

The Question God Hears the Most

Job 1:1, 2:1-10, 42:1-6; Hebrews 10:19-25

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 10) 2021

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Why? That's the question God hears the most. If God is good and God is great, why do the innocent suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why am I going through this? Why did this have to happen? Why did my friend, my son, my daughter, my mother, have to . . .? Why are there hungry people in this world of plenty? Why are children sexually abused? Why are there wars? Why do the wealthy get wealthier, and the poor get poorer? Why is there so little justice in the world?

If God is good, and God is great, why? Many theologians across the centuries have pointed out that we can reconcile only two of those three facts; we cannot reconcile all three. God is good. God is great. Why do the innocent suffer?

First, this is a fair question. The God of the Bible is a God who asks questions and has questions asked. Abraham asked God questions; Moses argued with God; Jeremiah wept with God; the Psalms ask God questions; they weep, even shake fists at God in anger. Psalm 22 begins, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? I call on you day and night, and you do not answer." This is the Psalm and the very words Jesus used when he was on the cross. Why God, why?

When preacher and pastor John Claypool's 11-year-old daughter, Laura, died from leukemia, Carlyle Marney wrote him a note and said, "John, I do not understand why leukemia kills children, but I do know that God has a lot to account for some day."

Someone later accused Marney of being irreverent. Marney responded, "Oh, no. It is a statement of reverent faith. If I am a person, if God is a person, then questions are in order. I believe God is the kind of God who will allow us to question him, challenge him, be angry at him."

It is fair to question God. It is a part of faith to be angry with God. And it is supposed to be part of the life of God in church where we are a place that makes room for such questioning and anger. Church should be the place where any question can be asked, including and especially questions like, "Why God?"

Back in 1967 and 1968 Archie McDonald asked questions about Vietnam, killing, and the Christian calling to love our enemies and the Fifth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," in a SS class in another church. He was promptly told not to ask such questions. Archie's response was something like, "By damned if I'll be in a church that won't allow questions." This was a major reason Austin Heights was founded in April 1968. Church is where we trust God and trust one another enough that we can ask questions.

In the Bible we never get syllogisms or abstract questions. We get stories, real life, mundane nitty-gritty stories; stories are not as clear-cut as abstract

questions. Life is not neat, put in a box and tied up with a ribbon and three principles. Life is not simple. The Bible is full of stories of life with their questions inviting us to step into them, live them, read them, re-read them, ask questions, and then ask some more, so we might know the richer, deeper, more intense life we can have with God.

One of the great stories but also hardest stories in the whole Bible is the story of Job. The prologue of Job in the first chapter tells us that Job was a good and just man, faithful to God, with a large, loving family and a successful sheep and farming operation.

And overnight he lost it all. He loses his family, his possessions, and his health. At first, our scripture tells us, Job held fast to his faith that these events, as terrible as they were; he believed they were part of some sort of divine plan and had some rationale behind them. Even in the face of the terrible misfortunes, Job is able to assert, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there” (Job 1:21).

But soon after it goes from bad to worse: Job is buffeted, assaulted, beaten down. In misery Job cries out asking, “Why? Why me? Why God?” His life, our lives, which once seemed so orderly, fixed, dependable, and serene, get disrupted, torn apart by pain and we cry out, “Why?”

Soon Job has friends who show up to comfort him. The bulk of the Book of Job deals with these friends telling Job why these things are happening and some

of what they say is good, reflective, and profound while much of their answers are, well, just that – answers.

They sit beside Job’s bed and offer various justifications for his pain. They are desperate to get the moral world put back together; their world put back together. One reason why lots of us find it difficult to be with people who have experienced some terrible calamity is that misfortune of others threatens us by threatening our explanations for what’s going on in the world. Surely there is an answer. Or “the” answer.

Writer David James Duncan calls this attitude “answerizing.” He says it grows out of the conviction that the only right way to handle any question is to offer “The One Correct Answer.” Duncan describes answerizing as “an activity that stands in relationship to truly answering as the ability to memorize the phone book stands in relationship to the ability to love every preposterous flesh and blood person whose mere name the phone books happens to contain.”

Duncan goes on, “Questions that tap into our mortality, our pain, our selfishness, our basic needs, questions that arise from the immeasurable darkness, lightness, or mystery of our lives, require more than mere Answerizing.” In other words, real questions about real flesh and blood people require sustained conversation, a willingness to listen and speak with one another in ways that can acknowledge the complexity of our lives. We Christians believe such complexity involves the God whom we worship.

Some of you will remember the great scene in Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* where young Jayber goes to see his professor with questions about God, the Bible, faith, and doubt. Jayber tells his teacher of some of his doubts and questions. His teacher responds to him, "You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out – perhaps a little at a time."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps."

"That could be a long time."

