



TRANSFORMATIONS, PART II TRANSFORMING MY DOUBTS

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Isaac and I had the chance this week to go down to Olympia to the Wynton Marsalis concert with my dad. If you don't know Wynton Marsalis, he's a trumpet player who is a living legend of jazz. My dad played trumpet, I played trumpet and Isaac now plays trumpet, so it was fun to go together and hear some amazingly talented musicians.

Like I said, we were all trumpet players, and the piece of brass pipe Mr. Marsalis was playing looked essentially like the same thing we had all played. But what he made it do was completely different. When I was in band, it was all marches and fanfares and predictable notes that told me exactly what I had to do when. Everything was structure and precision. Wynton's trumpet made sounds I didn't know were possible, and he shaped the music like he was working with clay. It was smooth and fluid. He turned that instrument into an extension of his own soul.

That was true of the music his band played as well. I'm not a huge jazz fan and half the time I don't even feel like I understand what's happening in it, but at this concert you couldn't help but sit there in total awe of what these musicians were doing. They took old standards you've heard before, like *On a Clear Day, Bye, Bye Blackbird* and *Embraceable You* (which you can hear a lot in Starbucks these days). And at the beginning, each song sounded familiar. Then the band would begin to improvise and recreate the melody lines and take off on these incredibly complicated solos to the point where the song ended up being in a much different place from where it started. Before playing one of them, Wynton even said, "I like to play this song a little differently every time." Each rendition of it was fresh and changed the original some more.

That's transformation. That's what we're talking about in this series of messages from the Psalms. God as the ultimate virtuoso take the basic ingredients of our lives and transforms them. He makes music out of our experiences that we never dreamed was possible. We end up in a far different place than we started as he shapes us and molds us into something new.

We said two weeks ago that the Psalms give voice to the full range of human experience, so we can see in them a little of how God works. The Psalms themselves give us tools to take part in that work of being changed and made more like him.

Last time, we looked at our emotions and how they relate to our spiritual condition. We talked about feelings defenses and how our feelings provide opportunities to reach toward God and other people, in addition to reflecting on the state of our own hearts.

God transforms our feelings and he uses our feelings to transform us. That's just one area of life the Psalms address. Today we're going to look at another area, the subject of doubt.

Do you ever struggle with doubts related to your faith? If you do, you're not alone. One of our core values here at New Day is authenticity, and if we're really going to be authentic, we have to admit that everybody goes through times when they don't understand what God is doing.

The dictionary definition of doubt would be a state of uncertainty or skepticism. It is the realm of nagging questions, the voice in the back of your head that keeps you from fully accepting something as truth.

Now depending on who you are, doubt will mean different things to you. For some people, doubt feels like the only honest intellectual place to be. You have to question everything or you're being naïve. It's the place to start if you want to be open to new truth. Doubting drives you to explore more to find answers. If you boiled it down to a bumper sticker, it would be, "Question Authority." Doubt is like a badge of intelligence that you wear proudly.

For other people, it's just the opposite. Doubt is viewed almost as sin, especially when they look at verses like the ones in James that talk so negatively about doubt. Doubt undermines faith and gets in the way of trusting God. To experience doubt is scary, and so when it surfaces, it becomes a source of fear and guilt because we think, "A good Christian shouldn't feel this way." So we fight it and try to squash our questions. The bumper sticker for this point of view would be, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it."

Most of us probably have a little bit of both perspectives inside us. We want to be honest with our doubts, but we feel a little uneasy with them. So what often happens is that we never admit them or give them a voice. We just tuck them back in the corner of our minds and try to keep functioning as if they're not there. We don't pursue them but we don't quite get rid of them.

I'm so glad we have Psalms that don't just talk about doubt, but actually show us people in the middle of a crisis, experiencing doubt. How did they handle it? What got them through? It helps to know we're in good company. And the fact that the Bible has stories of these people tells me that God is not afraid of our doubts. He's not threatened by them.

