

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Can we have uncertainty and remain faithful?



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The question of knowledge and certainty was explored last week by looking at Jacob Bronowski's moving episode in his "Ascent of Man" television series. This past week, an article appeared in Christian Century with a similar theme. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological seminary, wrote an article titled, "Uncertain and faithful."

Barnes suggests that the devil's temptation to Jesus to jump from the top of the temple so the angels would save him was actually "a temptation to be certain of God's love."

He then makes the claim that "nothing is more dangerous to our souls than trying to be certain we're loved by God" and that seeking certainty is "one of the great temptations of life."

Barnes points to the irony that in responding to the Enlightenment's exploration of the limits of knowledge, the church "developed new theologies of infallibility and inerrancy that the church had never heard of before."

He remembers a seminary professor who said to the students preparing for ministry, "Remember, you are not necessary." This had bothered him to the point of questioning the professor, who then reaffirmed his statement and added, "You're too important to be necessary; you are cherished by God." Barnes concludes, "Why would we settle for being necessary and certain, when we could be loved?"

O LORD, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
2 let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
3 For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
...

14 O LORD, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me?
15 Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.
16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.

Enns continues by illustrating with similar passages, not only in the Psalms but also in the other wisdom books of the Bible, including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. The author of Ecclesiastes expresses skepticism about what we can humanly know for certain, and yet our duty to trust God and be faithful: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter, all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone." (Ecclesiastes 12:12-13)

It is not what we know, but in whom we trust that is the essence of our faith, as is summarized in the book of Proverbs: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Jesus experienced this loss of certainty

"Worshipping other gods, or acting unjustly toward others gets criticized about every three sentences, but not this honest talk of feeling abandoned by God."

Peter Enns, professor of biblical studies at Eastern University

Another seminary professor, Peter Enns, professor of biblical studies at Eastern University in Pennsylvania, recently published his book, "The Sin of Certainty." He calls us to "decouple our faith in God from our thoughts about God. That way faith doesn't rest on correct thinking."

It is an acceptance of our limited understanding that keeps our thoughts from becoming idols, not made of stone or wood, but of finite mental constructions. Otherwise, "we are trusting our thoughts rather than God."

Enns compares it to a healthy marriage that is based on trust rather than accurate knowledge that seeks certainty. "After all, (and I know this may be hard to believe) I occasionally ... have mistaken beliefs regarding my wife, which she is only too kind to point out to me. But this skewed knowledge does not nullify our marriage." All human relationships depend on trust, not certain knowledge.

In his book, Enns shows how the Psalms, important and sacred to both Jews and Christians, deal with the question of our relationship to God. He suggests that the Psalms fall into three basic categories: 1. God is great and everything is fine; 2. things are not great but God will rescue; and 3. things are bad, getting worse, and God is nowhere to be found. He is particularly interested in this third category, since it reflects an authentic human condition of uncertainty that is not condemned in Scripture.

Psalms 88 is an example of this type of complaint against God, illustrating the psalmist's frustration:

when he cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) Enns summarizes the biblical experience as follows: "Feeling like God is far away, disinterested or dead to you is part of our Bible and can't be brushed aside. ... As offensive as it may seem, it is never criticized by God. Worshipping other gods, or acting unjustly toward others gets criticized about every three sentences, but not this honest talk of feeling abandoned by God."

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Holocaust survivor and author of the book "Night," describes his experiences in the death camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He also wrote the play "The Trial of God" based on an event he witnessed as a young boy. The play describes three Jewish scholars who put God on trial in absentia for abandoning his people and allowing them to be massacred.

As described in the introduction to the play:

"The trial lasted several nights. Witnesses were heard, evidence was gathered, conclusions were drawn, all of which issued finally in a unanimous verdict: the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, was found guilty of crimes against creation and humankind. And then, after what Wiesel describes as an 'infinity of silence,' the Talmudic scholar looked at the sky and said, 'It's time for evening prayers,' and the members of the tribunal recited the evening service."

As difficult as it seems, we are not called to certain knowledge but to faithfulness; not to certainty but to trust.

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