

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Psalm 145:1-5, 18-22 *or* Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

Last week in our new member class, we had a lot of fun tackling the common questions of faith. Things like is it okay to have doubt? Does God answer our prayers? Is the Trinity three or one? By the way, I can give that one to you right now, yes. Do only Christians go to Heaven? Why does a good god allow such suffering in the world? And one that always seems to come up around stewardship time: Is the tithe calculated on gross income or net after-tax income?

Asking questions of faith, challenging what our religion teaches us, trying to square what we know of the world with scripture. It's been with us since the very beginning and I think it's particularly true of Episcopalians, who proudly include reason right alongside scripture and tradition as one of the three legs on which our faith rests. And despite the volumes of books and thousands of years of theological debates, not to mention inquisitions, burning one another at the stake, and seemingly endless splintering of the church into different factions as we came up with different answers, it's really never stopped. Because I suspect the answers, at least to the big questions, never fully satisfy.

These are not just academic questions. As the psalmists model for us week in and week out, questions of faith can give voice to our greatest fears, and sometimes our deepest grief. I will never forget a grieving parent having just lost her child, crying out, why would God punish me so? Sometimes questions of faith represent an honest seeking, a desire to know God more by knowing more about God. Sometimes they're meant to provoke.

Back in college, long before I was a Christian I had a lot of fun peppering my fundamentalist friends, people who were trying to convert me, with all kinds of questions mostly meant for them to go away. Oh, the Bible is the inerrant word of God, you say? In that case, which of the two completely different creation stories is correct? Genesis 1 or Genesis 2? Oh, and while you're at it, which of the birth narratives is right, Matthews or Luke? Was Jesus born in a roadside manger surrounded by animals, or at home surrounded by wise men?

The Bible says Noah had the animals go in two by two. But in other places it says 7 by 7, which is it? Oh, and the Eskimos – what about the Eskimos, I would say? Would God really allow generations and generations of indigenous people in the far corners of the world – would he really let them go to Hell just because they never met Jesus? In other words, Pastor Manisha, if you think I can be a smart-ass now, you should have known me in college.

But what I didn't tell them – that behind those questions, behind those cross examinations, I was secretly interested in what they had to say. Not so much in their answers but in their faith. And that's a little bit of what's going on this morning when the Sadducees trying to use scripture to challenge Jesus about His faith in the resurrection. Under the law of Moses,

if your brother died without a child, you were to marry his wife so that the name would continue. It was called Levirate marriage and it was a particular feature of patriarchal societies where women are essentially property.

And knowing that Jesus is an observant Jew, they cook up this far-fetched scenario in which a widow keeps getting passed from one brother to the next because each time she marries one, he dies before they can have a child. And then she finally dies, much to the relief of that family, I'm sure. But the question they have basically is this: Okay Jesus, after seven marriages to seven brothers, which one gets her in the afterlife? Fair enough. Jesus's answer of course is to dismiss the question. Patriarchal marriage systems would have no purpose in the afterlife because there is no death. Women would no longer be passed around like cattle because we will all be like angels. All of us children of God as we always have been. The social stratas that we are so used to, the pecking orders that we keep such track of, will be all swept away and the dream of God that we would all be one will have come to be.

In the next verse of this gospel, which we didn't hear this morning, Luke tells us the response. The Sadducees were silenced and no longer dared to ask Him another question. You see, the Sadducees claimed to be strict adherents to the Torah, but they had never imagined the possibility of eternal life. For them, following God's law was exclusively about the here and now. So when Jesus reminds them of that familiar passage from Exodus that God is the god of Abraham, that God is the god of Isaac, is, not was – he shows them that the truth of the Resurrection had been staring them in the face all along, if they had only the eyes to see it. And it's realization that leaves them speechless.