Psalm 77 gives us a window into the world of someone consumed by doubts, somebody who worked through them and came out on the other side.

Psalm 77

*I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted.
I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint.*

When Isaac was in kindergarten, his class would line up outside the door at the beginning of the day. Since he was in afternoon kindergarten, if I was home for lunch I would drop him off on my way back to work. So I got to know a few of the kids.

There was one little girl named Morgan who always had something to say. One day, as Isaac arrived and walked up to the line, Morgan put her hands on her hips, scowled at him and said, “You again!”

Not a particularly warm greeting. But with kindergarten girls, you can never tell what a greeting like that means. You have to read the subtext. Sometimes hitting and insulting a boy really means, “I like you.” A scowl isn’t just a scowl. But try telling that to a kindergarten boy.

It’s a little mystifying the way the Psalmist greets God: I remembered you, O God, and I groaned. You again. What prompted that response to God? There’s always a cause for our doubts. Just like Morgan, sometimes the reasons aren’t always obvious or what they appear, but there are underlying reasons just the same.

The Psalm writer sheds some light onto the seedbed of our doubts. Doubts are not all the same. They come from many different places. At least three different factors can leave us feeling uncertain in our faith. One is

Our experience with God

The Psalm starts out by saying “I cried out to God for help. I cried out to God to hear me.” Apparently, those cries were met by silence. When we pray to God and he doesn’t seem to respond, it affects us.

There was an old Calvin & Hobbes cartoon that said it well. Calvin is praying for snow. He goes from pleading to demanding, looking up at the sky and not getting any results. Finally, after waiting as long as he can, he finally blurts out at God, “Do you want me to become an atheist?”

Unanswered cries to God leave us feeling skeptical and unsure. Why doesn’t God act the way we think he should? It leads to doubt. Sometimes it’s the people who claim to know God that leave us doubtful. We see the hypocrisy in other Christians or are hurt by something they do, and we go, “If these are God’s people, I’m not sure I want anything to do with him.” We may have tried church hoping to find some peace and goodness in the world, hoping to connect with God – only to be met by all too human church people who

don't live up to the ideal. People are not God, but when they're supposed to represent him and they botch it, it can plant create a real hurdle for us to believe in him.

So our personal experience with God and Christians can at times challenge our faith. Another factor that becomes a source of doubt is

Our difficult circumstances

The Psalm writer said, "When I was in distress, I sought the Lord." What prompted the cries was a crisis. There was a tough situation, and it called everything into question.

So often, hardships leave us feeling completely baffled. We start looking for reasons. "Why me?" We start questioning God's goodness. "How could he let this happen?"

One friend of mine was a Christian who was active in his church. Then his dad got sick with cancer, and my friend watched him die a horrible death. The experience devastated his faith, because he couldn't reconcile how there could be a God who could allow his dad to experience so much pain.

When we've been hurt badly, we rarely find satisfying answers to "why" questions, and doubts begin to creep in. Maybe God doesn't care. Maybe he doesn't even see me. Maybe there's no purpose in life. Our circumstances defy us to believe. When all the evidence in front of us points away from a loving God, it's hard to hold on to belief.

Those are two common sources of doubt. There's a third one as well that the Psalmist alludes to when he says, "My soul refused to be comforted." Sometimes doubt is the result of

Our stubborn hearts

We don't always WANT to know the answer. Doubt in this case is more of a smoke screen. We cling to it so we won't have to deal with the ramifications of accepting the truth.

Years ago, I had a decision I prayed about for months. I agonized over trying to hear what God was telling me. One day I said to Karin, "I just don't know what to do." She looked at me and said, "Really? You seriously don't know?" When she put it like that to me, I realized that deep down I did know. I was just afraid to act on it. It was safer to live with doubt because then I didn't have to act.

