

# ***Difference Maker*** **“When Your Children Ask You”**

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## **Background Notes**

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**Scriptures: Deuteronomy 6; 2 Timothy 1:5-7; and others throughout**

## **Introduction**

Tapping the mother lode of a child’s questions is among the most valuable parenting skills in our toolbox. Encouraging inquiring minds “who want to know” is sometimes more important than only “telling them what’s what.” Learning is a naturally synthetic process, joining line to line, precept upon precept, combining the familiar with the newly acquired.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters have a long fruitful history in this practice and art of “the question.” One sister, Yael Trusch, gives a delightful account of her tradition’s understanding of the topic we are considering this week. I’m offering a representative “read” of what she has to say about *questions* in the environment of faith and family.

She writes that:

Judaism is a faith based on asking questions. Sometimes, the questions we ask are deep and difficult, and seem to shake the foundations of faith itself. Often, questions get answered only at a later point in our personal or collective journeys; sometimes, they remain unanswered. Yet, even our greatest asked questions, often of G-d.

“Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” asked Avraham.

“Why, L-rd, why have you brought trouble on this people?” asked Moses.

“Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” asked Jeremiah.

*How does G-d answer? By asking us even deeper questions! (Consider the Book of Job.)*

This week’s *parasha*<sup>1</sup> recounts the last three plagues and the Exodus from Egypt. During this poignant juncture in Jewish history, the Torah turns three times to children’s questions, and parents’ responsibility to facilitate answering those questions.

“And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the L-rd, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptian.’” (Exodus: 12:26-27).

“In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the L-rd brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery’ (Exodus: 13:14).

“On that day, tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the L-rd did for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Exodus: 13:8).

There is a similar passage later in the Torah, which also speaks of a question asked by a child:

“In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the L-rd our G-d has commanded you?’ tell him: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the L-rd brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand’” (Deuteronomy 6:20-21).

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The Jewish *parasha* is much like the Christian lectionary. It is a scheduled calendar of biblical readings taken from the three major divisions of the *Tenak*, the Jewish Bible. Each week has readings for the worshipping community to hear read and to reflect upon.

Do you recognize that these four passages are mentioned in the Passover *Haggadah* as corresponding to the Four Sons? Why is this brought up just as the Jews are about to leave Egypt and begin their life as a free people under the sovereignty of G-d? Surely, there were more pressing matters to discuss.

Moses foretells the importance of handing the memory of this moment to our children. How? By encouraging the children to ask questions! Moses teaches us that as long as we are able to engage our kids in questions – in a discussion about who we are, where we come from, and what we stand for – we will remain a nation.

This has a striking similarity to science’s latest findings about children’s spiritual development, and the need for “spiritual parenting” to develop what scientists now know to be an inborn trait: spirituality. In her book, “The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving,” Columbia University Prof. Dr. Lisa Miller, Ph.D., shows compelling evidence to prove that children who grow up in homes where spirituality is part of the atmosphere, they are less likely to succumb to depression, substance abuse, aggression and high-risk behaviors. She quotes a study from Emory University that shows children are more likely to thrive when they have a grasp of being part of a lineage. Scientists call this the “intergenerational self.” (Passover Seder, anyone?)

Even if we feel we don’t have answers to questions of spirituality, Miller advises we support and encourage our children’s spiritual development without trepidation, assuming the role of “spiritual ambassadors.” For, children are “not squeamish about life’s big questions, are at home with the seen and unseen dimensions of the universe, the beauty, complexity and promise that it presents.” She suggests we nurture our children’s natural spirituality by discussing spiritual questions of faith and ritual; and by showing interest, curiosity and openness to his/her spiritual exploration, just as we do with regard to their capabilities in other areas.

Moses prepared us for the day when our children will ask questions, both about our individual relationship with G-d, and questions about our nation’s collective narrative.

