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The word “doubt” is defined as “a status between belief and disbelief.” This, to me, is extremely interesting. “Doubt” doesn’t mean you *don’t* believe something, it means you’re *half-way* between believing it and not believing it. It is that in-the-middle place. It is the state of being in limbo. You could even call it purgatory, if we believed in purgatory, which Lutherans don’t, but since we all know what purgatory is (that place in between heaven and hell that the church dreamed up in the 11<sup>th</sup> century)...it is a place of torment, a foot in heaven and a foot in hell. Both dead and alive, all at the same time. Doubt is that awful in-between place we are all familiar with.

When I first traveled to Berlin in 1988, I was a sophomore in high school, and the Cold War was still on. Traveling through Checkpoint Charlie in order to get from West Berlin to East Berlin is something I will never

forget. It's quite a thing for a 16-yr-old girl from Iowa to be frisked by an armed German guard and then pulled into a tiny room to be interrogated in German as to the nature of my visit to the East.

The thing that has always stuck with me, though, was looking at the Berlin Wall. I remember the barbed wire that ran the length along the top of the wall right through downtown Berlin. I remember staring at the concrete wall, the razor wire, the spotlights and the watchtowers in utter disbelief. 136 people died between 1961 and 1989 trying to get from East Berlin to West Berlin, using such creative methods as hot air balloons, tunnels and hidden compartments in cars traveling to the west.

Most people, however, chose to simply make a run for it, and it is these stories that lodged in my memory. Most people trying to get to West Berlin would run when they thought guards weren't looking. Their calculations failed, and they were shot. Some died right away; others were

left to die slowly, agonizingly, while citizens from the East and the West looked on helplessly, unable to do anything because the person was in the “no man’s land”...the strip on land where neither East nor West could save you, the place where no one would come to your rescue, the place where you were left to die alone, one foot in the west, and one in the east.

I would never literally equate the mental state of doubt with being gunned down by an East German guard, but the image of dying alone in “no man’s land” is a good image for exactly how lonely and despairing doubt can be. To be in-between belief and unbelief—wanting desperately to believe, but simply being unable to. To be in the middle of heaven and hell—barely grasping onto the promise of the cross while your feet singe from the fires of hell. To be in the east and make an epic sprint to the west—seeing your goal, but falling short, feeling the bullet, and dying alone. These

are both physical and mental realities, there are geographical no-man's-lands and mental ones as well.

This is a place where no one wants to be. We would rather be in heaven or hell, not floating somewhere in between. Personally, I hate in-between things, I loathe indecision, and would rather make a bad decision than none at all, but usually this concerns a choice between Chinese or Italian for dinner, not the state of the human soul. I would rather stay in the East than die alone in no-man's-land with my children looking on helplessly. I would rather be in hell than in purgatory. I would rather hear a "yes" or a "no" than a "maybe." While gray is my favorite color, I don't want it to be the backdrop in my brain. Doubt, being between belief and unbelief, is unbearable.

This is where our man Abram is today, right smack dab in the middle of no-man's land. Abram, of all people! Abram—pillar of faith to Christians,

Jews and Muslims alike! Abram, the founding father of three major world religions...steeped in doubt, only in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis. God has already promised Abram that he and his wife will conceive a baby—a son—and that, through this son, God’s promise of faithfulness will be passed down to all their future generations. In fact, God’s promises to give Abram and his wife not only a son, but more descendants than the stars in the heavens, more descendants, even, than some families around here with specific Norwegian names. Unimaginable! So, you would think that Abram and his wife would run at this promise and embrace it with all their heart and soul and strength.

But they don’t.

She laughs.

And he doubts.

Sarai says to God, “Conceive a child? Are you kidding me? I’m *old*, and we don’t even *kiss* anymore, if you know what I mean, and you say I’m going to *conceive*?” And she laughs. And God shows her, and she conceives Isaac, which is *yitzhak*, which in Hebrew means *laughter*.

It doesn’t fair so well with Abram. He’s caught up in the darkness of doubt, as we see in today’s reading. Three times, God reassures Abram of his promise. And three times, Abram pushes back with doubt (with only a single, fleeting moment of belief).

God says, “I have *given* you my word.”

