

Easter Vigil 2016 | Doubt and Longing

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 01] Please pray with me. O Lord, of all of your promises that you've given to us, you promise your presence and you promise your voice.

So we pray now, Lord, by your mercy, that these spoken words would lead us faithfully into your written word and that your written word would reveal to us your living word.

And that as we see him and as we hear him and as we come to know him, that we would be changed and become more like him. We pray this for our good and for your glory, Lord.

In your son's name, amen. Amen. So all of this week, all of this evening, we've been not only sharing a story, but embodying a story.

We've been participating together in the recounting of a story that started thousands of years ago and continues to this very moment. On Friday, we remembered the horror of the cross.

[1 : 19] This horrific image. And on Sunday, we'll celebrate the hope of the resurrection. In just a little while, in fact.

But for the moment, we find ourselves in a day that we call Holy Saturday. It's a day in between. It inhabits an in-between space, a space between horror and hope.

It's a day of uncertainty. It's a day of confusion. And so this is a moment where we pause and we ask ourselves, what do we believe about God?

What do we believe about this world? What do we believe about ourselves? And how it all fits together?

And I'd like us to do that by spending a little time reflecting on the person of Pontius Pilate. I know that's an odd choice.

[2 : 33] If you think that, you're probably right. We don't know much about Pilate other than the fact that he is famous for being the one who finally made the decision that Jesus should be crucified.

Beyond that, beyond knowing that he was the governor of the region at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, that he was in politics and held that office for roughly 10 years, we know very little.

The Bible, frankly, doesn't tell us much. There are many speculations and even one tradition dating back to at least the second century that Pilate eventually became a follower of Jesus.

A bit spurious, perhaps. But we don't know much about him. But the one reason that I believe we should spend time thinking about this person is because if the Bible makes anything clear about Pilate, it's that he was a deeply conflicted man.

He was a deeply fragmented person in his heart. And in that one way, I think that he's someone with whom we can all identify. Pilate seems suspended between two poles.

[3 : 53] As we see him encounter, interact with, and ultimately be forced to decide about Jesus, he seems suspended between two poles or buffeted by two powerful conflicting forces.

On the one hand, the Jewish leaders and the crowds are pressuring him to side with them, to agree that this man Jesus is nothing more than a rabble rouser.

He's nothing to concern ourselves with. And it would be better for all of us if he were done away with quickly and violently. And on the other side, as we read these accounts, Pilate clearly has a gut feeling about Jesus.

Jesus, an intuition, something that he doesn't seem to quite be able to identify, but it's obvious that he, in some ways, doubts his doubts.

He seems to wonder if Jesus might really be more than he seems. He tries again and again to convince Jesus to defend himself. He creates opportunities for Jesus to get himself off the hook, should he hope to survive this encounter.

[5 : 08] He even tells the leaders of the Jews and the crowds that he believes that Jesus is innocent of the charges. So what does this have to do with us?

And what does it have to do with this evening? I don't want to take Pilate out of context. I don't want to project anything onto Pilate that isn't there, but I do believe that in this way, Pilate would really be at home in our culture today.

I think Pilate would very much be at home in a Western postmodern context. A few years ago, the philosopher Charles Taylor wrote a massive doorstop of a book called *A Secular Age*, made accessible to people like me by other books, such as the one by Jamie Smith.

But he asks this question as the centerpiece of his work. How in just 500 years did Western culture go from being a place where it was virtually impossible not to believe in God and in just 500 years, it became a culture in which belief in God was just one of many options?

How did that happen in so short a time? And Taylor spends a lot of time describing what it feels like to be in our culture today. He's trying to get at the sense of things.

[6 : 35] And he says that we are, in many ways, suspended between two poles. On the one end, a purely materialistic atheism.

No gods, no miracles, no magic, nothing beyond this. And on the other end, the other pole, is a deep, profound, gut level, inconsolable longing for the transcendent.

And so he says we live our lives buffeted by these two forces. And because of that, we are all deeply conflicted. We are fragmented. And this applies to believers and non-believers alike.

So he says all believers are haunted by doubt. Admit it. All of us who are here who are believers, we're haunted by doubt.

The choice is not between doubt and belief. As Jamie Smith says, we believe while doubting. And what this means is that for people like me, my faith often feels like a struggle.

[7 : 56] Sometimes it feels like a tooth and nail battle. And I know many of you are the same if we're really honest. I'm not saying that there aren't great reasons for the faith.

There are. There's extraordinary compelling evidence that the resurrection actually happened. Hopefully you'll hear more of that tomorrow.

Extraordinary evidence. And I'm not saying that faith isn't a gift. It is very much a gift. But what I am saying is this, that we live in a culture that constantly undermines belief.

belief. It constantly undermines faith by the very fact that faith and belief are even considered to be a choice. And so some of us are okay with that.