These may not be easy questions. They may open yet other sets of questions. Sometimes, we may feel uncomfortable, or unqualified, exploring these questions. But, ultimately, when we do, we become more than just parents who help our children make a living and craft a resume. We become Jewish parents who help our children live a life, and craft a legacy. And, isn’t that worth the tough questions?<sup>2</sup>

As Christians — followers of Jesus — we turn our hearts to our spiritual fathers and mothers in the rich history of the Jewish faith who are able to teach us about our roots and shed light on the ancient texts which together we share as Scripture. Jews worked hard on keeping their distinct identity when cultural pressures and disruptive world affairs threatened to extinguish their unique faith experience. In that respect Christians who desired to remain faithful to the practices of Jesus often found themselves at odds with the dominant social order. Early Christians struggled in their witness that *Jesus is Lord* particularly when the Empire of Rome told them that *Caesar is Lord*. Both could not be true in the absolute sense. Children growing up in first generation Christian households required careful instruction so that future generations might remain devoted followers of Jesus even as they were at the beginning. Thankfully the faith of Jesus soon had its own *Scriptures* consisting of the Gospels and the Letters, literature that drew from the life and teaching of the apostles. Here was a curriculum for the Church—the *New Testament* — which supplied parents and families with rich resources for responding to questions from children who ask, “Why are we Christians and not something else?”

Our conversation this week begins with a consideration of *questions as entrees* to healthy and wholesome dialogue within the Christian community, especially within the environment of the local congregation. Many within our spheres of influence approach our church’s life and culture with cautionary tales about prior religious encounters, many of them as children being prepared for rites of passage in their respective religious traditions.

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<sup>2</sup> Yael Trusch is the creator of the bilingual Jewish lifestyle blog and podcast, Jewish Latin Princess. She is an influencer, communicator, and promoter of “a joyful, richer Jewish life.” A renowned international speaker, Trusch captivates a diverse audience of Jewish women with her honest, relatable, yet profound approach to Jewish life. This article can be found at <https://jhvonline.com/when-your-child-asks-p23790-303.htm>.

Common themes include religious educators who were not particularly interested in anything that even remotely resembled *dialogue*! Kept from *asking questions*, they eventually grew up resenting the church and its teachings, having discovered nowhere else a *different approach* through the guidance of genuine *difference makers*. The hope of this study is the cultivation of fresh and imaginative alternatives to the “don’t ask and we won’t tell” philosophy of church instruction. *Questions are, we will discover, the very heart and soul of spiritual discovery, the practices of communities that value growing trust in relationship with God and others above any claims to having a corner on the truth.* Or as one of my own spiritual directors showed me: “We are interested, not in certitude, but in fidelity.” Questions thrive in the spoil of fidelity, but they wither and die in the crusty clay of cranky certitudes. Children benefit from being nurtured in church communities for whom dialogic practices invite participation and lasting growth. If they see these practices in their elders, their faith in the institution of the church will be renewed and reaffirmed. Absent such examples, young people have reason to be suspicious that their elders are not being completely honest about what they claim to know with certainty.

*There is for children and for the church a better way, one that “has ears to hear,” and then through questions is “allowed to hear— and ask.”*

### **“Faith Questions”: Reflections on a Basic Faith Curriculum**

“When your Children Ask” is this week’s theme title with deep roots in the Jewish *Torah*, the first five books of our Old Testament. The prominent reading is from the story of the *Exodus*, given in the book bearing the same name, and presented in the form of a *Just So Story*.

<sup>21</sup> Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. <sup>22</sup> Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. <sup>23</sup> When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down. <sup>24</sup> "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. <sup>25</sup> When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony.

<sup>26</sup> *And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?'* <sup>27</sup> then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshiped. <sup>28</sup> The Israelites did just what the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron. (Exodus 12:21-28).

To be frank, children witnessing the slaughter of a lamb and the application of its blood to the door frame of their home once a year didn’t exactly look like an innocent religious practice by any stretch of youthful imaginations. At least doing what Jews did around the time of Passover doesn’t look anything like leaving cookies for Santa on Christmas Eve! What Jewish parents *did* demanded explanation from the inquiring minds of their children, “When they asked...” Regardless of the shock value, the order of discovery does seem shockingly effective. *Let the children see, and then let them ask* — that would seem the natural order of things when serious learning is supposed to take place. “Here’s what we do...and here’s why we do it...” is the natural progression of a deeply rooted religious household. Passover had its exclamation mark through the following of the blood ritual. Passover is central to Jewish faith for it is the demonstrative ritual affirming for Jews that the Lord God Yahweh is King, and the Pharaoh of Egypt is not. This One, and no other, is the supreme Deliverer and Promise Keeper for His people Israel. He is the Lord of the Everlasting Covenant who will do for Israel what needs to be done to make them free as His people. They belong to Him and the sign of His covenant is *blood* at the beginning of Passover and then *water* at the Red Sea. Yahweh is the One True God who comes to His people and for His people *through water and blood*. “That is why,” parents tell their children, “we do all these strange and shocking rituals. So, now you know!” *Yes, but that begs more to ask.*

From the fifth book of the *Torah* which we refer to as *Deuteronomy*, we hear echoes of similar language addressed in response to the questions of the sons of Israel:

<sup>18</sup> Do what is right and good in the LORD's sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers, <sup>19</sup> thrusting out all your enemies before you, as the LORD said.

