

Community Church of Issaquah
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From What If to What Now

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Someone asked me once, “Which disciple are you most like?” That’s an interesting question. Perhaps I should ask you that question. So, I will. Which disciple are you most like? Think about that for a moment. For me, I didn’t even have to think. I know. I’m a lot like Thomas or as some call him, Doubting Thomas. My head is full of unanswered questions about life, eternity, God, Jesus – just a flood of things I want to know. Like Thomas, I think seeing is believing. How could Jonah be swallowed by a whale if it supposedly happened in a river in the Middle East where there are no whales? Did David really have a slingshot that killed a giant? And how big was this giant? If it only rained for 40 days, how could it have flooded the entire universe in Noah’s world? And if they’ve found bones of human beings dating back hundreds of thousands of years, how were Adam and Eve the first people if their history goes back less than 5000 years? Where did Cain and Abel’s wives come from? So many questions to process.

Some years ago, a fellow co-worker who professed to be an atheist, delighted in coming to my table at lunch to persistently ask questions like, “What if the Jesus thing is just a myth that some humans made up?” It was intensified at the time when there was much ado about the Easter holidays. I was trying to climb the hurdle of defending my faith and trying to find the best words of authority to win my case. She was bothered by the fact that Easter, like Christmas, is just an arbitrary date chosen to fit a need or season for celebrations. Once she asked, “What if it was just part of a grand scheme or myth?”

I don't think she's the only one who has walked that fine line between the "what if" of doubt and the "what now" of faith. Today, we are talking about passages of Scripture that zero in on the cost of discipleship. It would seem only logical to ask oneself, "Why all the persecution and suffering?" Or, "What if this is all just a made-up excuse to describe all the evil in the world?" That's when the "what now" of faith pops into my head. Now that as believers in Christ we have a spoken promise that God will reward any negative experiences in our life when we believe and live in that belief – when it becomes our way of daily spiritual living. So, what now? What do we do with these concepts and beliefs that are constantly being addressed with the "What if?" Question. What if we question what the real message in the Bible is all about and what if we can't move past our doubts?

There is a very big difference in those two phrases – what if and what now. When we say "what if" we refer to the possibility that something may or may not happen. When we say "what now" we are firm in our belief that something has happened and now we question what path to take with that fact. Perhaps we could say that what if centers on doubt and what now centers on faith. Life is always going to present experiences when we are faced with doubts. It is certainly not only in such minor issues as who was swallowed by a whale. When we are faced with hardships in life, we often ask ourselves, "What if this isn't going away?" And our hearts are weighed down with worry and concern such that we cannot seem to find an answer to that question. Have you found yourself asking that of yourself? What if nothing changes? What if this is how I'm going to be living from now on? What if the doctor can't fix this? There are often floods of those what if questions. We each have our own list of those.

At the same time, there is also a different path of questioning based on the concept of ‘what now.’ In today Scripture passages, we find verse after verse of assurance that having believed in Christ as the Son of God and having committed to following Him, we know that our what now is based on our faith. I love that verse that says, “Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in their heart.” What is the testimony John speaks about here? He answers that question in the next verse. “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life.”

Like many of you, I come from an earlier time in the life of the Church. I was a part of a youth group that numbered in the hundreds. The church of my youth was the center of my life and the center of life for most of my friends. We were the ‘what now’ generation. Having made a personal choice to become a young disciple of Christ, we had nothing but great expectations about going out into the world and changing things. We had no reason to doubt anything. We just believed, and that was all there was to it. We only asked, “What now that we finished our summer mission trip? What now that we finished going to youth camp and have promised to become more dedicated to living by the teaching of Christ? What now that we have finished our youth choir tour and sung before hundreds?” It would have never dawned on us that things would change, that we would grow into an adult generation that would begin to ask, ‘what if?’