And Abram says, “Yes, I know, but I still have doubts.”

He wants to believe, wants to desperately, but simply can’t...one foot in heaven, one in hell...he is in purgatory, left to struggle in his own spiritual no-man’s land. Finally, God sees he is going to have to offer Abram more than just his word. So Abram collects a bunch of animals, which God

cuts in half and sets the two halves apart. In the ancient world, this was called “cutting a covenant,” which you did with someone to prove your word was good. So God begins this ceremonial ritual but, right when he is about to finish, thus calming Abram’s doubts once and for all, he stops, and causes a dark sleep to come upon Abram, but not a sound sleep, a sleep of terrifying darkness.

That night, with God’s ritual of assurance incomplete, is the darkest night of Abram’s soul (rivalled only perhaps by the night twelve years later when God commands him to kill this long-expected son Isaac, but that’s a different story). This night for Abram is a night of torture, a night of cold sweats and a pounding head, a night of a churning stomach, a night of thrashing legs. He is neither awake nor asleep. He is in a twisted “Never-Never Land.” He has fallen down a rabbit hole of demons. He is on the mythic River Styx, caught between the shores of Life and Death. He is the

trapeze artist, in that chilling moment between having already let go of one trapeze but not yet grabbing hold of the next one. His night is haunted by doubt. You have had nights like that. I have, too. And some have told me they would rather be dead than face another night like that. That's how much we fear doubt, worse than death, in some cases.

But finally! God finishes what he's begun. He passes through the severed animal pieces, which completes the ritual, which brings the ceremony to an end, which proves to Abram *he will not break his promise*, and if he does, may he become like one of those dismembered animals. The great thing about God in this story is he shows his patience with Abram. He doesn't abandon him for doubting, he doesn't punish him for doubting, he doesn't choose someone else to love. God simply keeps finding different ways to tell Abram the same thing—*I love you, and I have made you a*



*promise and I am going to keep it. If you can't trust my spoken word, than I will give you a visual to help you (hence the severed animals).*

We love Abram because we *are* Abram. We understand what's inside his head, when he hears God's word and reaches out to grab hold of it but just can't do it. We understand what's it's like to *want* to believe something with all your heart only to be consumed by doubt instead. This applies to our relationships with one another, and it also applies to our relationship with God. Wanting to make the run to the other side, the side of trust, but instead dying alone in a no-man's-land of doubt. Yeah, we get Abram.

And we also understand God's loving frustration with Abram, "I have already given you my word, why can't you trust me? Isn't my word enough?"...There is that side to human relationship, as well, as the human word is offered as a promise, as a pledge. Can the human word suffice and succeed before it is choked to death by another's doubts? Sometimes there

needs to be the visual, too...the embrace, the kiss...as the baby is both whispered to *and* swaddled, because the mother knows the baby will not understand her spoken word, but the infant heart grasps the mother's embrace.

Just like God understood Abram's doubt so well that he offered a visual pledge as well as a verbal one, so, too, does God do with same with us. He gives us his word, "I love you," he says, which we don't believe, and then he finally wraps his word in flesh and sacrifices it to us as a visual sign of his love, so that we can both see and hear that he loves us.

Thankfully, God's love for Abram did not depend on Abram's remains steadfast in his belief. Similarly, God's love for us does not depend on our unwavering belief. That's the definition of unconditional love.

Conditional love says, "I will only love you if you love me back."

Unconditional love says, "I will continue to love you no matter what." In

God's love for us, there is room for doubt, because, whether we trust it or not, whether we believe it or not, God loves us. He has told us so, and he has shown us so.

God does not desire for anyone to be in limbo, in purgatorial torment...it is not God's will for anybody to die alone, uncared for, unnoticed, un-lamented. It is finally Jesus who enters into that no-man's-land and carries you, the tormented, dying one, to the west, to your loved ones waiting to receive you, more loved ones than there are stars in the heavens. And in the meantime, God patiently drags us through our doubting human relationships and our doubtful relationship with him, just as he dragged Abram through his doubts, just as he dragged Isaac through his and Jacob through his and Joseph through his and so on and so on...

In learning to trust one another, will we learn to better trust God? Or, in learning to trust God, will we learn to better trust one another?