<sup>20</sup> *In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?"* <sup>21</sup> tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

<sup>22</sup> Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders-- great and terrible-- upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. <sup>23</sup> But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. <sup>24</sup> The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. <sup>25</sup> And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness." (Deuteronomy 6:18-25).

Questions asked by children and questions respectfully answered by responsible adults produce *a rich environment of meaning*. The curriculum for Israel and for the Church begins with the performance of the great events of covenantal faith, followed by the inquiring questions of curious young minds and hearts. That is a great curriculum, and in the long history of God's people, old and new, when this form of instruction becomes the expected form of faith communication between young and old, spiritual life can breathe the fresh air of truth, honesty, and mutual trust. Without the dialogic model for religious education, the peculiar events of salvation history sound discordant notes in young ears, perhaps not unlike what children see from a musical score the very first time they scan its clefs. "Daddy, what does this mean?" I once asked my father when reading closely the page of a hymnbook. With lifelong enrichment from the notion and notation of music, Dad eagerly began the slow painstaking work of showing *by pointing* at the different parts of the page, letting me know with clarity *what all of this means*.

Learning *the meaning* works best within the setting of a relationship between learner and teacher, where the learner trusts the lively wisdom of the teacher, and the teacher expects the hungry curiosity of the learner. Christian education is no different, for I have found that repeated encounters that begin with questions from congregants develop into relationships of shared learning and living knowledge of God's truth. Freedom to ask questions builds trust, especially when predicated on the idea that no question is beyond the pale of asking. *Let the Lord grant His church the grace of environments where questions are invitations for trust that blossoms into lifelong relationships of faith.*

Now a few comments about the subject matter of frequent questions heard in Church. Without doubt, the *words* of the Bible and the experience of life in the *world* are common sources of the perplexities that provoke questions from seekers and believers. When I meet with "drop-ins" to my monthly *Faith Questions* Life Group, the common questions begin with "chapter and verse" readings from the biblical text, followed by the familiar, "What does that mean?" or "Why is that in there?" or "Is that to be understood literally or is there a deeper meaning?" Because of its antiquity, the variety of its writers, the distance of its social-cultural practices, and the strangeness of its language, the Bible is thick with meaning which begs for responses to many questions.

From the last letter penned by St. Paul not long before the end of his life, we hear him becoming quietly reflective about many things that would have great impact on the churches after his martyrdom. Among his dearest protégés was the young man Timothy to whom this was Paul's second letter. Along with Titus, Timothy had been the special object of Paul's instruction and guidance. Thinking about that fact, Paul wrote in the opening lines of his final correspondence:

<sup>5</sup> I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. <sup>6</sup> For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. <sup>7</sup> For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:5-7).

Continuing these simple but deeply moving thoughts, Paul later in the same letter writes:

<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make

*you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.* <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Scriptural “rootage” for Timothy and for Paul was the legacy of Jewish faith and practice. The Bible for Jews served as the foundation and model for the writings of the apostles, later collected into the New Testament. Those texts appear as quotations or allusions throughout the newest written scriptures. When Paul speaks about “the holy scriptures” he has in mind the Jewish writings consisting of the threefold division: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Weekly, in the synagogues, young people like Timothy heard their elders read from these foundational documents and committed them to memory. Through the medium of such texts the Word of God immersed the bodies and souls of Israel’s people, an exposure which began (in the words of Paul) from “infancy.”