Soren Kierkegaard said, "It is so hard to believe because it is so hard to obey." Sometimes our doubts are our friends, because they let us stay where we are. I met a realtor once who initiated a conversation with me about God. When he learned I was a Christian, he was happy to share with me all his intellectual reservations about God. He liked to think of himself as a philosophical type who asked tough questions. But just a little ways into the conversation, I could see that he wasn't at all interested in pursuing

answers to his questions. They were his way to sound intelligent without having to talk about what was going on in his own heart. He preferred to keep his doubts intact so he didn't have to face God.

Doubts can come from all sorts of places. If we truly want to see them transformed, we need to begin by honestly examining their sources. Have I been burned in my experience with God? Are my circumstances driving my doubts? Am I using doubts as a defense to avoid dealing with God directly? Someone could give me all the right answers to my questions, but if they don't address the underlying cause behind the question, it won't help my doubt. Where is my uncertainty really springing from?

The Psalm writer goes on to describe for us the kinds of doubts he was having.

*You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.
I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;
I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart mused and my spirit inquired:
"Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?
Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time?
Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"*

You can sense the genuine desperation in the words. The questions come tumbling out in a torrent. There's a whole string of them. The writer is really grappling with whether or not his concept of God has been valid.

I talk to people on a regular basis who are struggling with doubts of one kind or another. As I've listened to their questions, it seems they all boil down to the same basic questions. They are questions that relate to the following:

God's existence, God's nature, God's plan for me

God's existence

Is there a God? That's the most basic question. For whatever reason, some people doubt God's reality, whether because of the way they were raised or a bad religious experience or a personal tragedy that made no sense. Some people just see it as impossible to know one way or another if there is a God, and they leave it at that. Other people reject the concept of God outright. Randy Newman talks about a college student named Allen who was the president of the Atheist Student Association at a major university. Come to find out, Allen had been raised in a strict Muslim home, but when a family tragedy had struck, he lost faith in there being any kind of God.

Barry was a student on the same campus and working with a Christian organization at the same school, and he was coordinating a debate with Allen to bring in atheist and Christian speakers. As they were working through the logistics, Barry and Allen got talking, and Allen shared why he no longer believed in God. Barry asked him, "So if

you've rejected the idea of God [because of this tragedy]...How do you as an atheist cope with such a terrible thing?"

Allen had never thought about it that way. His atheism didn't give him any comfort either. If we think the answers to our questions about God are unsatisfying, the answers for a world without God are even less satisfying when we really pursue them.

By and large, the existence of God isn't where most of us have our hang ups. I just saw statistics from a recent poll that found that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe in some form of God. The very fact that you are here at church would indicate that you accept the basic premise of God.

The Psalmist was certainly not questioning whether or not there was a God. His doubts centered elsewhere, such as

God's Nature

Look at the questions again and you can see what he's wrestling with:

*"Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?
Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time?
Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"*

These are all related to God's nature. And they're the kind of questions we feel a lot today. Is God compassionate? Is he reliable? Is he true to his word? Is he who he says he is? If God is powerful, why didn't he stop 9/11? If God loves everybody, why would Jesus say he's the only way to God? They all relate to how we see the nature of God.

How we answer them is critical. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that best selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, which was his response to the tragedy of losing his son. His conclusion was that God can't do everything, and he asks his readers, "Are you capable of forgiving and loving God even when you have found out that He is not perfect?"

That sounds more like a bumbling uncle than God. Where's the power in that? Is that the best we can come up with?

If you want to talk about when bad things happen to good people, look at Job. God said, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him. He is blameless and upright." There's good people for you. And then every bad thing in the book happens to him. And in the end, what does he say about God?

Job 42:2

I know that you can do all things.

Totally different conclusions about God's nature – God is all powerful or he isn't. Although Rabbi Kushner's solution may be easier to swallow initially, how much comfort will it provide in the long run? What good is a God who is that weak and imperfect? I've got friends who can fill that role for me. I need a bigger God.