The Christian family of today is quite different than the one we knew. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, it is just a reality. That old adage, “You can’t live in the past” has a much deeper meaning for you and me now, I think. Perhaps the question before us now is how do we become a people of hope, a people with the same determination we had in our

past and the same faith that the first Christians had which pushed them from being a people of fear to a people of ‘what now.’

How do we learn to put aside the questioning in our minds? Questions like, ‘What if this church is all there is?’ ‘What if being a believer in Christ gets too hard and I can’t do it anymore?’ ‘What if I’m unable to do anything to ease the suffering of the world?’ ‘What if the things I have been taught about my faith aren’t true?’ How do we get out of that rut and into a life of peace and hope? Well, the writer of First John gives some very clear instruction for us. Even though it was written for a people some 2000 years ago, I think these verses have a very clear message for you and me today. Here are four of those life lessons that will hopefully move us closer away from the ‘what if’ side of life to the ‘what now’ side.

First, humble yourself. In the book of First Peter, chapter 5, we hear: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Understand that as one single person you still have an amazing ability to make change. But that change isn’t of your doing, it comes from your submission to God to faithfully do what you sense would be in keeping with the teachings of Christ. You do remember that verse that says, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength to do it”? Submit to God in humility and see what will happen. The reward promised in this lesson from John is that when we do it – meaning humble ourselves – God will exalt us in due time. Trust me on this, it will happen that God will lift you up when you bow yourself to simply doing what you know in your heart is God’s will.

Second, did you get what Peter said in his advice to “cast your anxieties on God.” Isn’t that preposition ‘on’ an interesting choice in this phrase? The writer doesn’t say, “cast them to” God, or even gently lay them on God. It’s the instruction to cast them on God. That seems to be an odd way to phrase things for Peter, a fisherman, whose livelihood had depended on casting his nets into the sea. But here we are admonished to put our anxieties on the shoulders of God. Don’t try to bear the heavy burdens of your anxieties, your ‘what if’s’ by yourselves. We should learn to take those fears, that despair, that uncertainty and then relocate it from our shoulders to God’s. And the writer gives us a very good reason for doing this. It’s simple, really. Cast all your anxieties on God because God cares for you. It’s as if God is saying, give me that load of doubt and I’ll take care of it for you because I truly love you. It’s the same way we approach our family and friends – let me help you with that because I care for you.

The third lesson is to stay steadfast in your faith. Even though I can tell you that without a doubt I have questioned my faith, I have challenged the spiritual teachings of the Church, and I have voiced my disbelief in some who claim to speak on behalf of God. I make no apologies for that. I recall so clearly one of my seminary professors saying in class, “The one who has never doubted has never truly believed.” If it’s possible, I think that the reason I have held onto my own faith with such tenacity is related to my doubting. It seems the more I doubt and search for answers, the deeper my faith becomes. And the portion of the verse that gives me a great deal of hope are the words, “for you know that your sisters and brothers in all the world are undergoing the same thing.” I take that to mean that you and I have this doubting and believing, or what if and what now thing in common. At least, I hope so.

The last life lesson I see in his passage is simply this: wait for the light at the end of the tunnel. Now of course, that's not how the writer says it. After we have been true to our journey in discipleship to Christ, there are rewards to be gained. There will be a real bucket of blessings as our gift for faithfulness. Those rewards or blessings are listed as these: God will restore us, support us, strengthen us, and establish us. Those rewards do not all come at the end of life, by the way. You don't have to wait until you die to receive them. They are portioned out all along the journey. That's the real beauty of it. It's like getting a spiritual paycheck on a regular basis. This is our 'what now.' It's the answer to our question, "What if I do live my life as a believer in Christ?"

Perhaps you have never thought about the balance between these two life questions – 'what if' and 'what now,' but each of us is caught in that tug of war. My hope is that I, and hopefully you, will strive to spend most of our time in the joyful realm of the 'what now' world of expectations and blessings. We can choose to focus on the doubts and what if questions in our lives, or to trust in our faith in Christ to help us see that living in Him can always help us find the answers to those what now questions. What if? Our doubts. What now? Our faith.