However, Jews were not passive in their orientation to their own texts, but were well-accustomed to seeking out the meaning through rigorous conversations which asked hard questions about meaning, relevance, application, and purpose for the material handed down to them for more than a millennium of Israelite history. They were, as we are, curious about how such ancient materials could remain stable in meaning and application. Did they trust their own scribes in producing and transmitting these manuscripts to them? How would changed circumstances and language affect the way Jews received and applied what their forebears have given them for the present time? *Faith questions* were the heart and soul of religious faith that persisted in the life of a people called Israel. The resilience of Israel and then later the Church depended on their ability *to dialogue with the sacred texts—texts constantly under negotiation*. By contrast a rigid fundamentalism unable to maneuver among the texts in search of present truth would quickly lose its way. So will we if the Bible and its teachings harden into fixed and absolute rules or principles that are not animated by the breath of the Spirit. There is a better way with courage to interrogate the text and then listen for replies.

### **Exploring the Benefit of Questioning Faith and Faith Questions**

What follows is a series of reflections on what *Faith Questions* mean, not only for our children, but also for the rest of us who take the resources of our faith seriously. They must be our learnings before they come to our children.

1. If a person has "faith", should she have questions? Is doubt a "sin"? Depending on their religious tradition, a person may have mixed feelings about the answers to those questions. Which makes asking them so interesting: we are asking questions about the appropriateness of "asking questions"!
2. As a feature of human nature, asking questions is essential. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher who lived some three hundred years before Christ remarked that "philosophy begins in wonder". Socrates, his predecessor, made a practice of posing hard questions to his audience in order to, in his words, "beat out the truth". By apprenticeship, he was a stonemason, and knew something about shaping "hard material".
3. It has been said that wisdom is not shown by the answers one gives, but by the questions one asks. A little thought about this idea can lead us to understand why it is true. Asking questions means we know there are things that we don't know. It indicates a desire to learn. It is humility. Children asking questions and then having them answered by parents open doors to new unknowns, and the cycle repeats itself.
4. When our children ask questions, they are participating in the learning process. Therefore, question-asking is an important source of motivation. When children cleverly ask significant questions, it is evident that they are interested in acquiring knowledge.
5. How much more so for the person who "seeks from the standpoint of faith". The person who asks questions stands "somewhere" and not "nowhere". The questioner is in the "middle of life", situated somewhere along the timeline of history, and in a particular place. It is our "situation" which prompts our questions: Our situation as human beings, and, more importantly, our situation as possible "believers". Faith assumes a "point of view": we all look at things in specific ways, through a definite lens, and from our situation. That is why some of us will ask questions that may seem almost irrelevant to others, although I suspect that is

part of the discovery process--a willingness to say "I never thought about that before. Glad you brought it up".

6. In one sense, our questions are driven by three big ones:
  - a. What does it mean?
  - b. What is it worth?
  - c. What should I do?
7. *Faith gives us the handhold we blindly grasp when suffering through a dark night of the soul.* Healthy faith comes from life-giving answers. Healthy faith does not dispel the questions but assures us that there are possible answers to the questions we ask. Good answers do not erase the suffering of the world, but they comfort us by proclaiming hate and violence to be wrong, and lives of peace and love to be possible. Good answers to faith questions do not pretend that nothing horrible happens, or discount our outrage by saying that even unqualified evil is all for the best. Good answers do not defy logic or the deep intuitions of our spirits. Healthy faith-lives are horrified by acts of destruction, saddened by the deaths of thousands, and frustrated by a world perverted by hate and violence.
8. *But not all questions grow out of desperate circumstance. Sometimes they grow out of the claims of faith itself.* We read the Bible, for example, and are faced with a strange world of ideas, beliefs, practices, and events. In the Bible, God talks to people, angels appear, water is turned into wine, nations are sent to battle to wipe out other nations, the world is created in six days, the sun stands still, virgins have babies, good people suffer, God is jealous and seems to change his mind, and, above all, the extraordinary claim is made that God has become a human being in Jesus of Nazareth.
  - 1) It would take a wholly disinterested human being not to wonder about what that means, what it's worth and what we are suppose to do with it.
  - 2) The world of faith, found in the Bible, requires explanation for the reader of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And there are answers to some of those questions afforded us by history, archaeology and just plain solid research.

