

DOUBT AND ALL THAT MAGICAL STUFF

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I taught Sunday School for about 20 years, and one of my favorite moments actually took place before we started class one Sunday. Many of you know Abigail Fehrman, who had her confirmation a few years ago. She was maybe 10 or 11 years old at the time this happened. She strode into the room and before she even took off her coat or sat down, she announced: “I don’t think I believe all this magical stuff that’s in the Bible.” She wasn’t hostile about it, but she did have a lot of wind in her sails. And then her brother, about three years younger, said, “Yeah. Me too!”

Fortunately, I had given a lot of thought to the magical stuff, because I wasn’t sure that I believed all of it, either. And I loved that Abigail would *engage* like this instead of just going through the motions, keeping her thoughts to herself, and maybe turning cynical about all of it. So I said to her, “Well, some people do believe it all happened exactly like it says, and some people don’t. I think the most important thing is what Jesus teaches us about how to live our lives in this world.”

I think Abigail was expecting more of a tussle. But she seemed satisfied with this answer, and we talked for a bit about the Episcopal Church’s fairly open-minded position on questions and doubt, about our faith’s three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and – wait for it – reason.

Which brings me to today’s Gospel and the magical stuff that’s going on here. The appearance of Jesus’ face changed – in fact the version found in Matthew says his face shone like the sun! And his clothes became dazzling white, presumably after he’d been traipsing around in the dust in those clothes for days or weeks, and centuries before the invention of Tide and Clorox 2. (In fact, the version of the story in Mark says of his dazzling clothes: “... such as no one on earth could bleach them.”) Then Moses and Elijah, two long-dead giants of the Old Testament, appear and talk with Jesus about the journey ahead of him. In artists’ depictions of the event, including the one in today’s bulletin, Jesus often appears to be levitating as well, although the scripture doesn’t mention this. Finally, clouds appear and the voice of God is heard saying that Jesus is his son.

The intended message in this reading, at first glance, seems pretty straightforward. It’s proof of Jesus’ divinity. It elevates him into the company of Moses and Elijah, and then... above even them, as the son of God.

Do you believe this all happened literally, factually, materially, just as the Bible says? If so, I’m certainly not here to argue with you. Please understand that I respect your faith. But over the years I’ve found that Abigail and I – and maybe some of the rest of us here today -- have some good company in our doubts. When I settled on this topic for my reflection, I realized that for years I’d been collecting pieces of evidence that it’s okay to have doubts, that a doubter can still be a good and faithful Christian. I’d like to share a few of these this morning.

We don’t talk much about doubt during our services. Maybe a lot of us are uncomfortable with the concept. I first came across the idea of legitimate Christian doubt about 20 years ago, when I served on a parish discernment committee for a young woman who wanted to go to seminary and become a priest. Someone asked her if she believed – literally, factually – in the resurrection of Jesus. She said basically what I would absorb and tell Abigail years later: that she couldn’t know whether or not it was factually true, but that to her it was Jesus’ teachings that mattered most. She went on to seminary, was ordained, ran the children’s education program at the cathedral in Montreal, became a

parish priest, and is now an archdeacon at another diocese. And from knowing her, I'm sure she's a source of wisdom, insight and inspiration to everyone around her.

More recently, the *New York Times* ran an interview with the Rev. Serene Jones, a distinguished theologian who is president of the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Among other things, she says:

- Those who claim to know whether the resurrection happened, or whether it didn't happen, "are kidding themselves." Her exact words.
- She finds the virgin birth "a bizarre claim that has nothing to do with Jesus' message."
- She questions whether there's an afterlife and says she's *certain* there is *not* a designated group of bad people who are sent to burn in hell.

If you read the entire column, there's a little more balance to her theology than these cherry-picked points. But still... some of these are radical positions to many if not most Christians.

