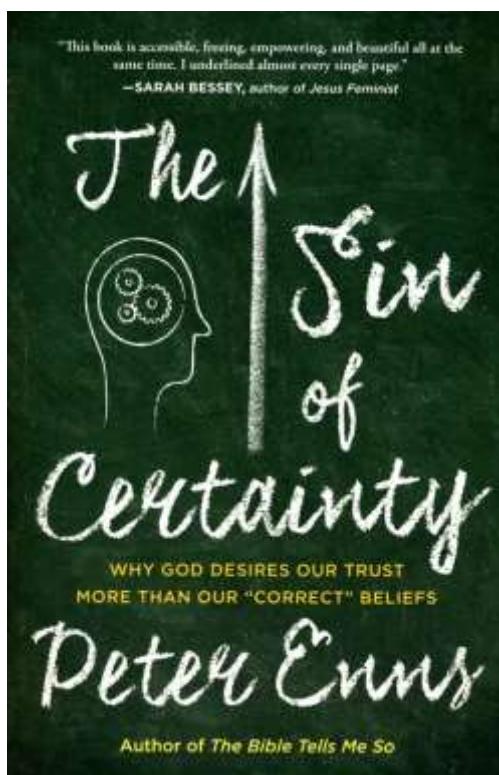


The Sin of Certainty
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
August 9, 2020 – NPMC In Person and Livestreamed Worship

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:9-18, Matthew 14:22-33



Good Morning. It is so good to worship with you this morning, whether here in person in our sanctuary or for those joining us in real time via livestream. This really is a happy occasion – we're not back to "normal," of course, but I hope we've struck a happy medium between safety and a sense of togetherness as we worship in these new ways. Now, you might be thinking, this is a happy day – so why on earth have I chosen to preach about sin today? Seems a little inappropriate! But it's a title I've borrowed from a book written by

Bible scholar Peter Enns, and it's really more the "certainty" part of it that I'm interested in exploring today.

Is certainty the same thing as faith? If it is, I might just be one of the least faithful people around! I'm a pretty slow decision maker, and often find myself weighing options and pros and cons for a long time. If you've ever seen the TV show, *The Good Place*, I'm like that character, Chidi – the indecisive philosophy professor who overthinks absolutely everything....

But this question – is certainty the same as faith? – is what Enns' book is all about, and as his title suggests, he comes up with a resounding "no." Certainty might

even be considered a sin, he claims. But he's not talking about regular certainty, as in being sure of a decision or sure of yourself. He's talking about a type of spirituality that idolizes certainty – that stubbornly refuses to adapt or change, that is rigidly stuck in its ways. It's the "this is how we've always done things" attitude – think refusing to wear a mask, or refusing to have worship remotely, because those things are new and scary.

Enns says it this way: "I'm not actually saying that certainty is sin. What I'm saying is that the need to stay certain when you've gotten to a point where you're not certain anymore [is the problem]. The sin is, "I've got to get back to the way things were" when in fact maybe God is actually pushing you to think of God differently." He uses the image of faith as a wall. When the wall starts to crumble a bit, and the bricks start falling out, the faith-as-certainty people try to patch it up – they try to rebuild and put the wall back to the way it was. But all along, says Enns, God is actually inviting us "on a journey of faith." And if faith is a journey instead of a wall, that's a very different perspective – one stays put, while the other ventures out – it's a bit of a brick wall vs. yellow brick road situation. With the wall, Enns says, "You're selling God short. You're not actually trusting God."¹

In our lectionary passages for today, we find two stories that relate to this imagery of faith as journeys. The first, from I Kings 19, is a story of the prophet Elijah. And our story begins when Elijah is at a pretty low point. Queen Jezebel has threatened his life, so Elijah is running away into the wilderness. He is depressed and fearful, and he is all alone in a desert cave near mount Horeb. And God asks him what he's doing there. He tells God of how "zealous" he has been, how he's tried to lead the Israelite

¹ These quotes are from an interview with Peter Enns about his book, *The Sin of Certainty*, available in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hO8gyRe_qW4

people away from the false god Baal toward God and God's ways, but they have not listened. And now they are threatening to kill him. And God tells Elijah that he's going to meet God, that God "is about to pass by." Can you imagine how exciting and terrifying that was? So Elijah got himself ready to meet God.

