

Asking Questions

Pondering Questions: Part 9 “Asking Questions”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – October 16, 2022

19th Sunday After Pentecost

Readings: Genesis 18:1-5,16-33

Reflection: Psalm 13

Greeting: Happy are those who find wisdom and understanding. The Lord laid the foundations of the earth with wisdom. Hold on to sound judgement and discretion from God. The Lord is our confidence and guard! Praise the Lord! (*Proverbs 3*)

Prayer: O God, source of all wisdom and bringer of understanding, we humbly enter into your presence. May we be blessed by your grace and your knowledge as we join together to worship you this day. May we grow in heart and mind with you, Lord. May you lift us up and strengthen us by your righteousness. Help us to be bold in our faith so that we may do your will joyfully and eagerly. May we worship you in a spirit of truth, that we may follow you all the days of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 13

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Psalm 13 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 13 and hear of longing for God’s presence. We also hear questions being asked, searching in fear of being hidden from the Lord. Yet we still hear of trusting in God’s steadfast love, even in the midst of worry and trouble. What was a time that you questioned how long before you would see the light? How can we help when others feel like they are waiting for God? What does it look like to show love and patience in times of hardship? What are the questions you ask when you are struggling? How can we grow together in those questions? How can we share together in God’s grace and mercy?

Prayer: O God, your steadfast love and faithfulness have brought us together this day. Help us that we may always seek your wisdom in our lives and may we hold fast to your ways. May we share in the hope you have inspired in us and may we share always in your blessing. We ask that as we bring our joys and our concerns to you that you will strengthen us in your spirit. As you are with us in our joys and sorrows, may you lift us up in both our laughter and tears. May your light guide us and lead us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our reading for today comes from Genesis, chapter 18 verses 1 through 5 and 16-33.

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." Then the Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me, and if not, I will know." So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to my lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." Then he said, "Oh, do not let my lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to my lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh, do not let my lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place. (Genesis 18:1-5,16-33 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week, we look at the idea of asking questions. And I bring this up because I realized that as I was asking for your questions that sometimes there's a hesitancy to ask. Now this can come from many different places. Sometimes it's because we feel like if we are asking questions, then we have to admit that we don't know something or that we don't understand it. Sometimes asking questions feels like it means that we are questioning the material itself. And when discussing the Bible, that can feel very awkward for people at times. Sometimes it feels like we are questioning God. And that, too, can raise many concerns. And I think one of the problems is that we often don't have a good frame of reference for how we ask questions, and if we should ask questions. So, I decided to use a very good example of somebody asking questions. Our reading today is from Genesis with a story about Abraham. Abraham doesn't just ask questions. He doesn't just raise possibilities. Abraham does something that I would consider to be very bold. Abraham questions God. Now, honestly, that is a bold move. An incredibly bold move, to be questioning God in God's presence. And I think a lot of people would definitely shy away from doing this. Sometimes it's even put that we should stop questioning and start believing, as if having a question is a mark bad faith. I don't see Abraham as not having faith in God in this exchange. I do not see Abraham as somebody having a crisis of faith at this time. I don't even see Abraham as doubting God's goodness or God's judgment even. What I do see is Abraham wanting to understand and Abraham wanting to know what it is God plans on doing. And Abraham wants to know how far God's love and forgiveness are going to be stretched in this instance. This shows a lot about both Abraham and the character of God.

Abraham has some very special guests come to see him, including the Lord. Abraham then poses a number of questions to God. All of those questions are under the same thing. What's going to happen to the people of Sodom? Now, Abraham begins with a rather vague question about whether or not the righteous will be swept away with the wicked. To understand, Abraham raises a hypothetical. What if there are 50 righteous people in the city? Will the whole place be swept away, including those 50 righteous people? Now if the question ended here, I don't know if I would credit Abraham with being very bold. But Abraham doesn't stop there. Abraham, in his own way, is exhorting God with the last part of this question. "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" I do need to note something here. Abraham is pointing out a quality of God that he admires, respects, and believes in. God is just and Abraham believes it. Now, I say this because we can get ourselves a little mixed up. There is another famous instance of asking questions of God. We see Job asking questions of God, but there is a difference. Job gets a reproach, but not simply because he was asking questions. Job gets a reprimand for trying to put God in the wrong. Abraham isn't doubting God's justice. Quite the opposite, Abraham is confident that God is very just. Abraham wants to know the extend of that justice and mercy, just hoping for a

response from the Lord. What is God's answer? If there are 50 righteous people, the entire city will be saved.

