

Faith, Doubt, Michael Vick, and Mother Teresa
James 1:1-12

I have a favor to ask of you. For the next moment, please do not think about pink elephants. Banish all thoughts of pink elephants. Now. Please.

Are some of you are thinking about pink elephants? You can't help it. And so it is with doubt. Sometimes some people simply cannot help but doubt, doubt something about God, something about faith, something about God's relationship with us or with creation.

In just the last week, the secular press is all excited because it turns out Mother Teresa had doubts. Real doubts. Severe doubts. And she is lifted up as one of the truly outstanding Christians of the previous century. But doubt she did.

"Please pray specially for me that I may not spoil His work and that Our Lord may show Himself -- for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead," she wrote in 1953. "It has been like this more or less from the time I started 'the work.'" That is what she wrote.

It's an upside down world, isn't it? Within a week of finding out that Mother Teresa lost faith from time to time, we find out that Michael Vick has found Jesus.

Michael Vick. As big a football star as it is possible to be in Atlanta. Nike endorsement, contract worth in the tens of millions. And it all comes crashing down. To his credit, he admits it's his fault. He apologized for letting down the National Football League, his teammates, and also young people who, tend, rightly or wrongly to look up to sports stars. And now for the first time, he says he is going to take a serious look at his life.

And said, in the midst of it all, he reports that he has found Jesus. One unkind person said, "I didn't realize Jesus had been misplaced," but I prefer to take Michael Vick at his word. In his despair, he realized that Jesus had a place for him, no matter what he had done.

But it's ironic, isn't it? A saint loses Jesus and a convicted dog-fight organizer has found him. And so it goes. What are we to make of it all?

Well, first, we realize that ours is not the first generation to doubt. Indeed, throughout the Bible we find many instances of folks wondering about God, not so sure how faith works in the midst of a world that is, well, sometimes not-so-Godly. We are not the only ones to ask, "where are you, God," or feel as if God is no longer on our side.

The psalmist cried out PS 88:14 *Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?*

And, one day, and this is found in Mark 9, a man in the crowd brings his child to Jesus. The child is convulsed, cannot speak. The disciples had tried to cure him. No success. Jesus tells him, "everything is possible for he who believes."

The man's answer is classic: "I do believe. Help my unbelief."

And when Peter begins to sink in the waves, and Jesus has to rescue him, Jesus asks, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" And Peter has no recorded answer. I don't know what the Greek or Aramaic word for "I dunno" is.

Some of us have been there. Mother Teresa had been there.

Jesus himself was there. Whatever we make of his words on the cross, *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me,"* whether they are words expressing his true feelings or words leading us to Psalm 22, where this soul-wrenching beginning eventually gives way to hope and promise, Jesus is telling us that sometimes doubt is a very real part of faith.

Now, we know that a strong faith is good. And that if doubt is all we have, then our faith doesn't carry us very far. But at the same time, doubt can be a catalyst for a deeper understanding of faith.

In the Old Testament days, faith was simpler. Being good led to reward and being bad led to punishment. Judges, Samuel, Kings, all have this theology. But when this theology began to break down, as folks noticed that sometimes good people suffered and bad people prospered, a deeper faith began to grow.

Its best expression in the Old Testament is the story of Job, an innocent, righteous

man, who suffered. And questioned God and got angry at God. And found that God did not reject him, that God embraced him in the midst of his doubt about the ways of God. How do we understand God's gracious and loving nature amidst the stuff that is not so gracious and wonderful, stuff like war and hurricane and such?

Jesus himself embraces this tension that the world is not always the way it should be. Our faith is that the son of God suffers. It's difficult to accept. But in faith, we hold on to the truth by which we live: following Jesus is the way to live, no matter what, that Jesus' suffering ultimately is redemptive, and beyond all the doubt and despair and chaos of life is eternity.

Live amidst doubt? Sometimes we can't help it. Which is one reason Jude counsels the early Christian community, and ours Jude 1:22. *Be merciful to those who doubt.*

But lest we become too comfortable with simply living amidst doubt and settling for doubt, suddenly we run smack up against our Scripture for this morning. James is

writing to a community of faith that facing turmoil and tribulation. He defines them using a term diaspora, that brings to mind the scattered tribes of Israel in an earlier age. He invites them to embrace their trials and testing.

These trials and testing which had led the community to doubt.

They wondered where God their deliverer was in the midst of all this. Later on, James will say, these trials don't come from God, they come from the world. So the folks weren't so sure about that either.

Then James cuts to the chase. Are you lacking wisdom? That is, if your faith is not sufficient to understand all you are going through, then pray to God for wisdom.

But when you ask, ask in faith, not doubt, because when you doubt, you are like a wave of the sea, tossed hither and yon by the wind.

You won't receive any wisdom from the Lord, if you remain "double-minded", which means either letting faith and doubt live equally in your heart or perhaps

letting the values of the world gain equal power in your life with the values that come from Christ.

And to this admonishment, we simply want to throw up our hands in despair and cry aloud to God, "Don't doubt? But we can't help it." Doubt, pink elephants, we can't help what's in our mind.

And at this point, we look again at our Scripture, and see perhaps another meaning. We already know the context is that people are doubting: how could they not, facing trials and testing?

And I think James, especially if we had the time to read all the Letter is saying something like this: Have the courage to live in faith, despite your doubts.

Do you not understand your trials, your testing? Resolve to follow Christ anyway. Pray to God for wisdom, but let this prayer be centered in Christ. Don't pray as if God must answer you questions in order for you to believe, but pray already believing in the midst of doubt. Trusting that God will give you enough wisdom to

continue to live a life of faith.

Wisdom is not finally understanding everything, but wisdom is living and believing in Christ in the midst of everything.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus receives no answer, but somehow receives again an assurance that God is, and still has something to do with him.

And so we Christians also listen to what Luke reports Jesus said on the cross, in the midst of his suffering, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit.”

But faith and doubt. They remain wondrous and mysterious, vexing and victorious.

And so here we are today, at the end of a week in which we find Michael Vick expressing his strong faith in Jesus Christ and hearing that Mother Teresa doubted.

But somehow, I think that so far, at least, it has been Mother Teresa’s doubt, rather

than Michael Vick's faith, that has brought the Kingdom of God closer.

And a final irony. If Mother Teresa's faith had not been so strong to begin with, she never would have doubted. For you see, when Mother Teresa was a young nun, it was expected that she would go to India and simply teach the daughter's of the elite of Calcutta society. And she could have lived a good life, untroubled by all the pain that lay outside the convent walls.

However, it was her faith that impelled her to take head-on the squalor, the poverty, the death, the devastation all around her in Calcutta. And daring to take her faith into the darkness of the Calcutta streets, she found her faith challenged, and her heart falling into despair.

So, yes, we find out that Mother Teresa doubted.

But she chose to live not according to her doubt, but according to her faith.

And maybe that's all God expects from any of us. Amen.