

Sermon 3 Advent Year A  
 December 16, 2007  
 St. John's Episcopal Church  
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### Living the Questions

*"When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?'"* Matthew 11:2

A woman was on her deathbed. She suddenly had the feeling of being taken up to heaven and standing before the Judgment Seat. "Who are you?" a Voice asked. "I am the minister's wife," she replied. "I did not ask whose wife you are but who you are," the Voice gently chided. "I am the mother of four children." "I did not ask you whose mother you were, but who you are," the Voice replied. "I am a schoolteacher." "I did not ask you your profession, but who you are." So it went. No matter her reply, she could not seem to give a satisfactory answer. "I am a Christian." "I did not ask you your religion, but who you are." She evidently failed the examination, for she was sent back to earth. When she recovered from her illness, she was determined to find out who she was. And that newfound quest made all the difference in her life.<sup>1</sup>

There are some questions that take a lifetime to answer. And the really good questions are worth as much or more as any answer we might come up with in response. Rabbi Edwin Friedman once said, "I have long believed that questions are more important than answers, because questions are eternal, while answers, like fashion, come and go."

One of the more satisfying aspects of reading the Bible, and spiritually speaking, by far the most helpful, is that periodically we stumble upon eternal questions. They are asked by people in a time and place vastly different from our own, yet the questions themselves almost leap from the page with a startling immediacy and relevance.

Here are a few examples:

The first comes from an encounter Jesus had with a blind man named Bartimeaus. You recall the story: one day as Jesus was walking down the road he was practically accosted by Bartimeaus. "Jesus, Son of David," he cried out, "have mercy on me!" The disciples tried to hush him, but Jesus intervened, turning to Bartimeaus and asking, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" (Mark 10:46-52) What do you want me to do for you? It is a potent question, cutting through to the heart of desire, and desire, Jesus knew, is the beginning of all relationship, healing, and faith. Bartimeaus was blind, and his was specific: "I want to see again."

What do we want, from one another and from Christ? We may not know at first what we want. Sometimes it's safer to want nothing, for we are less vulnerable without desire, which is the great insight of Buddhism. Or we may shield our deeper desires beneath lesser ones, which is something to think about at this time of year. What exactly are we shopping for? What is it that we want?

Another great biblical question comes from the story of Jesus' birth: the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, and tells her that she has found favor with God. He then informs

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony deMello, *Taking Flight: A Story Book of Meditations* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998) p.140

that she is soon to bear a child, whom she will name Jesus, and that he will be the hope and salvation of all people. Mary's question the angel, *How can this be?* What else is there to say in the face of what is impossible, preposterous, and yet somehow asked of her? What else can we say when we are asked to do what is clearly beyond us? Gabriel's answer is one we can hold onto for ourselves: *For nothing is impossible with God.*

The question of this morning's gospel story is from John the Baptist, languishing in prison now, facing certain death. Gone is any certainty he might have had about Jesus. He is haunted by the question that he sends by his emissaries to Jesus' camp. "*Are you the One who is to come, or are we to look for another?*" Are you the One, or are we to be disappointed once again. Jesus answered in prophetic language John would have understood: "Go and tell John what you have seen. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the poor have good news brought to them." As we just heard from the prophet Isaiah, this was what the Messiah would come to do, and John would have known that. It was the answer John needed to hear. But is Jesus the One around whom our faith and hope revolves, or are we looking for another? Even gathered in a church as we are, our answers will vary, if we even have answers. Maybe at best what we have is the question, haunting us as it once haunted John.

The most pointed question Jesus was asked in his lifetime, he chose not to answer. The questioner was Pilate. Jesus was under arrest. Pilate, the Roman authority, was not pleased to have been brought in to settle a Jewish squabble. But he remained intrigued and disturbed by the man brought before him. "Who are you?" he asked, "They say you claim to be King. Are you a king?" "You say that I am," Jesus replied. "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth." You can almost hear Pilate suck in his breath. "*What is truth?*" Jesus said nothing, knowing that Pilate must define truth for himself, as must we.

The power of a good question, like these or countless others that echo across time and space, is in its service to the Self within, to that unique quality of "I-ness" that makes us who we are. Remember your Shakespeare, Hamlet in his moment of reckoning: "To be, or not to be, that is the question." That is always the question. And a really good question will challenge the unique being, unique self, within us, make it stronger, clearer. It does so not by the answer given or discerned, but rather through the clarifying power of the question itself, pointing us toward our priorities and purpose.

But there is tension here, an inherent uneasiness in raising a question not easily answered. We like answers. Like the woman before the Judgment Seat, we are quick to come up with answers to question of our identity. For to acknowledge that we don't really know yet who we are, or that we aren't sure now that we're still the person we thought we were, or that others see, is unsettling. Remember Alice as she began her great adventure: "Who are you?" asked the Caterpillar. "I don't know, sir, at the moment. I thought I knew when I woke up this morning, but a lot has changed since then." "What do you mean by that? Explain yourself." "I'm afraid I can't explain myself, Sir," said Alice. "For I'm not myself, you see."

Yet it is in the unknowing and the searching, guided by a good question, that the greatest of meanings are to be found. The poet Rainer Maria once wrote these words to a young poet who was seeking to establish his identity as a writer too soon: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and books written in a foreign tongue. Do not seek now the answers, which

cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without knowing it, live along some distant day into the answers.”<sup>2</sup>

And so I leave you with one last biblical question, my favorite, which Jesus asked his disciples. It was during a particularly difficult time when Jesus’ teaching had begun to offend many, not merely the religious authorities, but also many of the great crowds that had once followed him. Even some that counted themselves among the disciples no longer went about with him. And so Jesus asked the twelve, his closest friends, “What about you? Do you also wish to go away?” Peter, speaking for the group, responded with a question of his own, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:66-69)

I love the question and the answer in response, for more than any creed they help articulate why I am a Christian. I follow Christ, not because I have faith without doubt, for I have many doubts; not because I understand everything about Him, for there is much I do not understand. I am a Christian not because the Church is perfect, for it is far from perfect, nor because it is the best faith, for I could never know that. I am a Christian because I have come far enough down this path to trust its truth. I have come to believe and know that Christ is real, not a real as I might like, but real enough, true enough. So I will stay, for like Peter and the twelve, because I have found something priceless of life and truth.

All are invited into this life, and it is a real invitation, which means that all are free to accept or free to walk away. But if we accept, we need to realize that what we receive isn’t a blanket answer to all the mysteries of life or a standard identity into which we must fit. What we receive is a path to walk and a little light to see by. What we receive is a community of fellow seekers. Together we are guided by eternal questions, stars in their own right, that allow us to embrace mystery and discover as we go who we are and what it is that gives our lives meaning and purpose and joy.

## Advent Reflection and Prayer The Third Week of Advent

### Reflection:

*Consider the questions of your life. Take a moment to write them down, whatever surfaces for you. Don’t judge your questions as worthy or unworthy: simply note what they are. Offer your questions, large or small, to God. If possible, share them with a trusted friend. Honor the questions of your life, and trust that God is with you as you live with them.*

### Prayer:

*God, I hold before you these questions and ask for your guidance and grace as I try to live them. Help me to accept them as mine. Guide me, in your time, to the answers I seek. Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> Reiner Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, p.35.