

**Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room:
Are You Waiting for Another?**

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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The Third Sunday of Advent

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See what you think about this. It was written by a rabbi named Eric Yoffie. He is a speaker, writer, and is currently the President Emeritus of the Union for Reformed Judaism, the largest and most progressive arm of Judaism in North America. This is from an article he wrote titled “Doubt Is the Heart of Belief.” Here’s what he writes:

Doubt does not undermine belief. It is central to belief, an indispensable part of accepting God and the mandates of a religious tradition. Even fervent believers have doubts—lots of them.

He goes on to write about those whom he calls “in-your-face-believers.” We’ve all seen them, those religious believers who appear to have no doubts, no uncertainty about their faith at all. They speak of their faith often, sometimes loudly, and sometimes with an absence of humility. They can quote scripture. They stand their ground. And their sense of certainty can be intimidating.

Are these people really that certain? Do they have no doubts? Rabbi Yoffie says they do have doubts, and their apparent certainty may be covering their insecurity. He writes,

In my experience...these are the people who are eaten alive by doubts, and that is why they feel the need to compensate with unending religious preening and public affirmations of faith.

(Huffington Post, June 10, 2013)

I don’t know if all that is true, but I do believe the premise of his article is true. Doubt is the heart of belief. Doubt is an indispensable part of a growing, substantive faith. I know that’s not what most of us were taught. We were taught just the opposite. Don’t doubt. Don’t question.

Hold fast to the childhood teachings of your faith, which I'm convinced now is a quick road to disillusionment and unbelief.

I've mentioned before that I was once a fiery evangelist. I know some of you find that hard to believe, but it is true. I also had long hair. I was probably eighteen years old, preparing to go to college at Samford University, and preaching revivals in the country churches around Calhoun County. At one of those revivals, an older pastor, knowing I was going to be a religion major at Samford, took me aside and gave me this word of advice: "Don't you go over to Samford and let them steal your faith."

I've thought a lot about his advice through the years. Here's what I think he was trying to say. When you get over to Samford, David, you're going to hear educated religion professors teaching things that are in contradiction to what you learned in Sunday School and your youth group. Those professors are going to be persuasive. Some students are going to fall right in line with them. David, you don't be one of those students. Don't let those educated religion professors cause you to doubt.

So I went to Samford armed with that advice. My first semester I had an Old Testament class with Dr. Karen Joines, whom some of you know. He started talking about two creation stories, something called the Documentary Hypothesis, and how Adam and Eve might be archetypical stories and not literal history. Why, I had never heard anything like that in Sunday School or my youth group, so I went to the chairman of the religion department. Now, I tell you this by way of confession. I'm not proud of this moment in my college education, but it happened. I went to Dr. Mabry Lunceford, a Bible scholar and a prince of a man, and said, "Dr. Lunceford, we need to do something about Dr. Joines."

Dr. Lunceford took an interest in a young, naïve fiery evangelist and helped me open up to the possibility that God and faith were larger than what I knew from Sunday School and my youth group. Did those professors at Samford University steal my faith? No, they didn't steal it. They helped me expand it, to see that God and faith are far larger, far deeper, and far more mysterious than I could have imagined. In order to get there, I had to doubt. In order to expand, I had to doubt what I was taught in Sunday School and in my youth group. I had to doubt what my

beloved pastor said and what my saintly grandmother believed. For me that was a difficult process. Today I am tremendously grateful to Dr. Mabry Lunceford, who is now deceased. I am tremendously grateful to Dr. Karen Joines, who has preached here on multiple occasions. A friend and I drove to Shelby County a few years ago to see Dr. Joines and to tell him thank you. We thanked him for the gift he gave us and probably thousands of students who came through Samford University.

Drs. Lunceford and Joines helped me do what John the Baptist was doing in our text from Matthew 11. Did you notice John's question?

Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

John was in prison where he heard about "the deeds of the Christ." Let me insert a quick footnote here because this is important. "The Christ" was not a part of Jesus' name, though that is often how we use it. "The Christ" meant "the Messiah." It was his title, a description of his role in God's redemptive plan. So when we call Jesus "the Christ," we are calling him "Jesus, the Messiah."

Do you see what John was asking from behind his prison bars? He sent his disciples, his followers, to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come (i.e., the Messiah), or are we to wait for another?"

That was a major question for John the Baptist because he was already a believer, wasn't he? Remember, John baptized Jesus way back in Matthew 3. He was there when the heavens opened and the Spirit descended like a dove. He heard the voice from heaven say of Jesus, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." John was a believer eight chapters ago, right? He has already declared that he was not worthy to carry Jesus' sandals. While I baptize you with water, John preached to the people, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The winnowing fork is in his hand already, John declared. He will clear the threshing floor and gather the grain. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

That's what John expected from the Christ—judgment, a winnowing fork, unquenchable fire. He expected a Messiah who would arrive in dramatic fashion and overthrow the wicked and vindicate the

righteous. Like the religious Zealots of his day, John expected the Messiah to be a military man with a militant message. With the aid of Almighty God, he would overthrow evil King Herod and his oppressive Roman Empire.

But that hadn't happened. John was in prison, put there by evil King Herod. If Jesus was the Messiah, the coming one, at least as John understood the Messiah, he wasn't doing a very good job. So John expressed his doubt, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

I love Jesus' answer. He wasn't a "yes" or "no" kind of guy. He simply told John's disciples to look around and listen. If they would only look and listen, they would see signs of the Kingdom of Heaven. The blind were miraculously receiving their sight. The lame were getting up and walking. Lepers were being cleansed. The deaf were hearing again. Even the dead were being raised. If they would only look and listen, they would discover that good news was being preached to the poor.

The Kingdom of Heaven was coming, and John the Baptist would have to doubt his old vision of the Messiah to be a part of it. He would have to doubt the military Messiah and the militant message. He would have to doubt the judgment and unquenchable fire. He would have to doubt in order to believe. We don't know for sure what happened to John the Baptist's faith. We do know what Jesus said of him, "The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist."

The rabbi is right. Doubt is the heart of belief. It is not our enemy. Used properly doubt is our close friend. It can help our faith to expand, to see that God and faith are far larger, far deeper, and far more mysterious than we ever imagined. So if you're a doubter, I encourage you to embrace your doubt. Work with it. Explore it. Talk to others about it. Call me. I'd love to talk with you. This Advent season John the Baptist reminds us that sometimes we must doubt in order to believe. So let us make room for the Christ. Let every heart prepare him room.

Closing Prayer

Lord, our belief is not perfect, but we are honest. We believe that matters. Honor our honesty and help us to believe more deeply. Amen.