Here we see even more boldness. Abraham replies again, and this is where he starts to really push things. And I love Abraham for it, because Abraham is willing to ask questions. We see another statement from Abraham that we can compare to Job. Abraham begins with humility "Let me take it upon myself to speak to my lord, I who am but dust and ashes." Abraham sets himself up from the beginning as humbly seeking God. Job has a similar line, but it is the last thing Job says after being questioned by God. Job discovers humility after being reminded of God's greatness. Abraham recognizes God's greatness in how he even asks his question. I think the difference here is that Abraham sets out to say, "Look, I know that I am just a mortal human being trying to understand the divine." Abraham wants to understand God better without putting himself above who he is. He instead uses it as the reason he wants to know. That he is only human, and because of that needs God's help to understand. So, Abraham asks what will happen if the city is 5 short of that 50 people. If five of those 50 are lacking and are not found to be righteous, will God still destroy them? And the Lord answers again that he will not destroy them for 45. Abraham pushes things further. Now this point you might be thinking to yourself "Gosh Abraham, you really push your luck, don't you?" But I think that curiosity is a wonderful thing to have. And I think it's good that Abraham is doing this. God doesn't seem to get angry with Abraham over any of this either. Abraham is sitting there asking questions and God is responding. What that says to me is that Abraham comes to God with good faith questions, not already declaring to know what the answer is but genuinely seeking answers. Abraham wants to understand God's justice and compassion. Abraham continues to push the issue by asking again and again. He pushes it down to 40, then to 30, and then to 20. And each time God says that, for that number of righteous people, he won't destroy the city. And each time Abraham pleads for God to not be angry because he has another question. Now, there's two things happening here that I want to touch base on. One is Abraham asking for patience as he tries to understand and asks his questions. The second part is God showing patience in answering those questions. And part of what this shows for me is an example for us in how we may ask questions of each other. Both that we ask for patience as we try to form the questions and that we show patience when we are answering them. Because what we see here is a great example of trying to understand something and needing more information. Abraham doesn't doubt that God is just. To the contrary, Abraham wants to know just how righteous God is. And so, Abraham asks one last question. What if there are only 10 righteous people found within the city. Would God save the entire city for the sake of just 10 people? God's reply is that he will not destroy the city if 10 people can be found. And that seems to be good enough for Abraham. Could he have asked more? Yeah. He could have. But I think Abraham is satisfied. I think that's satisfied Abraham's curiosity. Abraham wanted to know more, so he asked questions until he knew as much as he needed to.

There's another important lesson to be learned from this. If Abraham can sit and ask God questions, shouldn't we be able to ask each other questions about God? Shouldn't we be able to entertain those questions, even deeper philosophical questions, without feeling that we are doing something wrong by even thinking them? Because I'm going to share something with you. Lots of people have lots of questions that they don't ask. And I wish they would. Because one of the best ways we can inform ourselves about something is to ask questions. Abraham wants to be more informed about God, so he asks God questions. He wants to understand God better. We have to be willing both to ask questions, but also to answer them. Because we need to be able to ask questions of our faith, but we also need to be able to answer questions about our faith. And we have the examples of how to handle both right here. We have someone asking questions, earnestly seeking knowledge and those questions being answered with love and patience so that knowledge and wisdom can be gained. Which brings me to the point for today. It's not wrong for someone to ask questions. It's not wrong for someone to ask questions about faith. It's not wrong to ask questions about God. In fact, those questions are important. Those questions help us to grow in who we are. They help us to grow in our faith, grow in our understanding, and to grow in wisdom. That we may understand more deeply, so that we may believe more deeply. Because as we grow in our faith, being willing to ask those hard questions, we are strengthened as we find the answers. Sometimes we are simply strengthened by the journey to find those answers. So, I encourage you all to be willing to ask questions of faith. And when you are given questions of faith that you may answer patiently and lovingly that we may all grow together in God's love. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Pondering Questions

Our series will have Pastor Cameron answering your questions! Get them to him however is most convenient for you and he will be using those as the basis for our weekly message!

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup	Ambulance Crew	Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gabel
Sage Martin	Dalton McFarland	Ruth Ann Finley	Jodie Bunch
Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Family of Susie Callahan
Kenny Holmes	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jackie Potter
Jeremy Klinger	Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Family of Tracy Huddleston
Family of Mary Bayless	Jane Williams	Family of Colton Oakley	Family of Louise Oakley
Alice Sherwood	Dean Carlen	Ross Maddison	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Family of Wayne Carrell	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith
Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Nick & Leana Ochoa	Greg Williams
Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	

Rev Camron D St. Michael

<https://stmichael.pw>

cdstmichael@outlook.com

(316)530-3182 (call or text)

PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

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