First, "there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him [the King James Version



"Elijah Hears the Still Small Voice of God"
by Janet McKenzie

famously calls it a 'still, small voice'] that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" (v. 11-13). Now, I love this passage because of the great up-ending of the expectations we sometimes have about God. Whether consciously or not, we expect God to act in mighty, maybe even violent ways – the God of wrath. We expect God in the whirlwind, in the earthquake, in the fire. But Elijah the prophet knows God is not in these things. He waits quietly for these things to subside. And when he "hears" the

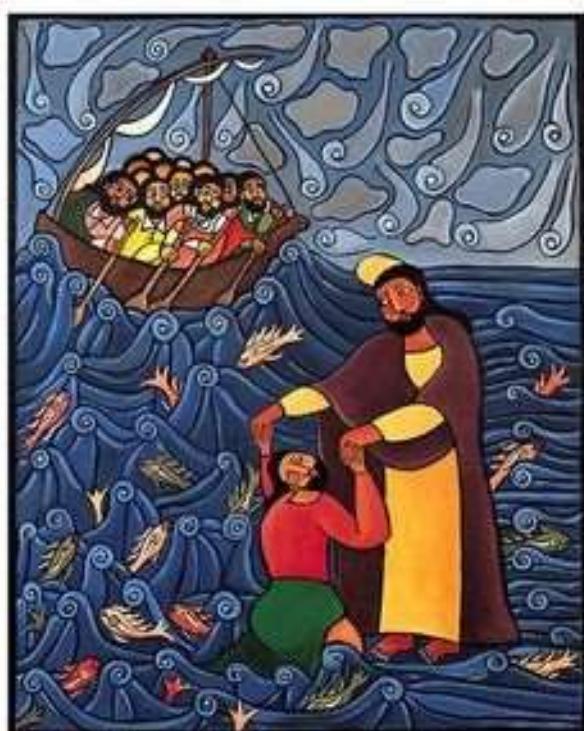
“sound of sheer silence,” that’s when he covers his face with his mantle (so there IS biblical precedence for mask-wearing!). He covers his face and goes out to hear the still, small voice – the gentle voice of God, the voice of compassion itself who seeks out Elijah in his lowest moment with loving concern. God ends up being the God of silence and gentleness, here, not the God of might who shatters mountains. How unexpected! It is this God who helps Elijah know what to do next, who calms his fears and sends him on his way back to face down Queen Jezebel, King Ahab, and the prophets of Baal. It is this God who sends him on a journey back to where he is needed, a journey without any guarantees of success, but one requiring Elijah to have faith and trust in God.

And this really is important, because that’s the key difference between certainty and faith. Writer Sarah Bessey says, “Faith isn’t certainty, I know that by now. If I were certain, I wouldn’t need faith.”² What underlies certainty is control – that refusal to change, that brick wall – but what underlies faith is a relationship of trust – a relationship that gives us the strength to step out into the unknown, to take the first step on that journey. It was this faith-as-trust that gave Elijah the courage to go back to face the corrupt royals and prophets of Baal, knowing that even though it was uncertain, he was doing the right thing, and God would be with him.

Our second Scripture passage for this morning is also about taking steps into the unknown. It’s the well-known story of Jesus walking on the water, and of Peter’s attempt to do so, too (Matt. 14). Interestingly, we have a bit of an Elijah situation at the start of our passage – Jesus goes off alone, up the mountain, to pray (v. 23), while the disciples go out in a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. A storm rolls in, and the disciples

² Sarah Bessey, *Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith* (Toronto: Howard Books, 2015), 171.

get scared (they sure encounter a lot of storms when they're in boats, don't they?). So Jesus "came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid'" ((v. 25-27). I like to imagine that he said that in a "still, small voice."



"Jesus Walks on Water" (1998)
by Laura James

Well, then good old Peter wants to get in on the fun. He starts making it a test, saying, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus goes along with it, and invites Peter out onto the water. "So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus." At first, it seems to be no problem, this walking on the water thing. But then Peter's fear gets the best of him: "when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried

out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'" (v. 30-31).

Now, I'm sure I'm not the only person in Christian history to be somewhat perplexed by this story. Here Peter, seeing Jesus walking on water, wanted to do that, too. He wanted to follow Jesus into the impossible – to participate in Jesus' miraculous power to walk across a stormy sea. So why does Jesus make it about Peter's failure to

have faith when things go wrong? Wasn't it brave for him to step out of the boat in the first place? Doesn't that show trust in Jesus?

Well, yes and no. The question is what he is putting his trust in. If he is trusting mainly in a God of miracles alone, in a God who likes to be tested, in a God who will swoop in and save him, in a God who will make him invincible, in a God who requires nothing from him – well, that's not trusting in the God of Abraham and Sarah, Elijah, Mary, and Jesus. That's some other god – one who promises certainty rather than faithfulness. Getting back to Enns, faith is not about everything going well for you all the time. That's the “prosperity gospel.” No, Enns tells us, faith is about “maintaining a posture of trust even when things are falling apart or don’t make sense.” We see this in the Bible. When things fall apart, faith gives us a “choice: am I now going to trust God anyway, or am I only going to trust God because life makes sense?”³