In November 2015, I attended the Diocesan Convention at our cathedral, which took place the day after multiple terrorist attacks in Paris killed at least 130 people and injured hundreds more. The national church official who gave the sermon that day said he had scrapped his original script and hurriedly written a new one. He told us that doubt is a crucial element of faith. Among other things, doubt – as compared to blind faith – is what might stop a believer from thinking God wanted him to slaughter other people in the name of his religion... Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, whatever. To me it was shocking – but in a good way – to hear this. It was a welcome revelation and quite a relief for this doubter.

I had just begun EfM that fall and week by week, book by book, I was reading the Old Testament. I'd gotten to the book of Joshua and I was horrified. To briefly summarize, Moses has died and Joshua the warrior is now the leader of the Israelites. They've crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. And God tells Joshua to attack and destroy all of the established kingdoms that already exist within or around this Promised Land. God tells him to take the sword to every last man, woman, and child, and even to kill all the livestock these people tended. God actually punishes the Israelites when they spare one king whom they believe can be useful to their cause.

Ouch! I told Mo. Cooper that if I thought this was the God we worshipped – which I didn't – I would have to leave the church. She said this was how the Israelites understood God at that time. That was very helpful to me.

There was a supply priest here one year on Trinity Sunday who, in his sermon, delved into the history of the Nicene Creed, the conflict and power politics and sausage-making that went into it. And then he declared that the older he got, the more the concept of the Holy Trinity felt like superstition to him. (He used a more colorful phrase that I'm not repeating here.) Another retired priest gave me a theological paper that describes Jesus as... "the human who dared to act as God's representative here on earth."

In Year Three of EfM, we read a book 1,016 pages long on the history of Christianity. There's a lot in there that, like the Book of Joshua, is very difficult to read. And it makes it easy to think cynically, to imagine powerful people making up stories and structures and rules in order to serve their own purposes, to control or take advantage of other people, to protect or increase their own power and wealth.

(About now I'm hoping not to get cast out onto South Highland Ave. as a heretic!)

But first, just one more exhibit for my defense: you can imagine my delight this spring at seeing the title of a special issue of *The Episcopal New Yorker*: the “Doubt Issue.” All three of our bishops, some priests, and some lay people write that doubt can be an essential, enriching component of faith. I’m really happy to belong to a church that, rather than demanding a rigid conformity of belief – or professed belief – encourages us to think and explore, to question... and even to doubt.

But before I close, I do need to say, on behalf of all of us doubters, that none of this necessarily means we don’t believe deeply in God, or consider ourselves Christians, or love and follow Jesus. And personally, I don’t rule out that some of the magical stuff, the miracles, really did happen. I’ve had just a handful of my own experiences in which I believe I was directly hearing from God. Some have been subtle and a couple of them were profound – visions, messages – and I cannot explain them rationally.

Other people I know and trust have told me similar stories. One friend, a very active and committed Christian, told me about being stuck in an afternoon traffic jam on Long Island – we know how nasty and frustrating *that* can be – and suddenly having a sensation of peace and calm, and seeing glowing lights shining over the heads of all the people in the many cars around him.

So, if ordinary people, sane and sober people, stuck in a traffic jam or walking a labyrinth, can have extrasensory, unexplainable phenomena like that, why *wouldn’t* Peter, James, and John have this vision of Jesus transfigured? We don’t have to think of the Transfiguration as either true or false. Was it a material reality or was it perhaps a spiritual reality?

Another way of looking at the magical stuff is as allegory, stories that carry important lessons for us. Think of Jesus miraculously curing lepers – outcasts, who were despised and feared in that time and place – and consider what it tells us today about mercy and caring for the unfortunate.

So: material reality or spiritual reality or allegory – they’re all valid ways to consider the magic and miracles we find in the Bible, including the Transfiguration. And for me, whichever way we consider today’s lesson, the ultimate takeaway message is the same. Let’s go to the last thing that the voice of God says about Jesus: “*Listen to him!*” Listen to him.

Amen.