We'll see in a few minutes how the Psalmist addressed these kinds of questions. For now, I am simply pointing out the content of the questions, many of which revolve around God's character. There's another component to them, though, because the questions also touch on

God's plan for me

We want to know how God relates to us. Will he show us his mercy? Am I doing the right thing? Will following him pay off?

Sometimes we think we know the right answers to these, only to have our circumstances change. We think we're in the right spot until everything shifts, and we're left scratching our heads.

I was talking with Scott Krippaehne about a guy he knows who felt like God was telling him to plan this big outdoor Christian concert. He sunk a great deal of his personal finances into it, trusting that God would make it succeed. Instead, he lost his job, it rained the day of the concert and his family life began to unravel. It was bewildering. He thought he knew God's plan for him. Had he heard wrong?

Even the apostle Paul had times like that. He really felt like he wanted to preach in Mysia, but then when he got near there, God stopped him and took him a completely different direction.

That's the most pressing question for us. If there's a God, if he's who he says he is, what does it mean for me? What does he feel about me? What does he want me to do?

All of that was brought into question for the Psalm writer. He didn't know if he was in the right place or if God had changed his mind about him.

Here's where we often stop. Doubts can paralyze us and prevent us from moving forward. We're going along fine, then we hit a question and it freezes us in our tracks. We start to think of doubt as this huge barrier.

But maybe that's not the point of doubt. Maybe it's not the enemy – maybe it's a doorway to grow deeper in our faith. Theologian Paul Tillich said, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith – it is one element of faith."

A question is an invitation to search for an answer – not a reason to give up the search. Doubts in God aren't a reason to give up the faith – they're a reason to pursue it harder

than ever. This is the key to doubt being transformational – letting it do its work and take us to a richer, fuller understanding of God.

The Psalm writer reveals his own strategy for coping with doubt:

*Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High."
I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.*

The Psalmist believed that

There are clues to God's nature in his history.

When we're having trouble recognizing his hand in our own circumstances, we can go back and review the record of what has been identified about him in the past. The Bible provides a wealth of information not only about God's actions, but also about his motivations. It tells us what he did and why.

That may sound like an incredibly simplistic strategy: "Read your Bible!" But I'm always amazed at how few people try it. Hardly anyone I know that struggles with doubt turns to their Bible for clarity. That's the last place they want to look. Maybe they associate the Bible with their questions about God and it's suspect, too. I've heard people complain about how the Bible is full of contradictions, and then you talk to them further and realize they're not even reading it.

Martin Luther used to say that the Bible is like a lion. If people are critical of it, we don't have to defend it – we need to let it out of its cage!

Reconnecting with God's work in history as recorded in the Bible takes us out of our own world of problems and gives us the big context. It shows us again who God really is. We see his compassionate rescues. We read about his powerful miracles. We hear his wrath and judgment.

All our questions won't evaporate, but something else becomes clear in light of Scripture: Our own search for the truth is flawed. Our own ability to recognize and receive the answers we want is impaired, because we're sinful people. Along with everyone else in the story, we're not fully capable of grasping God's character. As Leslie Newbigin puts it, "We are not honest inquirers seeking truth."

When I'm feeling abandoned, I need to read about the Israelites in Egypt, because their story is my story and the God who rescued them is the one who rescues me. When I'm feeling God has mistreated me, I need Job's clarity, because he went through everything I have and more. When I can't see God's plan, I need to hear from Joseph after he was sold by his brothers, because his loneliness is my loneliness. When I'm confused, I need to connect with David's wilderness experience, because he found God in those places. When God seems to be the opposite of what I thought, I need Paul's Damascus road

experience to tell me God can do anything. And when I wonder how God can allow evil, I need Jesus on the cross, because that's where God met evil head on. I need Jesus on the cross because that speaks to my evil. I need Jesus on the cross because there is no other answer.