A recent book by Peter L. Berger, titled *Questions of Faith* (2004), has the subtitle, "A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity". What may seem like an oxymoron is the combination of "faith" and "skeptical" in the same title. Yet, I think this underscores the nature of our work here. The root meaning of "skeptical", "skeptical" is the Greek word *skeptomai* which means "to look about, look carefully, think about, consider, examine". The true "skeptic" is a "seeker", not necessarily a "cynic" who rules out all forms of faith-based understanding. *A "skeptical faith" simply means a carefully thought out faith which examines what it believes in a sincere effort to understand it*

9. Is there precedent for this kind of questioning in the Bible? Yes, in many places and here are a few examples:
  - 1) Abraham, trying to make sense out of God's decision to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah where his nephew Lot lived (Genesis 18:16-33). In this story, Abraham poses some excellent questions to God:

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (18:23)

"If there are fifty righteous people in the city, will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?" (18:24)

"Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (18:25)
  - 2) Moses, at the burning bush (which no doubt raised its own questions!), debating with God over what possible role he should have in leading Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 3:1:-4:17)

"I will go over and see this strange sight--why does the bush not burn up?" (3:3)

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (3:11)

"Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you', and they ask me 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (3:13)

"What if they do not believe or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'" (4:1)

- 3) Moses, after the people made the golden calf and God told Moses, "Leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (32:10)

"O Lord, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt...?" (32:11)

"Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?'" (32:12)

Then Moses speaks directly to God, "Turn from your fierce anger..." (32:12)

And the reaction of God: "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened" (32:14)

This example shows how questions directed toward God bring real response, and that questions are not merely inquiries, but are heart-felt efforts to engage God in genuine conversation.

- 4) Job, in response to an avalanche of personal disaster, encounters first his friends, then the mysterious young thinker, Elihu, and finally God "out of the whirlwind" (Job 38:1).

Job's story is a full blown epic account of a righteous man grappling with the seemingly meaningless experience of personal loss and suffering. It is one large "Why?" question put first to human listeners and finally to God.

His large question begins with this: "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" (3:11)

"Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?" (3:23)

His friends will respond with questions like. "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?" (4:17). Their questions proceed from the point of view that thinks suffering is the result of sin. Therefore, Job must be hiding his sin. In effect, they claimed to know the answers to Job's questions.

God eventually responds to Job and, as Job later summed it up, said, "Listen now, and I will question you, and you shall answer me..." (42:4)

Job's story illustrates the complexity of "question asking"--that questions we put to life's greatest puzzles may return, not only in the form of answers, but of questions put by God to us. And it turns out, the whole point of the exercise was greater understanding, not from our point of view, put from God's.

- 5) The collection of poems in the Hebrew Bible known as *The Psalms*

The psalms contain many kinds of poems: worship and praise, simple prayer, celebration of events in history, special occasions, and complaints. This latter form, sometimes called the "lament", invariably contains questions, some of them quite pointed and directed at God.

"Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10:1)

"Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?" (15:1)

"My God, my God, why have you forsake me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" (22:1)

"Why have you rejected us forever, O God? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?" (74:1)

"Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?'" (115:2)

Other Psalms directly confront God's handling of circumstances in the poet's life and assume the form of "formal complaints", "covenant lawsuits" brought on behalf of the righteous, in hopes that God will respond and bring justice to the situation. These are also "questions" addressed honestly to God. (An example, Psalm 4)

6) The New Testament also contains questions.

Jesus immediately encounters debate as he performs miracles, interprets the Hebrew Torah in new ways, and challenges the traditions of the elders.

The "letters" often contain responses from people like Paul to questions raised by young churches, questions like how can the resurrection take place (1 Corinthians 15) or what's the future of the Jewish people (Romans 9-11).

Revelation, an easily confusing book, raises questions about "how long?" history's painful course will take before God finally finishes his righteous purposes and ends the reign of evil and suffering (Revelation 6:10).

Ironically, the cross of Jesus becomes the greatest question posed. How can God become human and then suffer, displaying impotence and weakness? How can the Messiah, expected to powerfully change things, suffering and die?

The gospels record the story of Jesus healing a young boy. They also record the words of his father, when asked by Jesus to "believe". This is what the father said: "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). In many ways, this is how we approach "faith questions". We come to the work eager to believe, anxious for assurance, and wanting answers. It is in the middle of our attempts at faith that we offer a simple prayer to God: "We believe, help our unbelief!"