We understand that this is a part of our culture, a part of the water that we swim in and we embrace it. But I know that there are some of us, many of us, some of whom are probably here tonight, who are ashamed, who feel that our faith is somehow deficient.

- [9 : 07] This is the water that we swim in, friends. And here's the thing. It works both ways. Not only is belief constantly undermined, but unbelief is constantly undermined in the very same way.
- Many atheists and agnostics are also haunted. But they're haunted by belief. Thomas Nagel, who's an atheist professor at NYU, writes about what it's like to be haunted by belief.
- He says this, I want atheism to be true. I want it to be true. And I'm made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers.
- So Taylor says that we're haunted by this deep inconsolable longing for something bigger or something more or something beyond this. Listen to these lyrics from the Fleet Foxes.
- You gotta know your audience, right? I was raised up believing I was somehow unique. Like a snowflake, distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see.
- [10 : 28] And now, after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be a functioning cog in some great machinery, serving something beyond me.
- But I don't. I don't know what that will be. I'll get back to you someday, soon. You will see. What's my name? What's my station?
- Oh, just tell me what I should do. So think about this. We live in a culture where we define freedom as the ability to define truth for ourselves.
- The Supreme Court even made this official back in 1992 in a ruling where they wrote, at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence.
- existence. At the heart of liberty is the freedom to define one's own concept of existence. And we hear this and we believe this on one level and yet this makes you wonder, is life as a self-defining little snowflake really that great?
- [11 : 44] because the time comes when we look at our degrees and we look at our jobs and we look at our accomplishments and we look at our perfectly manicured identities and we think, is this it?
- Is this all there is? Is there nothing more to it? And all this means that we're more and more and more fragmented on the inside in the sense that we don't fit together.
- It's as though our thoughts and feelings are like multiple ships passing in the night. There was an interview on NPR's Fresh Air where Terry Gross interviews the children's book writer Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, one of our favorites at home.
- And he's talking about getting old, he's talking about his friends dying and he starts talking about his brother passing away and he's mourning the loss of his brother and listen to what he says.
- I don't believe in an afterlife but I still fully expect to see my brother again. I don't believe in an afterlife but I fully expect to see my brother again.
- [13 : 02] If you're not convinced that this division, this conflict is a reality, just ask people who work in advertising. They have this down to a science.
- You know, brand managers used to be responsible for writing copy and designing packaging. But now, brand managers are expected to turn their brand into an entire system of meaning with an entire religiously devoted community attached to it because they know that a person like me, if I even remotely suspect that a shoe or a car is going to somehow satisfy that inconsolable longing, I'm much more likely to buy it.
- Or there are places like SoulCycle. Wildly successful. Wildly successful. It's an exercise class.

It's an exercise class that promises you can not only get in shape but find your soul. It says it in neon letters.

Find your soul for just \$30 to \$40 per class. You ride a bike for an hour.

[14 : 28] Find your soul. But these places are blowing up. Why? Julian Barnes once wrote, I don't believe in God but I miss him.

That's our culture in a nutshell. We live suspended between disillusionment and longing. So why are we talking about this now?

Now? Because there's no day in the church calendar where this theme is more appropriate than Holy Saturday.

This cultural moment is captured perfectly in the mood of this evening. Because in our culture, listen, every day is Holy Saturday.

Every day is Holy Saturday. It's a day suspended between the godless brutality of the crucifixion and the seeming fairytale hope of resurrection.

[15 : 36] And it's suspended right in between these two things. Can you imagine what it must have been like for the disciples on that first Saturday? Can you imagine what they must have been feeling?

You understand, they expected that Jesus had come to lead a rebellion. They had been told since the time they were toddlers that their nation was set aside by God for great things, great purposes.

They had been told that when they were in times of captivity, like the great story of the Exodus, that God would one day come and liberate them. And here they are, oppressed by Rome, humiliated, tolerated as long as they pay their taxes.

And they knew, they just knew when they read their scriptures that at some point God was going to send another Messiah, liberator, to set them free. And so they saw Jesus and they saw what he did and they heard what he said and they expected, they knew in their guts that one day he was going to overthrow Rome and he was going to vindicate Israel and he was going to show everybody, you don't mess with God's people.

in short, they wanted Jesus to make Israel great again. So can you imagine what they must have been feeling?

[17 : 05] As the blood ran down the cross that day, it must have been as though all the magic bled out of the world. Don't you feel it?

Don't you feel the disillusionment? I mean, when you look at our city, when you look at our world, when you look at our country, when you look at this election, can you not feel the disillusionment, the almost existential dread in the air?

here's the point. I believe that we are a Holy Saturday culture in need of Easter Sunday hope.

