A short story, “The Expert on God,” by John L’Heureux describes the predicament of a newly ordained priest whose faith is full of doubt and skepticism about everything from the Trinity to the Presence of God in the Eucharist. After a while, he suppresses all the doubts but one. The one that remained was a doubt about the love of God. He’s unsure that God loves Him and everyone unconditionally. The story reaches a climax when, on the way home from Mass on Christmas Day, he comes upon a red sports car, partially turned over on its side. He grabs his vial of Holy Oil and runs to the car where he seeks to offer last rites, what is expected of him and what he was trained to do.

The last two paragraphs of the story are:

“He shook with an involuntary sob then, and as he did, the boy shuddered in agony and choked on the blood that had begun to pour from his mouth. The priest could see death beginning to ease across the boy’s face. And still he could say nothing.

The boy turned some dying reflex and his head tilted in the priest’s arms, trusting, like a lover. And at once the priest, faithless, unrepentant, gave up his prayers and bent to him and whispered, fierce and burning, “I love you,” and continued till there was no breath. “I love you. I love you. I love you.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

The priest was a doubter. When he thought about the love of God in his head, he just couldn’t grasp it. He couldn’t believe it. But when he looked into the face of this trusting young man and let his heart take over (his heart, which of course, had God within it) he *loved* this young man. And, in that moment, the priest knew that God’s love was real, too. The doubting priest not only believed, but became, himself, an expression of God’s love.

For many people, a full vibrant faith can come only out of doubt, as they wrestle with those things the Bible tells us about God that seem difficult to believe. Many of us, as people of God, need the freedom to question and doubt so that our faith can mature into one that is much more than just a recitation of creeds or a once-a-week attendance at church. Rather, once we finally accept God’s miracles as real we then proclaim that God is God and we willingly allow God to rule our lives.

French philosopher Peter Abelard, from the Middle Ages, said, “It is by doubting that we come to question, and by questioning that we arrive at the truth.”[[2]](#endnote-2) In other words, we learn the truth about God only through the experience of wrestling with our questions about God

James Fowler, a theologian and researcher, expresses this idea in another way. Fowler did research in the 1980s – some 800 years after Abelard -- and developed a grid of stages of faith development. We must pass through each stage of the grid successfully to mature in our faith. As children and teens, we progress through several faith stages in which we learn faith through the experiences, stories and images and those around us. Initially, we conform to the authority of our parents, godparents, Sunday School teachers, and priests. Basically, we accept the faith these people demonstrate to us without question. We ignore any conflicts that bring us out of conformity. Typically, in young adulthood, however, we begin to wrestle with our faith as we take personal responsibility for it. We ask ourselves if we really believe everything we’ve been told or do we feel differently than our parents on certain issues. If we are successful in that wrestling, we emerge with our own personal creed or rule of life – one to which we have a much stronger commitment, one which we own. If we don’t undergo this period of wrestling with our faith, Fowler says, we won’t get to the point where we actually own it and are willing to give our whole lives to it.[[3]](#endnote-3)

As Christians, we realize that we will likely experience times when we doubt some – or maybe all -- of what we’ve been taught about God. Others within our community will struggle with their faith – others will doubt, too. Young adults, in particular will doubt, but older people will as well. Liam, who we baptize today, will likely have times when he doubts his faith and we, who will agree to support him, will allow him the freedom to wrestle with these questions. God created us with a brain, a capacity for reasoning, and God knows that sometimes we will use that brain to wrestle with aspects of faith that seem to defy the realm of reason. As a people of God, we don’t panic when we or others doubt; we realize that doubting is part of the process. We need the freedom to let ourselves experience God directly. If we continue to wrestle with these thoughts while in contact with each other, we will work through doubts. We will be strengthened in our journey through the doubts and be ready, at the end of that journey, to say to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” We will be ready to go out into the world and be the hands and heart of God in the world.

1. John L’Heureux, “The Expert on God,” quoted in *Words That Listen, A Literary Companion to the Lectionary, Volume 1* by J. Barney Hawkins IV and Ian S.Markham (Church Publishing, New York, 2018), p 253 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Abelard, quoted in Synthesis , A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship Following the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, April [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Psychology Charts, <http://www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html> and Unitarian Universalist Association, Handout 1: Stages of Faith Development, <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop2/167602.shtml> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)