. Rather than a simple yes or no reply, Jesus invites them to reflect on what they already know. He says, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."<sup>4</sup>

Put differently, Jesus tells them to tell John: "I am he. I am legit. I am the one you've been waiting for. The message I preached in my first sermon is the one I've embodied every day since."<sup>5</sup>

And, Jesus continues being who he always was while these disciples relay his message to John. Jesus' own affirmation of his identity is exactly what John needed to hear.

Maybe you are wondering about Pastor Jeremiah – the pastor in the story that I related earlier. Remember how his congregation doubted him because in one very visible way he didn't fit their expectations? He didn't look the part of the one they knew was soon to come.

And, yet, he was that pastor. He invited their doubt. And, I assume he also created space to help them overcome it.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 7:20.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 7:22.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:14-30.

As he spoke for the first time. As they started to get to know him for who he really was – not just based on his resume or a single unusual entrance. I picture Pastor Jeremiah inviting their questions and patiently responding to each and every one.

How much more patient and loving must Jesus have been with those who doubted him, including John the Baptist. Jesus' ministry was unlike anything anyone had ever seen before. Jesus knows that truly accepting him for who he is will be hard for his followers and becomes harder still when he is physically absent.

Jesus never condemns John for his doubt. Instead, Jesus welcomes his doubt and ours.

I don't know your story of doubt, but I imagine you have one.

In his retirement, United Methodist Pastor Martin Theilen has created Doubter's Parish to "help thinking people navigate faith in the twenty-first century."<sup>6</sup> As someone with considerable experience as a doubter, he offers us six lessons about religious doubt:

1. Doubt is unavoidable.
2. Doubt is acceptable.
3. Doubt is necessary.
4. Doubt is painful.
5. Doubt is survivable.
6. Doubt is beneficial<sup>7</sup>

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest who was named one of the best preachers in the English-speaking world, says this about doubt:

Here's the way I presently live with doubt. Doubt often brings me to poke at what I believe, and when it topples, I realize that was

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Theilen. "Welcome to Doubter's Parish!," available from [doubtersparish.com/](http://doubtersparish.com/)

<sup>7</sup> Martin Theilen. "Six Lessons I've Learned about Doubt," available from <https://doubtersparish.com/articles/six-lessons-ive-learned-about-doubt/>

an idol. And so doubt and disillusionment have been the divine gifts that have led me deeper into who God is.<sup>8</sup>

Siblings in Christ, let me testify to the importance of doubt. It is only because I encountered a Jesus who welcomed my doubt and communities of faith that lived and loved like Jesus enough to do the same, that I stand before you today.

If you are a doubter, you are in good company.

Famous doubters abound both in the Bible and throughout church history. Everyday doubters are all around us, including many of those gathered here in this sacred space.

Lord we believe, help our unbelief.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. An interview by Bob Abernathy for Religion & Ethics Newsweekly, March 9, 2007 — Originally published: July 7, 2006, available from [www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2007/03/09/march-9-2007-barbara-brown-taylor/1792/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2007/03/09/march-9-2007-barbara-brown-taylor/1792/)