- 7) From what Scripture tells us, God welcomes our questions. They do not threaten him. They do not bring down lightning bolts. By asking them, we actually show that we believe, but that our faith is growing and "in search of understanding". While at times, the answers are incomplete or may raise more questions, they can be discovered. If God seems silent, his silence is not absolute and he has chosen to speak "in many times and ways" through prophets and finally through his Son (Hebrews 1:1ff). In our class, we want to ask the questions, be open to possible answers, rejoice when certainty is possible and be grateful when the light we see is only partial. At least we are not totally in the dark.
- 8) Paul once wrote (1 Corinthians 13), "Now we see through a glass darkly." He also took hope that "now we know in part.." He then showed confidence that in some future time we would "know as we are known". In other places Paul prayed for his readers, that "the eyes of their hearts would be opened" and they would grow in their understanding of what it was they had discovered in the gospel (Ephesians 1:18ff).
- 9) James reminds us that "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). He then adds, "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt..." Here is an interesting paradox, an irony in our "asking process". On the one hand, James, the teacher, reminds us that questions are always in order with God, and that he is not offended when we ask them. So, he says, "ask away!" But the approach to questions and their answers requires a "trusting" mentality. It is possible to ask "cynically", with no confidence of finding an answer. Such a person, says James, "should not think he will receive anything from the Lord". It appears from what James tells us next, that the cynic has a double agenda: he wants to appear as the "open minded skeptic", seeking honest answers to his questions. But, beneath the surface, is another intention: he really doesn't want to find answers, wants the questions to finally win out, and in so doing discredit the whole faith enterprise. But James is convinced faith is required to give stability to our lives. It's like standing on solid ground, even before we know what makes it solid. We really should find out what makes it solid, since this will help us do rather important things, like build houses on it or pave roads over it. But we still accept the ground beneath our feet and the act of accepting it is truly an act of faith, of believing.

10) What James so clearly teaches us here is that faith must make a start somewhere. We have it before we have understanding. God's existence would be such a starting point. That doesn't mean we know everything about God, or that we completely follow his ways or can figure out what he's up to. But the viewpoint of faith must be fixed, while we embark on the questioning process. James gives us good advice here, it seems to me, in approaching our questioning task:

He invites us to ask

He assures us God is not offended by our questions

He encourages us that rich answers are forthcoming

He reminds us that we start from faith before we can have understanding

11) In the Bible, to "ask" often means "to pray". In fact the words used for praying and asking are often the same words. Praying is often asking, and asking can be praying. May I encourage all of us to consider our questions as, at the same time, prayers to God, as James reminds us. That as we sincerely seek to understand, we do so in the attitude of prayer. Often the great philosophers of the Middle Ages (Augustine, Anselm) would compose their treatises, not as philosophical works, but as prayers, exploring with God what some great idea meant or looking for answers to some probing question. Anselm's famous argument for the existence of God was composed in the form of a prayer. In the spirit of these great thinkers and with the good advice from brother James, let us boldly ask our questions, in believing confidence, that God will receive them and help us find answers.

Let our growth in *learning to ask* become beneficial in the ways we respond to the questions of our children. No sooner do children begin to hear and then to read the Bible for their faith and life than they run up against peculiar stories, ideas, instructions, and invitations. They learn that the Bible is not quite so pleasant a book in all its parts. They discover the difference between old and new testaments. They encounter the God who not only shows Himself to them but also hides Himself from them. When they begin to see contrasts between what the Bible says and their own situations in the world, questions start to come, fast and furious. We must be prepared to negotiate their understanding of the Bible with meekness and respect. Approaching them in engaging ways will make all the difference in the world.

*Children will begin to form impressions of the God we ask them to trust by the way we respond to the questions which they ask.*

What is true for *natural* children is also applicable for children in the faith: for those *starting out* or *starting over*.

## **Conclusion**

Israel, before the invention of printing presses and the wide distribution of books, knew the Scriptures by what was largely oral and recited. Learning was a matter of hearing and reciting what they heard. For us the printed word in a variety of venues supplies the resources with which we have conversations and about which we ask questions. Printed Bibles and their worldwide distribution have shaped the mission of the Church for centuries. Picking up a Bible, being told to read it, and then trying to understand what is written there is an especially challenging project for someone without spiritual direction or moral guidance. One Bible scholar wrote:

We are to attempt an answer to the questions, "What is there within the Bible? What sort of house is it to which the Bible is the door? What sort of country is spread before our eyes when we throw the Bible open?" [Karl Barth, *The Strange New World Within the Bible*, originally from a series of essays in 1916, later republished in 1958 with its new title].