We find clues for living in the present by reconnecting with what God has done in the past. The Psalmist found he could see God more clearly after spending time reflecting on the past:

*Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.*

This brings us to another point about handling doubt.

There are clues to God's nature in his nature.

When you read the account of this Psalm, you find a God who is intensely personal. He is deeply involved in the lives of his people. He's not a generic, cosmic force. And that's part of why some of our questions will never find the kind of answers we're looking for.

One of my professors used to say "The logic of $2 + 2 = 4$ is different from the logic of 'I love you.'" We have a God who is not a concept to be believed but a full fledged personality to be engaged and loved. That requires that we frame our questions differently. It also opens up another possibility: Maybe we're not the only ones asking questions. If truth isn't just a proposition, if it is a person, then truth with a capital T is fully capable of turning the tables and pursuing us.

Which is exactly what God has been doing. Ever since the Garden of Eden, when God asked, "Adam, where are you?" He has been the one seeking us. And the question he poses to us is, "Will you follow me?"

Tim Dearborn, of World Vision, says that when we go through difficult situations that raise doubts, our question shouldn't be "Why is this happening?" It should be "Who's there?" God may be knocking on our hearts with his own questions for us, as we are searching for him at the same time.

The Psalm writer paints a graphic picture of God commanding nature in his quest to rescue his people:

*The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed;
the very depths were convulsed.
The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with thunder;
your arrows flashed back and forth.*

*Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and quaked.
Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.*

You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

I particularly like the line that says, “Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.” God was there, but he was completely invisible. He was active, but he didn’t leave so much as a footprint. As we seek to transform our doubt, one final point to make is that

Some clues will always be clues.

Having strong faith will never remove the mystery. There will always be wonder and awe when it comes to God. There are questions that we will need to live with, because God can walk on water without leaving a footprint.

Isaiah 55:9

*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

God is always going to be mysterious. Lesslie Newbigin said this, “There is still mystery, but it is not the mystery of an empty infinity of space and time. It is the mystery of the incarnation and the cross, of the holiness that can embrace the sinner, of a Lord who is a servant, and of the deathless one who can die. There is still the vast ocean of what we do not know and do not understand. But we know the way, and the way is Jesus.”

We tend to think the solution to doubts is more facts and information. We think if we could just have a little more knowledge, we’d have a stronger faith. But often it is the reverse that’s true. There are things that can only be known with certainty when we’ve already stepped out in faith. It’s that personal response to a personal God.

Paul wrote these words to Timothy.

2 Timothy 1:12

*I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is
able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.*

I will never have all my questions answered about God this side of heaven. There will always be things I doubt, things I don’t know. But what I do know outweighs the things I don’t know.

I know that God has been as faithful to me as he has to his people throughout history. I know that he has given me strength to face difficult days. I know that he has been with

me when I needed comfort. I know that he has changed my life. I know that he has changed the lives of my family and friends. The transformations I have seen in people's lives are real and can't be explained by anything other than the power of God's Holy Spirit. I know that God heals people up inside and rebuilds lives. I know that God forgives me. I know that what Jesus claims to have done on the cross is unlike anything else, that it brings sense and purpose and comfort in a senseless world. I know that God offers me a certainty based on who he is rather than my ability to understand him. And I know that he will keep working on me until the end.

That's what I know. And what I know outweighs what I don't know. God is bigger than my doubts. He's bigger than your doubts.

What are yours this morning? Maybe you've been wrestling with the same ones for a long time. I don't pretend to have all the answers, and I know we've barely scratched the surface of the subject this morning. You may be thinking, "That didn't even come close to dealing with my questions." But don't let the shortcomings of this sermon become an excuse for leaving your doubt untouched. As you reflect on your own doubts, I would challenge you this morning to dig in and examine them for yourself.

Where are my doubts coming from?

What are my biggest questions?

What is my strategy for transforming them?

What is God's question for me?