It reminds me of a story I heard recently about a doctor in Montreal, at the McGill University Health Centre Emergency Department. Dr. Sanjeet Singh Saluja belongs to the Sikh religion, which is known for its practice of “Kesh” – to allow one’s hair (and beard, for men) to grow “out of respect for the perfection of God’s creation.” This is why men and boys wear turbans, and it’s a central practice of Sikh faith and a key part of Sikh identity. Another key aspect of the Sikh faith is “Seva,” which is “service to humanity.” Dr. Saluja views his work in the hospital as fulfilling this part of his faith. With the pandemic, however, Dr. Saluja faced an extremely difficult decision: since the N95 masks required in the hospital don’t fit properly over a beard, he would either have to stop helping COVID-19 patients or shave his beard. He had to choose, in other words,

³ These quotes are from an interview with Peter Enns about his book, *The Sin of Certainty*, available in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hO8gyRe_qW4

between two central practices of his Sikh faith. And Dr. Saluja made the difficult decision to shave off his beard so he could continue working as an emergency room doctor during this pandemic.⁴ (You can see before and after pictures below).



This story

struck me as such a powerful example of faith and trusting in God even through very unexpected and uncertain

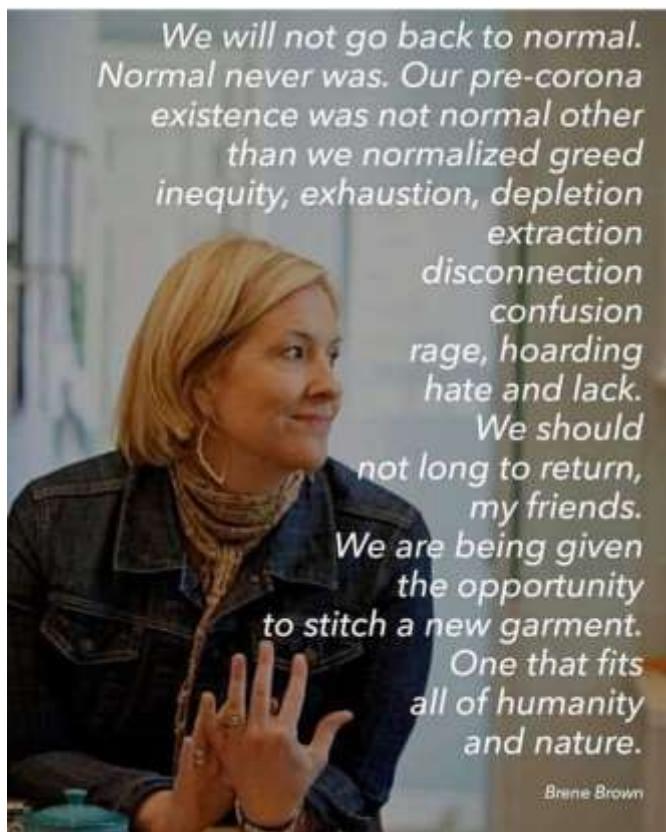
circumstances. Dr. Saluja likely never imagined that he'd have to choose between two pillars of his faith – he likely never imagined that he would have to give up his beard for the sake of continuing to live out his faith. That's the opposite of why he had a beard as a Sikh man! And yet, when faced with that decision, he chose to step into the unknown.

In various ways, we have all had to give up aspects of our “normal” lives during this pandemic. I’ve heard some form of the sentiment “I wish we could just go back to normal!” many times, and I’ve said it myself, too. But what this pandemic has shown us – alongside the Black Lives Matter demonstrations and the current “Walking with Our Angels” march and ceremony for mental health services, especially for the north of our province – is that the old “normal” wasn’t actually working that well for many of us. Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: “In our moment of fear and insecurity, we may be tempted to hold on to what was once safe and secure. Prophetic tradition

⁴ Neale McDevitt, “Sikh doctor shaves beard in order to keep serving COVID-19 patients,” *McGill Reporter*, May 7, 2020, <https://reporter.mcgill.ca/sikh-doctor-shaves-beard-in-order-to-keep-serving-covid-19-patients/?fbclid=IwAR1n9DAYX1inZC21nlxT7tw2Md6ISwk5JOGbbRaLI33a3wBjZmnj1nnBmec>

knows, to the contrary, that the future does not reside in old treasured realities. It belongs, rather, to bold faithful thought that evokes bold faithful action. ... The good news is that we need not go back to those old ways that are punitive, parsimonious [or token], and predatory. We can embrace a new normal that is God's gift to us!"⁵ We have an opportunity here to create a "new normal" that is more fair and more sustainable and more compassionate than things were before. What a gift! And what a reversal of our expectations and our visions of certainty. We don't have to rebuild the wall, my friends. Instead, we can set out on the journey, together, trusting in God despite the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

Brene Brown has said something very similar, and I'll let her have the last word:



AMEN

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 58-59.