

HONEST DOUBT

Readings: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27 and Mark 5:21-43

June 28, 2007; Christina Bogar

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I grew up in a pretty nominally Christian family. When I was very young we occasionally attended a Presbyterian church in town, but as my parents faced greater and greater stress on their finances, their health, and their marriage, we went less and less often, finally ceasing to go at all by the time I was in 3rd or 4th grade.

As a teenager I was drawn to the practice of Buddhism, and even found a "Zen temple" in my hometown to attend. That ended in a strange and sordid tangle of violence, crime, and molestation when the man who had represented himself as a priest was arrested and imprisoned for crimes ranging from statutory rape to attempted murder.

And for decades after that, I had no affiliation with organized religion at all. I came to realize that there was no God, and that that was OK. God's existence (or lack thereof) had no bearing on the choices I made to live a moral life, to love the earth and its people, to do right. I didn't need Heaven as a carrot at the end of Life's very long stick.

So I was surprised, well into adulthood, to feel the call to Christian practice. I knew it wasn't a perfect religion, and I knew that its practitioners had a lot to answer for. Believing in God seemed to be an important aspect of it, and as an atheist I couldn't say I did that. But I had a strong yearning to be part of a spiritual community, and my short experience with Buddhism had convinced me that nobody had it completely right. And Christianity, to quote the Christmas carol, was the "faith of my fathers" – my mothers too. I didn't have a conversion experience. Deciding to become part of a Christian faith community was more like entering into an arranged marriage for me – and I mean that as a positive thing.

But it made for some obvious problems: how does a person explain herself as a "Christian atheist"? How does she define God in such a context? How does she ever find faith?

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Today's New Testament passage is all about faith: misplaced faith, heartfelt faith, desperate faith.

I think it's worthwhile to take a moment to clarify something about today's New Testament passage, because all the translations I've come across are guilty of the same over-delicacy. The woman who had been "hemorrhaging" for 12 years wasn't bleeding from some mysterious unhealed wound. She was menstruating. This is a concept that makes a lot of people uncomfortable, but there it is. She was having a 12-year-long period.

There are lots of possible causes of heavy menstrual bleeding, and almost none of them would have been understood in Jesus' time. One thing that was universally understood in that place, at that time, however, was that a menstruating

woman was ritually unclean. So was everything she touched, everything she sat on, and everyone who touched her. She was prohibited from worship, and exiled from normal social patterns. She was ostracized from Jewish culture.

Who in her position wouldn't place their hopes for a cure in the hands of anyone who offered it?

The Talmud offers 11 different cures for this affliction, or so I've read. I bet this lady tried them all, and more. These "cures" were not cheap, probably not painless, and certainly not effective. She spent all she had, and only grew worse, while the people she paid to heal her just got richer. She'd put her faith in the wrong people. But really, what choice did she have?

The fact is, no one *wants* to be in a position where they've got to have faith. It's the position you're in when all your plans, all your back-ups, all your safety nets, have failed. The things you can control don't require faith.

This is a hard thing for me, a legacy of my childhood in an alcoholic household. I was the oldest child, the self-designated keep-it-together girl. I put a lot of energy into trying to keep things under control, perpetually trying to set up systems that would keep my parents, especially my mother, to whom I was close, from drinking. I'd empty liquor bottles into the sink when my parents weren't home, knowing there would be consequences for "wasting the money" that had been spent on them. I taped an Alcoholics Anonymous questionnaire I found in Dear Abby to the wine bottle my mother kept behind the garbage. I was 9 years old when I discovered you could call the State Patrol and confirm that there had been no report of your mother's car having been in an accident.

I know a lot of people here grew up in similar circumstances. And I bet we all achieved more or less the same result. Some of us got in trouble with our folks; some of us managed to make things look normal to the outside world. But I bet none of us made the drinking go away.

When you realize that what you're doing isn't working – when nothing anybody's doing is working – when you finally have to admit that your life has become unmanageable – you do still have one more choice. You can let go. You can have faith.

Faith isn't about wishing for something and getting it. It's not passive, and it's not an easy way out. Because to have faith, you have to get out of the director's chair. You have to know, really know, that this is one problem you're not going to solve. You have to come to terms with that fact. It's humbling, and it's scary.

The writer Ann Lamott once shared her own pastor's depiction of faith: it's more like you're all alone on a dark, dark stage, and the spotlight is trained on you. All your problems, all your worries, all the walls you keep hitting are right there with you, in the small space of that light. The conversations you keep rehashing, the fears you keep anticipating, the constant, aching worry you keep feeling for this loved one or that: they're packed in tight with you, just you and your anxieties in that little circle of light. You can't see what else is onstage; you can't see anything outside your own spotlight. But then faith opens up a second spot.

You see that second spot appear on stage, but you still don't know what lies in between you and it. You don't know what lies beyond it. But at least you can see it. It's someplace you can go. And taking that leap – from that first spotlight to the

second – is an act of faith. You still don't know what's coming next. But you're not frozen in that same old lonely spotlight anymore.

The opposite of faith isn't doubt. It's despair.

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As an atheist in a Christian faith community, I didn't talk about my doubts much. I decided that if there was a God, and it was important that I understand this in some specific way, then surely he or she would find a way to make that happen. Meanwhile, I had stepped into my "second spotlight" just by showing up here.

In his book *The Sins of Scripture*, John Shelby Spong (former Episcopal bishop of Newark) analyzes the traditional Christian concept of God, which is that of a "supernatural being who lives outside this world, but who periodically invades this world in a miraculous way." It's been an enduring and appealing concept: "a divine parent figure to whom we can appeal when all seems to be collapsing around us." Spong goes on, however, to examine the minority voices of the Bible that speak of a different understanding of the God experience: of God as "the life force that flows through all that is"; of God as "the power of love"; of God like "a rock, that firmness underneath one's feet". It is these conceptions of God that speak to me, that make sense to me, that I can understand and embrace. And you know what? You find them in the Bible too.

Christianity has developed a pretty bad rep – and an often deserved one, I'm afraid – for judgmentalism and exclusion. But I know from what I've read in the Bible that this is NOT what Jesus taught. When that woman reached out to Jesus, knowing in her heart that just to touch his robe would bring her new life, he brought an outcast *into* the circle of God's love. When Jesus raised that 12-year-old girl from the dead – a girl, by the way, at the brink of menarche herself, and its attendant exiles – he was offering her a new life of love and *inclusion*.

I don't call myself an atheist anymore. But I can't really tell you who God is; I can only tell you some of the ways that I experience God. I experience God in the awe I feel looking out over the dry, rolling hills of the Columbia basin. God is the tenderness I feel toward my children, my husband, my family. God is the community I feel when we all link hands and sing "Shalom" at the end of each service. God is what calls me to live fully, respecting life in every form as holy. God calls me to love extravagantly. God calls me to be all that I can and to affirm the sacred in all that is.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, Britain's second-ever Poet Laureate (after William Wordsworth), experienced a great loss as a young man when his good friend – and his sister's fiancé – died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 22. Like David, who lamented the death of his dearest friend (and many believe lover) Jonathan in today's Old Testament reading, he was devastated. And also like David, he composed a heartfelt lament in response to this death, expressing his sorrow, his confusion, and his loss of faith. He concludes, however, that

*There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.*

The opposite of faith isn't doubt. It's despair. Help us, God, to reach for that robe, to step into that spotlight, to keep going when all around is darkness. Amen.