Reading the Bible is, much as Karl Barth described it above, like embarking on a journey to the new world, one both familiar and strange. Any ancient book appears out of place and out of time. Its language is odd, its

vocabulary foreign, and its stories fantastic. Things happen in the Bible which don't ordinarily happen in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (in Barth's case, the 20<sup>th</sup>). But then why would we expect the Bible to look like our world? Still, as we read its stories and run our fingers around the outlines of its characters, a strange *familiarity* emerges, almost unexpected and comforting. We get the impression that we have lived this story ourselves and might well be living it now. Chalk it up to the common thread of human nature or to a deeper mystery binding all of history together, subplots and all.

But it must be *read*, entered into, as one might make her way into the enchantment of a deep forest, shaded from the outside by overhanging vines and tall muscular trees, hushed by the stillness found only where the brooks flow, the birds chatter and quiet winds rustle the pliant leaves. Listen. What do you hear? Is it the voice of God?

Much of our work with the Bible is about listening, and doing so without noise. That's not easy. Each of us brings to the Bible a cacophony of life experience, present occupation, and future anxieties; in turn they interrupt the continuous flow of mental concentration and spiritual attentiveness. Listen. The words of the Bible live dual lives, bearing a wonderful message from God to us. What we read in these pages is deceptively transparent. On the one hand, we read ordinary human words, telling about other human beings, living long ago. Listen. The landscape they inhabit looks strange: its raw rough roads and primitive transports, carrying passengers across uncharted deserts and to the walls of fortified cities where the inhabitants trade simple wares and exchange unfamiliar currency. Listen. On the other hand, it is the word of God at home in none of our worlds, yet strangely the visitor to all of them. He spoke to Moses and he speaks to us, though we have never seen a burning bush or command the waters to part. Ask questions, and then listen.

The unfamiliar is not all bad: that's why we enjoy vacations--they remove us from the humdrum and habitual and place us in another time and place. The Bible drags us into the house of the unfamiliar and invites us to sit at the table of the strange. Are we afraid to do that? Perhaps we are. But curiosity is a persistent companion of the human soul, and reading the Bible raises all sorts of wonderful questions. Are we able to put questions to the Bible and then listen for possible answers? "Faith Questions" is the way I like to style such encounters. "Faith"--because we wait expectantly and open-mindedly to hear the voice of God speaking to us; "Questions"--because we hardly wish to read only that which we already understand or observe that which we have already seen. The listener is also a questioner, and the Bible invites all sorts of questions: "Ask of me," God tells His ancient people, "And I will give the nations as your inheritance" (Psalm 2:8). "Test me", he tells the audience of the prophet Malachi (Malachi 3:10). Nor can we get out of our mind's eye the image of the adolescent Jesus sitting in the Temple questioning his rabbis (Luke 2:46).

Entering the world of the Bible is dangerous business. Who knows, we might actually find something there that challenges our best-held beliefs or sets aside some closely guarded certainties. "My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts...", he told Isaiah in 55:8-9. Moreover, secrets are told and mysteries unlocked, and both leave us breathless. We are thereby invited to share in God's hidden purposes, now revealed to us, and become with Him partners in the grand scheme of world history. Through reading the "big stories" of the Bible our "little stories" assume new contexts and no longer lack significance. We find ourselves speaking more easily about "the big scheme of things" and are less likely to sink into meaningless activity. Nor are we prepared for the possibilities proposed by the plot of the Bible. "Could such things *really happen?*" we catch ourselves saying under our breath. It's hard not to be cynical about such matters: water into wine; blind people seeing again; dead people rising. Our contemporary metaphors seem to gobble up the images into a cheap science fiction tale or badly written horror flick. Of course, we can't blame the Bible for such digressions and distortions. After all, we bring along a lot of baggage.

