

Sermon for Sunday, October 17, 2021

God Has Questions

Job 38, Mark 10:35-45

One day James and John ask Jesus, “Can we be your two top staff members?” What a question! Aren’t we a nervy bunch? We will ask God for anything. Kenneth Burke argued that humans invented the negative. I think we also invented the interrogative mode. In our minds, God is constantly being subpoenaed to tell us why stuff happens.

When it comes to God, we have strange expectations. In a NCAA basketball regional game, the president of a religious school, who was also a preacher, watched his team play a tight game. The opposing team was at the free throw line. If the shooter made both shots, the preacher’s team lost. The preacher, looked up and cried, “Dear Lord strike him with temporary blindness.”

Fortunately, God is patient, and it takes divine patience to endure our endless questions. Some years ago, a man dressed in a suit filled with question marks did infomercials on late-night television. He’s our patron saint. We are haunted, riddled by, obsessed with questions. If our questions were stars, they would fill a new galaxy. I mix my questions with praise, so they don’t permanently damage my faith or my hope. But it’s not really our questions that are of the most consequence.

What if I told you that our questions pale in comparison to the questions God has? “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” God sounds like a deity collecting questions for eternity as they spill out like Legos onto a marble floor: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements? Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? “The realism of the book of Job depends on the presumption that God is God and we are not” (*Working with Words*, 12). Learning to say God requires that I learn to say, “I am a dependent rational animal.” This is a tall order considering our babbling so about freedom in such irrational ways.

This is God’s examination, and all the questions are creation questions, but all the answers are not in Genesis. God warns Job: “**Gird up your loins like a man.**” This is not going to be a Sunday morning praise fest, with a casually dressed preacher belting out a casual, pop psychology message. When your mind is about to be blown, you need encouragement. I’m not endorsing this overly masculine

metaphor as the only reading, because the term applies to men and women. It means, “prepare for action and hard work.” No one works harder than women. Zora Neale Hurston called southern Black women the mules of the world; they did whatever needed doing (*I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 268). St. Peter: “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind.” It takes a difficult effort to get our minds in the place to take on questions from God.

God has creation questions because only God was present at the dawn of the universe – no human witnesses for billions of years. God has homefield advantage to ask questions only God can answer. By the way, God’s questions to Job converted me at the age of 19 from “young earth creationism” and a literal six-day creation to a grasp of the vastness and age of the universe. Genesis 1 – 3 is a poem celebrating creation; not a reporter recording the event. The people claiming a literal creation are making stuff up out of nothing – a kind of human *creatio ex nihilo*.

Look, God isn’t expecting answers. We are not graduating from the school of creation *summa cum laude*. The point of the examination is to humble us not reward us. We are not getting hooded with a Ph.D. God is not trying to hoodwink us. Job, undone by God’s questions, speaks: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” We have new answers: “My Lord and my God,” “Have mercy on me a sinner,” “How great thou art!”

When God takes the floor, notice the questions are relational. “Adam, where are you?” “Cain, where is your brother?” “Who is your neighbor?” “Who is my mother and brothers and sisters?” Having heard God’s questions, maybe our questions and our answers will change. When God asks, “Where is your brother?” we will respond: “My brother is Abel and his blood cries out to me from the ground. My mother is Sarah the wife of Abraham. My mother is Mary the mother of our Lord. My sister is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. My sister is Rahab, the harlot of Jericho. My brother is the Ethiopian eunuch.” “My Father/Mother is God; my brother is Jesus; my companion is the Holy Spirit.”

When God asks, “Who is your neighbor?” – take a deep breath because this is the theological/relational question of eternity – rooted in the Old Testament book of Leviticus and fought over by people of faith forever. An early edition of Leviticus claimed that the neighbor was fellow Jews. A later edition reached for a new answer: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the

alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself” (Leviticus 19:33 – 34).

The book of Ezra says “Get rid of all the foreigners.” That’s in the Bible but it’s not the last word. The book of Ruth reminds us that Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner. Our Lord has Moabite blood in his veins. My neighbor is Nineveh. My neighbor is Nicodemus, religious scholar. My neighbor is Zacchaeus, tax collector and traitor. My neighbor is the widow of Sidon and Naaman the Syrian leper. My neighbor is the Canaanite woman confronting Jesus about bread and dogs and a sick daughter. My neighbor is the man lying in the ditch on the road to Jericho. My neighbor is the woman of Samaria at Jacob’s well. My neighbor is the mourning mother of Nain. My neighbor is the woman caught in sin and on the verge of being stoned to death. My neighbor is the angry congregation in Nazareth. My neighbor is the rich young ruler. My neighbor is the pack of lepers crying “Have mercy.” My neighbor is the pair of thieves hanging from the cross on either side of Jesus. My neighbor is Judas. My neighbors are the young black men killed on our streets; my neighbors are the police officers killed in the line of duty.

Look, I’m not saying you have to come along with me, but I’m going full-blown universalism here. Forget arguing over diversity, multiculturalism, nativism, or patriotism, I’m talking universalism. In Christ Jesus, all humanity gets reclaimed. Johnny Cash and ‘Down There by the Train’ crosses my mind:

“There's a place I know where the train goes slow
Where the sinner can be washed in the blood of the lamb
You can hear the whistle, you can hear the bell
From the halls of heaven to the gates of hell
And there's room for the forsaken if you're there on time
And I know that your name can be on that list
There's no eye for an eye, there's no tooth for a tooth
I saw Judas Iscariot carrying John Wilkes Booth.”

Now, do we get it? God wants us in right relation with God and creation. God wants us in right relation with one another, all others. God’s questions change everything including, I hope, our lives.