

“Lots of Questions”

It has been noted by many scholars through the years that the Gospels, and Mark’s Gospel in particular, are Passion Narratives with introductions. I say, “*and Mark’s Gospel in particular,*” for a couple of reasons: 1) Mark’s is the first Gospel, the first to use this literary genre; 2) Mark has laid out his Gospel along a couple of motifs: a) Where things happen (so we see Jesus in Mark’s Gospel, in essence, retracing the journey of the people of Israel coming out of slavery — this is called the topological motif); and b) Consistently setting before his readers the quintessential question: “*Who is this Jesus?*” That is *the* question that begs for an answer, and that must be answered before we ever hear about His death.

You will notice that this comes up in a variety of ways in Mark’s Gospel (some of which we have already heard as we read through Mark in this cycle of the Lectionary, more of which we will encounter in the coming weeks and months): “***What is this? A new teaching—with authority!***” the crowd wanted to know as Jesus healed a demonized individual. Later the question arose: “***Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?***” And today we hear the Twelve ask: “***Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?***”

Who, indeed, is this? That is a question before not only the Twelve, or the crowds that gather around Jesus, but a question before us, as well.

Many people have answers to that question: They will say that Jesus is a good man, a worthy role model, a fine teacher, and someone they can admire. Those who adhere to the teachings of Islam will acknowledge Jesus as a prophet. Mark has set us up with the way he presents his material such that, if we pay close attention, at the end we will join the centurion at the foot of the cross to confess: “***Truly this man was God’s Son!***”

But that has to do with answers. Today, we focus on questions.

In today's First Lesson and Gospel there are ten questions that we need to confront. To Job, God puts forth seven questions that really form a single interrogatory. In the Gospel the disciples have two questions to which we should really give close attention. And Jesus has questions that are not confined to that place and time, but are before us, as well.

We start with Job.

We often hear about the patience of Job. Anyone who has taken the time to actually read the book will recognize that Job is anything but patient. He *is* suffering — is he ever! His wealth and property are all gone. His children lie dead. He has been struck with a grave illness. His so-called “comforters” offer him little or no comfort whatsoever. And his wife simply advises him: “*Curse God, and die.*”

In his suffering, Job seeks for answers: Why is this happening? I know I'm not perfect, but what have I done to deserve this? Where is God in all of this? Why doesn't God make it stop? Have you ever been in a situation where questions like that have arisen in your life?

For thirty-seven chapters, Job moans, cries out, listens to the balderdash of his “friends,” and bellyaches before God. Now, as Chapter 38 begins (and please do recognize that, in the original manuscripts, there are no chapter and verse designations), God has some questions. They really boil down to a single point: “*Who are you to question me?*”

In the midst of life's upheavals, that is not something we want to hear, nor do we find it especially helpful. We don't find it helpful because it takes the focus off of us and places it on God. This is where the focus always needs to be. This is why God asks these questions about who created, who established, who has the power, the knowledge, the sovereignty. And He challenges Job to focus on what Job knows and does not know.

In the face of such interrogation (for that is what God is doing: “*Gird up*

your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.”), Job can only admit that he has nothing to confute God. The questioning of Job leaves us somewhat empty (can you be “somewhat empty”?) . . . it leaves us empty. We are left hanging for, while God’s questions leave Job without answers to reply, and therefore to counter God’s point, these questions do not get at what Job is really asking.

That question is made with great precision by the disciples in today’s Gospel. Caught in this storm that was threatening to capsize and destroy them and their boat, they literally scream at Jesus: **“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”** (Unfortunately, while this translation is accurate, it needs the “punch” of the vernacular: *“Hey, Teach! Don’t you care? We’re dying!”*)

That’s the key question we want to know in the midst of struggles: *“God, do You care?”* Hidden within that is the sentiment that, if God does care, then God will act to change our circumstances. Jesus certainly does here: **“He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.”**

That’s what we long for — swift and complete resolution to every one of our problems . . . a complete reversal of fortunes. Money woes gone! Relationships now just dandy! Aches, pains, illnesses all disappear! Everything made perfect . . . which, of course, means: The way I want things.

But how realistic is that? What if your life did suddenly become idyllic? What if everything that could go wrong now goes exactly “right.” I place quotes about the word “right” there because that is a judgment we make. When I have trouble, that’s wrong! When I am trouble-free, that’s right! Who says so? Me!

So, my perfect world means a month of seventy-six degree days with low humidity so that I can golf to my heart’s content, go on as many picnics as I desire, fish all day (okay, that would be some people’s ideal, not mine), and never break into a sweat.

So how do all the farmers and gardeners fare in my “perfect world”? Their crops dry up, they have little yield, the price of food doubles, the already-weak economy sputters even further . . . but it’s all right with me! If I could order the universe according to my wishes and whims, watch out world!

Does God care? We want to respond, “*Yes. Of course!*” Where’s the proof? We are inclined to think it’s in the rebuke to the wind and waves: “***Peace! Be still!***” That certainly is a demonstration of power, and power is what we want God to exercise on our behalf. But I think the real proof of caring comes after that . . . in Jesus’ questions: “***Why are you afraid?***” “***Have you still no faith?***”

How is that proof of God’s (of Jesus’) caring? Because this gets to heart of the matter. The question should not be, “*Does God care?*” The question must be how we marshal our fear and bring to bear our faith. [Just as a matter of translation, the Greek word that the NRSV issues as “afraid” (δειλοι deloi) has the connotation of being cowardly; the difference? Fear is an emotion that comes unbidden and unfiltered; when we succumb to our fear, we act in cowardice.] Faith is a matter of giving ourselves to God — evidence or no evidence — and trusting that, in Him, we shall be secure.

Note the reaction of the Twelve to Jesus’ actions (and here I am going to eschew the NRSV and give it to you literally): “*they were afraid with a great fear . . .*” The demonstration of power did not calm them; it only fed into them another affirmation that they were not in control, and they could not understand that power. It raises yet another question (the one Mark wants us to ponder): “***Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?***”

So we come to encounter lots of questions. It’s enough to make it seem as if there are no answers, or at least no satisfying answers. Does God care? The cross is proof that He does. Will God be there when we need Him? Yes, He will, but it may not be according to our terms. Can we ask of God what we need? You certainly may; but don’t assume that you

know precisely what you need (tune in next week for more on that!).

I call your attention to this quotation from Frank Laubach: “*The trouble with nearly everybody who prays is that he says ‘Amen’ and runs away before God has a chance to reply. Listening to God is far more important than giving Him our ideas.*” By all means ask of God what you think you need; but stop to listen for what He wants to give you, and what He knows you need to have.

Finally, take a cue from St. Paul, who doesn’t have any questions in today’s Second Lesson, but does have some powerful insights. He lays out the pluses and minuses that have come his way as a result of his ministry: He had faced “*afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger . . .*” But on the other hand, there had been: “*purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God . . .*” There was a mixture of both: “*in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.*” In all of it, Paul argues, the grace of God is at work — which for us is, and will ever remain, a mystery.

Why does God allow some things to befall us and to others they steer clear? I don’t know; I don’t know anybody who does. But I do know this: When questions arise, we look to the cross and see there the final declaration of grace: God will do whatever is necessary for our good, even unto death. And here’s the really big question: Will you trust that?

Amen.