

### What If I'm Wrong?

*“I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey.” Ezekiel 34:22a*

What-if questions. What if this happens? What if that happens? I imagine that you're familiar with these types of questions. Some what-if questions can be very useful. They can jumpstart creativity. They can lead to improvement and growth. They can stimulate progress and positive change.

However, there are other what-if questions that we deal with that are far more challenging and troubling than useful. These what-if questions can quickly gum up the works. They can create doubt and hesitation. They can erode confidence and cause regression. They can haunt and cloud.

Perhaps the most common troubling or challenging what-if question we face is, “What if I'm wrong?” What if I'm wrong about this personal choice? What if I'm wrong about this decision for my family? What if I'm wrong about this relationship? What if I'm wrong about this conviction?

I don't think any of us can escape some variation of this question, “What if I'm wrong?” Maybe we can ignore and overlook some instances of this question so that their impact is slow and barely noticeable like a river slowly eroding the rocks of the riverbed. But there likely are other times that these what-if-I'm-wrong questions seem like bombs going off in our lives leaving great destruction in their wake.

Our spiritual lives aren't exempt from this what-if-I'm-wrong question either! Whether the impact of this question in our spiritual life seems like erosion or an explosion, facing this question can be especially challenging on this last weekend of the church year. As we hear reminders about Christ's return and are given insights into what His second coming will be like, these moments focused on the end times can easily lead us to fall prey to various versions of this question, “What if I'm wrong about my faith?”

What if I'm wrong about my faith? I don't know about you, but I don't even like to utter this phrase. But the reality is that this question lurks behind the mask of other questions seeking to either erode or explode our spiritual lives. This question hides behind the question of good works, do we do good works to be sure of our salvation? This question hides behind a world overwhelmed by sinful human reasoning asking how Christians believe things that defy human logic? This question hides behind our heartbreak over believers who have gone astray, does God really care about those who are lost?

Whether it's the purpose of good works, the battle between faith and human reason or wondering if there's hope for the lost these concerns ultimately lead us to wonder if we're wrong about our faith? And this weekend, our readings help us address this concerning question and the various forms it can take. Working backwards through the readings we just heard, let's be reminded of God's answer to this earnest and challenging question, “What if I'm wrong about my faith?”

Consider first, the Gospel reading from Matthew. The return of King Jesus coincides with the separation of the sheep and the goats. As we hear Jesus' description of this future moment, it can sound to us that inheriting God's kingdom is completely based on the works we've accomplished. So, the temptation arises to think that my faith must be wrong to believe that the assurance of heaven rests on God's work alone. Aren't Jesus' words telling us that it's based on the good deeds that we've done?

While it's tempting to start believing this, the reaction of the sheep to the king's words tell us a very different reality. When the sheep hear of the good works that they've done, they're just as surprised and shocked as the goats are at the good works they've left undone. If either the sheep or the goats believed good works earned them God's kingdom they would have had a laundry list of all their good deeds to present to the king; deeds likely much more extravagant than the ones highlighted by the king.

The sheep's surprise and shock reveal to us that their good works aren't flowing from a belief that they could earn heaven but rather from a belief that they were already secure in God's kingdom outside of what they did. And from this security and assurance, their lives responded in gratitude with mercy to those in need. The sheep weren't doing acts of mercy to gain heaven, the sheep were doing acts of mercy because they knew that heaven had already been gained for them. They weren't wrong about their faith for their faith was in Jesus and their caring actions were evidence of this God-given reality.

Now let's consider, the second reading from 1 Corinthians. Paul is defending the resurrection of the dead, especially the resurrection of Jesus. The section we have in our service comes right after Paul assumes for the sake of the argument that there is no resurrection of the dead – a common, cultural thought in Corinth

during Paul's time. Paul explains that this faulty assumption leads to no hope for the believer and faith is pointless. But then come the words we have in our service this weekend where Paul adamantly dismisses this false notion, affirming Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of the dead as fact.

Paul and many others were witnesses of Christ's resurrection. Christ's resurrection wasn't a fairy tale needing to be debunked by cultural ideas and mocked by the latest and greatest phases of human logic. The Corinthian Christians wouldn't be wrong to have faith in Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of the dead – even though the popular temptation of the society around them was to believe otherwise. It was Jesus' bodily resurrection reality that was the foundation and bedrock of their faith. The empty tomb was the powerful reminder that their faith most definitely wasn't in vain even in a community so confused and misguided by human reason!

Lastly, we have our reading from Ezekiel. Ezekiel is proclaiming the Lord's word to the broken and bruised people of Israel. While Israel had been humbled and scattered through exile even more disheartening was the reality that they had turned on each other. The people of Israel, the people of God, were destroying themselves from the inside out. And as they divided themselves from each other, they were driving themselves from God too. They were lost and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Knowing the story of the people of ancient Israel, their repetitive rebellions and failures, it seems safe to assume that God would give up on them. They're lost for the umpteenth time and so they should be written off. Turn off faith, turn off hope, no one could expect God to continue to seek them out in compassionate care. However, that's exactly what the Lord proclaims through Ezekiel that He personally would rescue His lost sheep and restore them to His fold. The Lord's promise was the guarantee that faith in His mercy, care and compassion was not wrong but would be affirmed. Faith wasn't being placed in a God who was far off, but rather in the God who was near and ready to act for His people's benefit.

My dear friends in Christ, this weekend's readings are a resounding proclamation that God-given faith in Jesus and His life, death and resurrection is never wrong! For the gift of faith in Christ knows the proper perspective on good works that enhances faith rather than destroys it. Good works are evidence of the living and active faith God the Holy Spirit has created and is sustaining. God-given faith is active not because of fear and demands but because all fear and demands have been removed. A life of faith in Jesus loves and is merciful because that life knows the love and mercy it has been shown already in Jesus.

Likewise, God-given faith in Jesus is never wrong even when human reason challenges with all its might. God is the giver of human reason and when He chooses to go beyond the limits of human understanding this doesn't make faith in Him wrong rather it's a reminder of how dependent creation is upon Him, the Creator. God-given faith doesn't need to be considered wrong when every mysterious action of God can't be explained, rather it freely confesses and points to its Almighty Creator as the One who can do what seems humanly impossible.

Neither is God-given faith in Jesus wrong to cling to God's mercy, care and compassion even in the darkest moments of the lost. The same God who promised to seek out the lost sheep of Israel is the same God who is relentlessly seeking His flock today. He was faithful to His promise to mercifully seek the lost bringing it to fulfillment in Jesus' life, death and resurrection so many years ago. And He remains faithful to this promise to mercifully seek the lost even now because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Friends in Christ, as we look towards Jesus' return and the question arises, what if I'm wrong about my faith, may this question drive you back to One who created, sustains and is the object of your faith. Whatever variation of this question might challenge you, may the Holy Spirit always assure you that faith rooted in Jesus' life, death and resurrection is never wrong. In Christ Jesus, heaven is ours, may we love one another in light of this reality. In Christ Jesus, we have wisdom far greater than the wisdom of this world, may we remain in His wisdom no matter how foolish the world might think it is. In Christ Jesus, we have been sought and found, may we continually pray and trust that our Lord will continue to seek out the lost until He returns. In Christ Jesus, our faith is anchored to the God who is eternally faithful, may His faithfulness assure us that our faith in Him is never wrong. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan