

“Mistrusting God”
Luke 13:31-35; Genesis 15
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Our questions and doubts are part of our faith, but they still take us into the arms of Christ.

Are you a hugger? Do you like to give and receive hugs? I guess some people are and others aren't. And it's not always easy to figure out who is and who isn't. When we were in Europe a few years ago, I noticed that people always greeted each other the same way, they would hold each other in a half-hug, sort of by the upper arms, and they they would kiss each other, first on one cheek, then the other, then back to the first one. Always three kisses, kisses that didn't really touch their cheek, just sort of along side. Not a full hug, not a real kiss, but everyone did the same way so I guess they didn't have to worry about how much to hug or whether to kiss on the cheek or the air right next to the cheek. It was social convention and already decided. How do you decide? When you greet someone on the street—do you shake hands? Hug? Kiss on the cheek? When someone comes to your house, is it different? Do you hug all the friends who come into your house? How about at church? How do you greet people here? How do you know if someone doesn't want a hug?

Have you ever tried to hug someone and the person backed away? I mean other than one of your kids in a public place when you try to hug them and they just say, “Daaaaad . . .” But what about someone else. Have you ever tried to hug someone and been rebuffed? You might have even been excited to hug them, smile on your face, arms outstretched, until you saw the flinch on their face, until they backed away. How did you feel? You feel like you have offered your love, offered something of yourself and been turned down. Don't you think that's how Jesus felt? He comes to this point in his journey toward Jerusalem and he knows that it is not going to go well for him. He also knows that it won't go well for Jerusalem either. They are headed for a downfall, for eventual destruction, and they will do nothing to stop it. And so he weeps over Jerusalem. As Barbara Brown Taylor says about this passage: "If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most

vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed -- but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand." This is Jesus the hen, Jesus trying to protect his chicks, Jesus trying to protect those whom he loves.

But how do we respond to God? Do we let ourselves be enveloped in his wings? Do we trust him that much? Abram and his wife Sarai lived in the land of Haran two thousand years before Jesus. Their names had not yet been changed to Abraham and Sarah. We don't know much about him but most people in that area lived as semi-nomads. They would keep their flocks of sheep and goats and occasionally come into the small town to trade with others for grain or fruit. They made their own clothing and tents and constantly wandered the area for the best grazing and the best water. Abram lived like this until he grew old, and according to the Scripture he was rich in gold and silver and flocks, but they had no children to leave all these possessions to. When he was 75 years old we are told that God spoke to him and told him to take his wife and his servant and his flocks and to move to a new land, a land that God would show him. And Abram does. He comes to the city of Shechem in the hill country of Judah. Shechem was a city of traders that arose in the Middle Bronze Age and by the time Abram and Sarai probably arrived there about 1800 years before Christ, it was a thriving city. It was there at Shechem that God spoke again to Abram and told him that he would leave this land to Abram and his offspring. So Abram begins to live there. But as a herder he still travels around and grazes his herds and seeks the best water, and his wealth grows, but his family does not. And he and Sarai keep getting older. Finally, after many years, God appears to Abram in a vision and says to him, "Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield. Your reward will be very great." For all these years, God has spoken to Abram and Abram has obeyed, but as far as we know, Abram has never talked back. The Scripture just records God speaking to him, never Abram speaking to God. Until now. Until God says, "your reward will be very great." Big deal. Abram has as much wealth and power and servants as any man could want. The one thing he wants he doesn't have. So for the first time he questions God. "You're going to give me a great reward? What in the world could you be talking about? I'm still without

children and when I die, some guy I barely know, some shirt-tail relation will inherit all my stuff.

You've given me a lot of things, but not the thing I really want.”

All this time when God has spoken to Abram, he has responded obediently without questioning. But now he has questions. In fact, more than questions, they begin to sound like complaints. “Are you going to give me what I really want? I want a real child, I don't want some slave or some distant relation to be my heir.” How can he be complaining? This is Abram, soon to be renamed Abraham, the example of obedience and faith. This is who is now complaining to God? Abram, the only one in all of Scripture who is described as the friend of God.

Can a person who complains and questions God be the model for what faith looks like?

What does faith look like? What does it mean to you to have faith? Does it mean to believe? Do you believe? Maybe faith means believing that there is a God or that Jesus was the Son of God. Is that what it means to have faith? Does it mean that you think that the Bible is God's word or that Jesus will return someday? Is that what it means to have faith? Isn't it more than that? Isn't faith more than just just thinking some things are true and others aren't? Can faith have doubts? Can faith ask questions? Can faith complain? Presbyterian preacher and scholar Daniel DeBevoise asks, “What is the character of faithfulness? So often when people face perplexing questions—when they feel the anxiety of doubt and uncertainty, when they struggle with frustration and disappointment—they think of it as a crisis of faith. We are tempted to think of faith only as unquestioning acceptance or silent submission, but as we follow Abram on his journey of faith, he clearly comes to the point where he challenges and questions God's claims. This kind of struggling with God can also be a part of faith.”¹

Do you ever question God? Do you ever complain to God? Do you ever wonder if God can be trusted? What about days like today? Did you wake up early this morning and wonder how such a thing like the shootings overnight can happen in Kalamazoo? Do you question God? Do you want him to give you answers? Daniel Migliore in his great work *Faith Seeking Understanding*, says that the

1 DeBevoise, Daniel. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, volume 2.* p. 52.

“knowledge given in revelation is not simply knowledge *that* or knowledge *about*, but knowledge *of*.”²

Abram doesn't just know about God. He knows God. That's why the text says Abram believed the Lord. What does Abram believe? That he will have a child? That God can be trusted? That there are a lot of stars in the sky? Does Abram completely understand how God will fulfill what God has promised? I don't think so. Does Abram have all the answers to his questions? Not really. However Abram does believe that God will be faithful and true. Abram believes that the life God promises to give him is the way he should go. Notice that Abram does ask God how this is all going to happen. He isn't really whining, but he questions because he does believe God, he trusts God but he doesn't yet understand. His questioning faith takes seriously God's presence and power in his life and challenges us to be open to God's work in our lives. Abram questions God because he deeply believes God can do something about it. It is questions like that that help us take the next steps on our journey of faith.³

Like Abram we can question God as part of our faithfulness and trust. We believe, not about God, but we believe God. We trust. And so when Jesus stands there, arms outstretched, ready to embrace us in his love, we step into his arms, not flinching away. Even when we see that his outstretched arms take us, with him by the way of the cross.

² Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding*. p. 20.

³ DeBevoise, p. 54.