"I will tell you a further mystery," he said. "It may take longer."

Church is the place where the questions which cannot be answered, can be asked. And it is where we listen to one another's questions without rushing to answer.

In our other Scripture reading this morning, the writer of Hebrews is urging us, "let us consider how provoke one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another (Hebrews 10: 24-25).

The writer is reminding us of the simple truth – for us to be encouraged we have to show up. The life of faith is mostly showing up and you show up because

your neighbors need you. I have no doubt that God hears your prayers, your doubts, your questions and one of the primary way God responds is for someone else to show up and listen to you. Not to give you the one correct answer – don't worry about that – just to be here, be with, and listen. Listening to one another leads to praying for one another and that leads us into more truly being the church of Jesus Christ.

Carlyle Marney said, “We might not talk too many into the kingdom, but we might listen a few in.”

The last section of the Book of Job, chapters 38-41, is God speaking. Out of the whirlwind, out of the storm God speaks. We hear from the One who has not been heard from since the beginning. At last comes the speech of God. What Job wants is a day in which he would question God and God would give definitive answers. But that hoped-for, divine-human dialogue never quite takes place.

The God whom Job wants to question becomes the questioner. God never addresses the issues that Job so eloquently raised. Ultimately, the result of God's speech is to end Job's speech. Job says, “I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer, twice” (Job 40:4-5).

When Job replies again at the beginning of Chapter 42, he begins with his words, but ends by quoting God's words: “Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42: 3-5). In using

God's words, Job is learning that God gives us a new language, a grammar, that re-describes, re-envisions, the world around us and our lives in it. We still have questions, but often our questions change. How we see the questions changes.

God's speech is a remarkable vision of the cosmos.

Look at the world, just for a moment, as God looks at the creation. There are wonders beyond human comprehension. God talks about the words of creation, the mysteries, the wonders. The rabbis long ago noted that, when God boasts of his handiworks, of all of the animals God offers as evidence of divine creative genius, none of them are of any earthly use to humanity. What can you do with an ostrich? Moreover, when boasting about wonderful animals, God fails to mention pride over the creation of humanity. It's a big creation out there; humanity is only a small part of its wonder.

The speech from the whirlwind has changed Job's expectations for how God was supposed to talk. Job demanded answers. What Job gets is a vision, a wide view of the world in all its mystery.

Is not this what Job says at the end? "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5). Previously, Job had only heard words about a God who sets the world in motion, who creates out of chaos. Now Job sees. Job wanted the word of God. Instead, Job gets God.

Job had lived in a rather narrow world where the good get good and the bad

get punished and when something goes wrong, we figure out how to fix it. But then come the contradictions, and the questions, and the demand for answers that help him patch his world back together. Job suffers. Is he guilty? Is God fair?

The friends try but fail. More than once I have had people say to me, “If God doesn’t answer this prayer, then I am through with God and church.” When our world of cause-effect morality crumbles, then we are devastated. Our world has been dismantled. Will anything take its place?

Job is invited out toward a new world, a world not based on simple, distributive, retributive justice. And what does Job decide? We really don’t know. Many people in today’s world refuse to see differently and cannot live in complexity and mystery. Everything has to be right/wrong, good/bad, black/white. But Job is given a glimpse of the wide world, of the deep mysteries. He isn’t given answers. He is given questions that take longer than a lifetime to live out. He is given mystery that cannot be fixed or resolved. He is given the Living God.

Can you live with that?

Browning Ware was the long-time pastor of FBC Austin, and who died in 2002. Browning was ruggedly handsome, tall, had a gravelly voice, a dry wit, and one of his best ministries was listening. He was at his best listening to waitresses in a late-night coffee shop or sitting and listening to a homeless man on the streets. Back in the mid-1990’s Browning wrote:

“When younger, I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time, I knew many of the answers.

I knew about parenting until I had children.

I knew about divorce until I got one.

I knew about suicide until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year.

I knew about the death of a child until my child died.

I’m not as impressed with answers as once I was. Answers seem so pallid, sucked dry of blood and void of life. Knowing answers seduces us into making pronouncements. I still have a few friends or acquaintances who are 100 percent sure on most anything and are ready to make pronouncements on homosexuality, AIDS, marriage problems, teen-age pregnancies, abortion, sex education, or whatever is coming down the pike. But when we get shoved into our valley of the shadow, a pronouncement is the last thing we need.

A friend wrote recently, ‘I too get Maalox moments from those who know. I’m discovering that wisdom and adversity replace cocksure ignorance with thoughtful uncertainty.’

*More important and satisfying than answers is the Answerer. ‘Thou art with me’ – that’s what we crave. There may or may not be answers, but the Eternal One would like very much to be our companion” (from *Diary of a Modern Pilgrim*, p. 161).*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.