

The River of Doubt

delivered by the Rev. Lawrence Wood, 9 March 2008

In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt lost his last race for the Presidency of the United States. He had run as an independent against his hand-picked successor and the standard-bearer of his party, William Taft, and by splitting Republican votes down the middle, had handed the election to the Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

Many thought he had done so merely out of vanity, and millions of his former admirers regarded him with contempt and derision. He had fallen from President to pariah.

Secluded in his home at Sagamore Hill, New York, Roosevelt brooded on an uncertain future. When he had faced losses before, such as the deaths of his parents, his brother, and his first wife, he had thrown himself into strenuous physical tests, such as ranching out West or hunting dangerous game. He needed to punish his body to restore his mind.

So his family was not surprised when he responded to humiliating defeat by accepting the chance to head an expedition in South America. The details were vague; he left them to others. The friend of a friend took care of arranging provisions. Roosevelt did what he did best – namely, get lots of attention. Late in 1913, he steamed to Brazil, commenced a speaking tour, chatted up Latin American dignitaries, and finally turned to the proposed adventure.

It looked a little tame. The route had already been explored, and could be traveled in relative comfort. Roosevelt would have none of it. What caught his curiosity was a river deep in the jungle that no white man had yet dared to descend, called the River of Doubt.

Brazil's bravest explorer, Col. Candido Rondon, believed that this river, which he had found and named, might be a tributary of the Amazon. But no one knew for sure. If it turned out not to be a tributary, or if it ended anywhere short of civilization, the party would be lost deep in the jungle with no hope of survival.

Perhaps it was his electoral defeat, or having faced death so many times before, that led Roosevelt to gamble his very life on Rondon's hunch. His son Kermit had just gotten engaged, and Roosevelt suggested that maybe the young man shouldn't share this risk; but Kermit refused to let his father go into the jungle without him. Early in 1914, with a small party led by Col. Rondon, they set out overland, following the telegraph road deep into the interior, coming at last to the River of Doubt. A thick canopy of trees created a tunnel as far as one could see; the waters were as black as ink.

If only Roosevelt had known how poorly they were prepared. Their dugout canoes were heavy, unsteady, leaky. Their provisions included many dainties fit for a President, but not enough to sustain the men for months.

In the waters were flesh-eating fish; in the jungle were man-eating Indians.

Disaster befell the party almost from the start. They lost canoes and provisions in the rapids. They had to portage around waterfalls. Their boots began to disintegrate in the damp. Almost every man contracted malaria, and some of the native porters turned on their leaders.

One man drowned in the rapids; another died of gunshot, and his killer was left to perish in the wilderness.

If they came into conflict with tribal warriors, Col. Rondon was perfectly content to sacrifice his own life; long ago he had determined that the only way to win over hostile natives was nonviolence; “Die if need be,” he told his men, “but kill never.” This Christlike acceptance only increased everyone else’s doubts.

Although most of the men were hunters and fishermen, they had no experience in this region, and spotted almost nothing. Rations had to be cut; little by little, the men began to starve. They had been on the river for almost six weeks and had no idea where they were. If they didn’t find safety and provisions soon, they were done for.

Just when things looked blackest, Roosevelt stumbled against river rocks and tore open his right leg. Infection set in almost immediately; fever rose and he became delirious. At lucid intervals, he told the men to continue without him. He had had a full life; if they waited days for him to recover, they might never get out alive. Roosevelt had secretly brought with him vials of morphine for just such an emergency; and now, late at night by the ink-black water, he told his son of his plans for suicide.

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We have journeyed down the river of doubt. Some of us here have had terrible tests, and even those who have known mostly comfort have wondered whether God is an illusion, whether the world really has our interests at heart.

The idea that a man in a small town a long time ago showed that God loves us, and will to the end of time, may be more than our minds can accept.

Now, that’s not unreasonable. So before going any further, I’d like to say some good things about doubt.

When somebody tells you that the world is only six thousand years old, it’s good to ask questions. When someone suggests that saying a certain prayer and mailing fifty dollars to a televangelist will take away your sciatica, it’s good to ask questions.

And even when a gorgeous day invites your progressive mind to conceive of a Supreme Artist, it’s okay to remember that nature is not benign. There are uses for doubt. Good questions don’t harm our faith, but nourish it.

This church welcomes doubt. People who have felt uncomfortable in other churches have found permission here to be authentically themselves. Thank God, it’s liberating.

And yet, if we never move beyond that, it can foster biblical illiteracy, a general reluctance to commit, and difficulty in affirming our beliefs.

At least we find ourselves in good company – the company of Jesus’ friends and family.

The Gospel of John tells how Jesus fed the multitudes and then explained that he had come to give them more than bread – that they could have something that would fill them forever. But this promise was so grand that even the disciples balked.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of

Man ascending to where he was before? The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you are some who do not believe.” *John 6:60-64*

Indeed, once Jesus spoke of lasting life and realms beyond sight, touch, and sound, even his closest followers had misgivings.

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” *John 6:66-67*

Can you imagine a more poignant moment than Jesus asking his twelve, “Do you also wish to go away”? And yet it got worse. He could no longer go to Judea, where people were looking to kill him; he had to remain in Galilee. Yet his own brothers, who knew the mortal danger he faced, taunted him:

“Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.” (For not even his brothers believed in him.)
John 7:3-5

The gospels report these doubts fearlessly. No modern jests could be more withering. And if it's clear that his closest companions doubted Jesus, the gospels are also clear that he doubted, too. According to Luke, he sweated blood and prayed, “Let this cup pass.” According to Matthew, he cried out a psalm from the Cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

He had promised that God would redeem even the ugliest death, that God's love would triumph over all. The answers to doubt might have been found in his own life – and yet it would not have been surprising if no one saw that at all.

Instead, people just like us – common, ordinary, everyday people with every reason to keep their heads down – were suddenly moved to tell dangerously good news.

The very people who had doubted him, whose doubts would be firmly recorded in scripture, spent the rest of their lives affirming that Christ was raised, that God does love us, and will to the end of time.

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Kermit Roosevelt refused to let his father die alone beside the river. Overruling the former President, he insisted that they would find a way to bring him along. It took a backbreaking effort to lower the canoes by ropes down the rapids, but the group continued making progress; and in mid-April they saw another human being, a solitary rubber-tapper working far upriver from civilization, who confirmed Col. Rondon's hopes that ultimately these waters would lead to the Amazon.

They did reach help; they did find doctors who saved Roosevelt's life, and he completed his recovery onboard a hospital ship.

Roosevelt's party had accomplished the unthinkable: they had descended some of the world's wildest waters; they had explored a river as long as the Ohio or the Rhine and quite literally put it on the map.

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The answers to doubt may be found in life itself. Unimaginable tragedy does not have the last word. This is the very season when the world wakes up, when possibilities are all around us.

Jesus himself embodied the promise that what seems to be the end is not the end, but rather the start of an abundant life.

Doubt is a river. It leads somewhere. Just where, we cannot know. Some may die along that river before reaching a conclusion. But if we courageously follow its course, it will help us to map our beliefs, to know where we really have been and find out who we really are. Beyond the river of doubt are waters more powerful still that will carry us home.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Candice Millard. *The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey*. New York: Broadway Books, 2005