



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Can We Question God?

Text: Acts 9:10-19

Rev. Dr. John E. Manzo

February 11, 2007

The Lord appears to Ananias and tells him to Straight Street to find a man from Tarsus named Saul. Now Ananias was a God man who was used to being obedient to God in all things. But when asked by Jesus to find this Saul from Tarsus, Ananias is alarmed. Had Jesus, in Heaven, not been on top of things?

This was not unlike someone appearing in a vision in 1942 and being told to go to Berlin and talk to a man named Adolf. Or go to Bagdad and see a man named Saddam. Saul, to the early Christians, meant two things. Trouble and death. And no one wanted any part of him.

So Ananias asks about Saul and Jesus assures him that all is well and Ananias goes off and does what he has been asked.

But rewind the tape a little. Ananias questions Jesus. Ananias questions God. And lives. It makes you want to ask the question, can we question God?

The short answer is 'yes.' So if you wanted a really short sermon and wanted to get to the bottom line, the answer is 'yes' and you are free to go. But if you stay, I do have some more thoughts.

Have you ever thought what you'd ask God about? I have several thoughts.

Superficially:

What were you thinking when you created the ostrich?

Why did you make the pit in the avocado so big?

Why is it then when I'm driving down a road there is always someone going way under the speed limit who is in front of me?

Why is it that some people are just so annoying?

And maybe a bit more in depth:

There is good and evil and I don't understand what it is that drives people to do such tremendous evil or good in the world?

Why do people have to suffer?

Why do children have to die?

Why do good things happen to bad people; and bad things happen to good people?

We probably all have questions we'd like to ask God.

Sometimes we question God like Ananias did because we don't understand God's logic, we don't understand God's wisdom.

I have this vision that we are going to go to Heaven and God is going to ask us one question and the question is this:

"Why did you believe all the people who said that when you got to Heaven, I was going to ask you this question or that question?"

I am amazed and dazzled by all the books and preachers who claim to know what questions God is going to ask us at the pearly gates. To even claim that indicates, to me, that people think they have deciphered God's wisdom and logic.

God's wisdom, God's logic eludes us. Mystics who have spent their lives in prayer and reflection on God and God's ways all come to the same conclusion. The more time they spend in prayer and in learning about God the MORE mysterious God becomes. Over the years I have preached on many of the same passages in the Bible many, many times, seemingly simple passages, simple stories, simple parables, and often the truth of those stories eludes me as I discover more and more mystery within them.

I never worry when people say that they question God because they do not understand. I worry when people don't question God, when people 'know it.' If we can fully understand God, if we can fully know God, our God is not big enough.

Secondly, we question God because we are troubled by God. I listened to a sermon once about forgiveness and the preacher said that at times we need to forgive others for the wrongs they have done to us. At times we have to forgive ourselves for getting ourselves into jams. And, at times, we need to forgive God because we have found ourselves in plights, in circumstances where we didn't do anything wrong, but things have gone awry or even tragic.

Often when people are not that attractive in a world where beauty seems to mean everything, those people will be angry at God for making them as they are.

We are a society that almost worships athletic accomplishment. Go to scholarship night sometime at a school and you'll hear athletic scholarship after athletic scholarship. Being a good athlete is a natural ability, a gift from God and often people get angry at God for not receiving this.

I saw the movie *Amazing Grace* two times. It is a wonderful movie about William Wilberforce, a member of the British Parliament who led the crusade to end the slave trade. Wilberforce was a person of great religious conviction who believed, with his whole heart, that he was doing God's will by helping to end the slave trade. It took him twenty painfully difficult years to do so. He had to question, over and over again why God would lead him to such a frustrating endeavor.

Plus there is the fact that we all lose people we love, spouses, partners, children, and parents and friends. And we ask the question, why?

The question many people ought to be asking isn't if they are ever troubled by God, and if they aren't, why aren't they? God, we say, often moves in mysterious ways, but that explanation isn't always enough.

If you have never questioned God you have never read the Psalms. God is often praised for some very bizarre things.

In Psalm 135 it begins one would imagine:

Praise the Lord!
Praise the name of the Lord; give praise, O servants of the Lord,
you that stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God.
Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good; sing to his name, for he is gracious.
Psalm 135:1-3

Most people would read this and say that this is nice. It's a Psalm praising God and that's a good thing. It's what they are praising God for, however, which becomes bizarre:

He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
both human beings and animals;
he sent signs and wonders
into your midst, O Egypt,
against Pharaoh and all his servants.
He struck down many nations
and killed mighty kings--
Sihon, king of the Amorites,

*and Og, king of Bashan,
and all the kingdoms of Canaan. Psalm 135:8-11*

Maybe Og the king of Bashan was a bad guy, but what kind of a God longs to be praised for smiting Og?

In Psalm 136 a beautiful Psalm that inspired song *On the Willows* from the play *Godspell*. The Psalm is beautiful until we have the Psalm ending with people rejoicing in the day when they can dash the babies of Babylon against the rocks.

We question God, at times, because we need to. God is often a mystery to us and, frankly, when we are this mystified, we need to question.

Which brings me to the final point. We can question God because God loves us enough to be questioned.

Jesus professed God as Father. A Father is a parent who we hope loves his children. God as Father is a Father who loves His children perfectly. As any parent can tell you, children ask questions. Loving parents patiently and at times impatiently answer the questions. Some are answered right away, some are answered in time. Some are answered partially and simply at the time and the answer changes. Such as the question, where do babies come from? The depth and detail of the answer is different for a 5 year old than a 12 year old. (As an aside, we can quibble about the ages, but this is for example purposes only.)

We question parents because parents love us enough to take the time and answer. So it is with God. We can question God because God loves us enough to be questioned.

The most audacious question asked in the Bible was asked by the prophet Jeremiah. It's the question that if asked, is the most likely to inspire a lightning bolt.

*Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail. Jeremiah 15:18*

Jeremiah's question is poised because he had been called by God to be a prophet and people were tormenting him and hurting him. The question, "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed" is made potent by the context: "Truly, you are to me like a **deceitful** brook, like waters that fail." When translation puts this so poetically when it says, "You are like a well spring of deceptive waters." The words just hang there. Why are you tormenting me; I get the impression that you lied."

And God takes Jeremiah back, gives him new promises, and restores him and loves him.

Frankly, after Jeremiah, any question we can ask God is not going to be nearly as tough.

The story begins with the Lord appearing to Ananias and telling him to get Saul and bring him into the fold. Ananias questions the Lord and the Lord answers and Ananias obeys.

Questioning God is a valid thing to do. It reminds us that we are paying attention, and it teaches us, grandly, that God loves us enough to answer.