So this brings us to our final question. How do we respond to the claims of Easter? How do we respond to these claims of hope?

There's Pilate's way. How does Pilate respond? He hides behind cynicism. When Jesus tells Pilate that he came to bear witness to the truth, Pilate famously responds, what is truth?

[18 : 39] Some people live their whole lives asking that question, poking holes and poking holes and popping balloon after balloon.

it's a great way to insulate yourself against disillusionment. But to borrow an image from Andy Crouch, cynicism is a lot like bubble wrap.

You can wrap yourself around with it and it will insulate you from the hard knocks of disillusionment in this kind of culture.

And yet, it will also rob you. It will rob you of the ability to fully experience. joy, love, it will dilute those things.

The problem is, C.S. Lewis writes, is you cannot go on seeing through things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it.

[19 : 42] If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To see through all things is the same as not to see.

Cynicism, I believe, is one of the leading causes of blindness in our culture. Or, like Pilate, we can simply put off making any decision as long as we possibly can.

Pilate obviously has a high priority item and that is keeping the peace. And he knows that once he takes a clear stance on Jesus, he will have to deal with the implications.

And so, if you read these accounts, he puts it off as long as he possibly can. He even sends Jesus to Herod like a hot potato, hoping that Herod will take the responsibility off of his shoulders.

And even when he finally makes the decision, he publicly washes his hands as if to say, don't hold me responsible for this decision. How many of us are the same?

[20 : 55] We know that as long as we remain undecided, we don't have to be accountable to anything. Plus, it is a shortcut to being sophisticated.

The jury's still out. I have a friend who came to Jesus a few years back, but she spent a long time seeking as an adult.

And she told some of her friends at work about her spiritual journey. And she said, I'm beginning to ask questions and I'm beginning to look and to seek spiritually and to figure out what I believe about God and myself and this world.

And I'm exploring. And all of her friends rallied around her and said, this is amazing. This is great. We have such respect for you. This is incredible. Share with us what you're learning. We want to be a part of this journey with you.

This is incredible. And she had an amazing, powerful experience. Came to believe in Jesus. It began to change her life.

[21 : 56] And she went back to these same friends and said, I think I found what I was looking for. And she told me that these same friends were shocked and they were horrified.

And a number of them told her that they had lost respect for her. Our culture loves seekers, not so much finders.

It's funny, if somebody came and said they were thirsty, would we not offer them a drink? Or would we say, it's all about the experience of thirst? Enjoy it.

This is what life is. Short though it may be. So we can be like Pilate, but then, and listen, then we would probably have to take that deep yearning and we would have to suppress it.

What do you do with it? Or you could take classes at SoulCycle. Or, we can do what countless others have done.

[23 : 10] People like Augustine, who actually had a very powerful conversion experience about 300 years after Pilate. Augustine was every bit as conflicted as Pilate.

He was every bit as fragmented, every bit as torn. By skepticism and unbelief and longing. And yet, when he felt that longing and when he felt that desire, he didn't suppress it, he listened to it.

He listened to it. And he followed it. He followed it like a mountain stream up and up and up, past wealth, past success, past romantic love, past pleasure, and he kept following it up until he found the source.

And he met Jesus. And he realized that this longing is actually an ancient memory that we have as human beings.

It's an imprint. It's the emptiness that we experience apart from the love of God. And so, when he found Jesus, he realized he was finding the one who said, I came that you may have life and have it abundantly.

[24 : 34] I wonder what it would have been like if Pilate could have met Augustine and had a conversation with him. Can you imagine Pilate in a rare moment of honesty for a politician after a few glasses of wine finally spilling it out on the table?

I can't take it anymore. I feel torn apart. And for Augustine to share with Pilate the words that he once prayed to God. You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

Friends, I would never presume to tell you what you should think about Jesus. I don't think Christians should tell people what to think about anything. But I will encourage you to think.

To think well. To ask the questions. Because we could remain in the perpetual uncertainty of Holy Saturday.

We could stay right here. There's nothing stopping us from staying right here. Because there is a sort of peace here. The only problem is it's the kind of peace that you find in a tomb.

[26 : 01] It's a lifeless peace. Or if you do feel this longing in yourself. if you feel it gnawing, even whispering.

Might you have the courage to listen to it? To follow it out of the tomb? To commit yourself to open and honest inquiry?

To see where it might lead? Let's pray together. After we pray this prayer, there will be a song and then there will be a ten minute period of silent reflection.

I encourage you to use this time to think and reflect, to ask God to speak to you. Let's pray together. Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, grant that as the crucified body of your dear son was laid in the tomb and rested on this night, so we may await with him the coming of the third day and rise with him to newness of life who lives and reigns with you in the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.