"Become as little children...enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 18:3). Jesus counseled his audiences with words like these. It's not bad advice for the reader of the Bible. Open its pages and read it as a child might: filled with wonder, anticipation, and curiosity. In other worlds, such things like this can happen. And our

world is more than the ordinary events which thread their way into the headlines or primetime news or the gossip around the water cooler. C.S. Lewis counseled as much in his little essay on writing stories for children and adults. He contended the best stories are read with enthusiasm by children but also by future adults who knew those stories as children. Could we hope as much for the readers of the Bible? After all, the Bible opens up another world to us, proposing that we live our lives "above" as well as "below". Its language is not escapist nor does it invite a queer isolation from reality. "In the world, not of the world" best fits the invitation to the reader.

Reading precedes study, though in a deeper sense, we must study to read. That is, the art of reading requires a certain discipline of its own, learning how to take up words into our minds, appreciate them with our hearts and then figure out what to do with the meanings they convey. What sort of thing is it that we are "studying"? Had this been an invitation to study the lifecycle of a butterfly, we might be well-served to have personal encounters with as many butterflies throughout their lifecycles as possible. If this were the study of American elections, we would certainly know what sorts of documents to research and would want to pay close attention to a real live election in process. In these examples there is a blend of first-hand knowledge, history, psychology, biology, and lots of patience.

What about the Bible? In what sense do we "study it"? To answer that question requires a better understanding of its "nature" and how other people have approached the matter. We are not the first, after all, to undertake this task, and have something to learn from the "pioneers". And so, we will not neglect the so-called "experienced experts" in our quest.

Study is a discipline in itself, requiring first-hand experience with the thing studied. It's tempting to rely on the hearsay of others or the often distorted reports of what they have found on their journeys into the biblical landscapes. There's no substitute for "being there yourself", and so we must dive into the readings with the abandon of an explorer on new-found territory. But study has its risks as well. We can become like wanton conquerors, laying claim to new lands, stripping its soil, marauding its villages, despising its customs, and simply making off with its goods for our own purposes. Study, in that case, becomes a self-serving enterprise.

No, the study we seek lets the landscape remain under its own control, its resources tapped with discretion, and its residents treated with respect. We want, for example, to understand the people of the Bible: how they lived, who God was for them, and why they believed in Him. In their sorrows, doubts and fears, they tell us about their own encounter with God and how it enriched them. Even in our study, we must listen without judgment to what that had to say. In study we bring ourselves under the authority of what we study, and do not seek to dominate it instead. Even the scientist develops a healthy respect for the "data", forming tentative hypotheses and controlling the variables in his experiments. Like him, we can hardly disown the lenses of our observations or ignore the formation of our own lives. Everything about us--culture, language, personality, experience--is brought to the task of study and colors it in ways that we cannot ignore. Learning to "bracket" what we contribute and what the Bible itself brings to the table is an important discipline all its own.

We study to live. The Bible is sustenance. Eugene Peterson helps us here:

Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son [*Eat This Book*].

However else we approach the study of the Bible, its nourishment value exceeds any of our own personal goals. The Bible is not primarily a puzzle to be solved, though it contains many puzzles; it is not merely a challenge to be conquered, though its pages purport many such challenges. Nor is the Bible a sort of riddle, spun by some deep magic accessible only to a few who are either smart enough or wise enough to unravel its charms, though it certainly casts a wonderful spell on the minds of modern readers in search of its mysteries. Helpful though the Bible is in the discovery of ancient history and the wealth of surprising wisdom, we come to its side for

more than these. Among the texts we will explore in this study is Psalm 119, at least in part, where the Bible's role looms larger than any of these private expectations.

For children who ask adults, or for adults who have the courage to ask each other, the role of questions, especially concerning the primary resource for our faith—the Bible, is enormous and at times onerous—a burden that requires others to come alongside to direct and guide through the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. About such efforts, Jesus once said:

<sup>28</sup> "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30).

In a moving story from the days of the early Christians, a follower of Jesus named Philip meets an unlikely character in an unusual place headed to a foreign destination. And this unlikely character has questions:

<sup>26</sup> Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." <sup>27</sup> So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, <sup>28</sup> and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. <sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

<sup>30</sup> Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. <sup>31</sup> "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>33</sup> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." <sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

<sup>35</sup> Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26-39).

From perplexity, fueled by questions about the Bible, to faith and joy, this official from Ethiopia encounters somebody who was willing to share the yoke of understanding and be responsive to the official's questions. When that combination of persons happens, as we read and study, it makes all the difference! When we come alongside others engaged in the dialogue, loaded with questions about what they read, we can become difference makers for them.

**Glory to God! Amen.**