It's interesting to me that that's essentially the same response that Job has. Job, who questions God again and again for why should he suffer when the wicked prosper? And when God finally shows up at the end of the book to answer his question – spoiler alert, by the way, if you haven't read it – Job comes face-to-face with the reality of God's eternity and it blows his mind. And like the Sadducees, he too falls silent and dares not ask God another question.

As my own faith has grown over the years, I too have noticed the vexing questions of faith no longer nag at me as they once did. And I have become increasingly comfortable with the silence of unknowing. As much as I would like to know why God created a world with such suffering, as much as I would like to know why God doesn't always answer my prayers, or why – yeah, the wicked do seem to prosper way too much. The story of God and the life of Jesus reminds me that perhaps these questions are unanswerable because they too are the wrong questions.

I've come to a place where my faith is far less about understanding God and much more about following Jesus. It isn't about my need to know why things happen, but how I might respond when they do. I'm less interested in why and much more interested in asking God how. How might I love as You love us? How might I give as You gave yourself for us all? No longer do I need to have all the answers. No longer do I need to have it all sorted out. I'm increasingly comfortable with ambiguity and mystery.

When the Sunday school kids ask me how did Noah get dinosaurs on the ark, I tell them, happily, I don't know. I don't know. When Barry peppers me with questions about baptism at the Forum, I really do want to tell him, you know Barry, I don't know. And it is a bit liberating because God is the god of the living and letting go for me of the need to know, of the need to have it all sorted out, frees me to be more fully alive, to live by faith, not by sight.

And if that sounds too idealistic or too simplistic, look no further than the veterans and their families we celebrate this weekend who served and sacrificed for their country, even though they may not always have understood the mission. Even though it took them too far away from their families. And even though for some of them the country they served didn't always serve them, yet they too served not by sight but by faith. Faith in an America that would one day live into the fullness of her promise. To be that promised land of liberty and justice, where huddled masses can finally breathe free and where all people are created equal and treated equal.

Like our veterans, we to follow in the footsteps of the first disciples who didn't always understand and didn't always agree, but nevertheless gave their lives so that the hope of the Gospel would be passed to the next generation, and the next, and the next, so that we too could hear the good news of a god whose love knows no end, whose mercy, no limits, and whose embrace leaves no one out. Living by faith, not by sight is the theme of our stewardship appeal this year. As we seek to lift up the many ways that this church walks by faith day in, day out, in big ways but also in small ways. In ministries that are seen and unseen.

We've been putting them in the bulletin. Did you catch them last week? Did you see John Keck's story about how a weekly bible study and an unexpected dance at our 90th anniversary party actually helped to change his life. By teaching him to listen and showing him that when he does, that it was possible to not only appreciate those whose views and whose politics were very different than his, but to learn to love them as the amazing children of God that they are.

In today's newsletter, 11-year-old Christy Hooprick (sp?) shares how she grew up in this church, watching the acolytes each Sunday. Even running to the ends of the pews and standing on a chair so she can see them process and dream of the day when one day she would be one herself. And she shares what an amazing feeling it is to finally be one and to know that she is now a role model for the next little girl who now watches her, dreaming of who they might.

Or Sally Mesi's (sp?) story, also in the bulletin this week about how this community came together to hold them together when her husband nearly died, and how that support taught her the very lesson in today's Gospel, that with faith can come a peace because in death there is life, and how knowing that freed her from the worry and the doubt and empowered her to be there for her husband, to be there for her family, and to be there for herself with an inner strength she never knew she had.

These every day ministries and moments don't always make the headlines, but together they enable us, all of us, working together through this church to magnify and multiply God's blessings in ways that we could never see and never hope to fully measure. To share God's love with people we might never meet and to touch lives with God's hope more than we could ever fully count. God is the god of the living and these are glimpses of the world that's possible when we come alive. When we put down our questions, when we set aside our need to know and our doubts and walk together. Not in sight but in faith. When we lay down our fears and our doubts and whatever it is that holds us back and find the courage to give by faith. God is the god of the living. May we come alive. Amen.

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