



Transforming QUESTIONS

Facilitator's Guide





Transforming QUESTIONS

Dear Friend,

Congratulations! You are about to embark on a journey of formation and reflection, and we are delighted to be a part of this experience. In these downloadable PDF documents, you will find:

- **A Facilitator's Guide: Includes a course overview, step-by-step instructions and guide for each session. If you are using the guide on a computer, tablet, or smartphone, the hyperlinks are enabled.**
- **A Participant's Guide: Designed for participants to follow along in the class with bulleted topics, key points, and scripture citations, as well as a place to write notes. For those who would like a more durable guide, it is available as a photocopied book, .**

You can find additional resources at www.transformingquestions.org. We will continue to add resources and tools so please check back periodically. We also hope you will send ideas and best practices to us at editorial@forwardmovement.org so we can share them with the wider community.

Another helpful resource is *Faithful Questions: Exploring the Way with Jesus*. Based on the course lectures, this book is available as a companion for the course or for independent use by individuals or groups. It is available at www.forwardmovement.org or as an ebook at Kindle, Nook, and iBook.

The development of Transforming Questions was funded by a generous grant from The Episcopal Church's Constable Fund. With this financial support, we are able to offer the curriculum free of charge as a download to any Episcopal or Anglican church.

Our mission is to inspire disciples and empower evangelists, and we hope these resources encourage, engage, and transform you on your journey of faith.



Transforming QUESTIONS

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Scripture citations refer to the New Revised Standard Version Bible, although any version is appropriate.



Diocese of New Westminster
ANGELICAN CHURCH OF CANADA



Transforming QUESTIONS

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Transforming QUESTIONS

WELCOME

Many Christians and seekers operate under an assumption that doubt is the opposite of faith. Sometimes we hear people say that to have faith means accepting things without questioning them. Others say that you can't be a "good Christian" if you have a lot of doubt. Nothing could be further from the truth. Questions are an essential part of faith. Almost every single person in scripture who encounters God does so with a lot of questions, and more than a little doubt. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, Mary, the disciples, and Paul all ask questions, and those questions are part of their faithful response to God. In fact, it is in the act of asking questions that we wrestle more deeply with our faith, allowing ourselves to be transformed by the One whom we encounter in the midst of our doubts and questions. Transforming Questions is a curriculum that offers the opportunity to engage in faithful questioning with the companionship of a leader and in the midst of a community. Through table fellowship, teaching, and conversation, participants wrestle with some of the most basic questions of our faith: Who is Jesus? Does God answer prayer? Why do bad things happen? In the act of asking questions, we see our faith transform, deepening and developing from something simple and superficial to something complicated and rich. And, in the act of asking questions, we see ourselves transformed, as the answers that we find, or the new questions that we discover, demand that we respond, changing not only what we think but also how we live. Transforming Questions is a good introduction to the Christian faith for newcomers who are still seeking God. It is a good refresher on the Christian faith for longtime church members who are wondering about the basics of the faith.

Above all, Transforming Questions helps to build community among those who are seekers and those who are members, those who are old and those who are young, those who are questioning for the first time and those who are questioning for the thousandth time. Together they will find that wherever they come from, they share the same questions; together they will discover, not easy answers, but the still, small voice of God, speaking in their very midst.



Transforming QUESTIONS

OVERVIEW

Transforming Questions is an eleven-session course designed to help participants engage the basic questions of the Christian faith through a combination of teaching and conversation. Participants gather to share a meal, which sets the foundation for fellowship. Scripture tells us again and again that people grow closer to God and one another through table fellowship, and that Christ becomes known to us in the breaking of bread. After the meal, a leader gives a presentation about a central question of the Christian faith. Then, in small groups, participants are invited into deeper reflection on and engagement with the question. Prayer both begins and ends each session to set the context for the conversations that occur within each class.

Scope and Sequence

Each session of the course is devoted to exploring one of the foundational questions of the Christian faith and discovering through the presentation and conversation how these questions transform and change during our spiritual journey.

- **Can we question our faith?**
- **Who is Jesus?**
- **Why did Jesus have to die?**
- **How should we live?**
- **How should we read the Bible?**
- **Does God answer prayer?**
- **Why is there suffering?**
- **What happens after death?**
- **What is the Church for?**
- **What does it mean to be Anglican?**
- **Where do we go from here?**



Transforming QUESTIONS

OVERVIEW

Transforming Questions is designed so that each session lasts a minimum of 90 minutes. The session format is as follows:

- Opening collect and welcome (5 minutes)
- Meal and fellowship (25 minutes)
- Presentation (25-30 minutes)
- Small-group discussion (30-35 minutes)
- Closing collect and dismissal (5 minutes)

The meal and fellowship are an integral part of the class itself, allowing for community building and deeper engagement. If required, the sessions can be adapted to a Sunday morning formation time or an online format, provided at least 60 minutes of time is available. In place of a meal, participants can be invited to a collective spiritual practice such as lectio divina. In that case, the session format would be:

- Opening collect and lectio divina (scripture meditation) (5 minutes)
- Presentation (20-25 minutes)
- Small-group discussion (25 minutes)
- Wrap-up and Closing collect (5 minutes)
- This format does, however, change the tenor of the gathering.



PREPARING FOR CLASS

REGISTRATION

Transforming Questions is not designed as a drop-in course. The sessions are related to and build upon one another, and the small-group discussion requires sustained community. Participants should be required to register in advance and need to commit to attendance at all of the sessions (one absence is permissible). Advance registration allows the leader to assign appropriate small groups and do necessary set up. It also helps underscore commitment for participants.

NAME TAGS

The leader should provide name tags for each participant for the first class. Name tags should be sorted by table group (using numbers, colors, etc.). In subsequent weeks, the leader can provide the name tags each time, or can provide name tags and markers and allow the participants to write their own name tags. It is important to use the name tags throughout the course, even if you think that members know one another. This helps ease anxiety and extends hospitality, particularly to newer attendees.

MEALS

The meal is an important part of the Transforming Questions course; it is a time of fellowship and community building that allows and enables deeper engagement during the small-group discussion time. The leader should provide the meal for the first class. Although the food does not need to be fancy, the leader should be aware of setting a stage for hospitality, attending to small details such as flowers on tables, nice tableware, etc. At the first class, the leader should assign small groups the responsibility for the subsequent meals, allowing every table group to take a turn (or more than one, depending on the number of table groups). Although the course is free, this allows the participants to contribute to the classes in a meaningful way. The small groups should work among themselves both to provide the necessary food, drinks, and so forth, and also to be responsible for the set up and clean up of the meal. When making the assignments, the leader should clearly say that anyone for whom purchasing food presents a financial burden should privately give their receipts to the leader for reimbursement. This allows everyone, regardless of financial means, to take part in providing hospitality to the group.

SMALL GROUPS

Small-group discussion is an essential part of the Transforming Questions course. Groups should be seated at tables of six to eight participants. Online groups should be no more than 5 participants including the facilitator. Participants sit in their table groups for the meal and the small-group discussion. Both the online and the table groups remain the same throughout the course, to help with building community and allow for more fruitful discussion time. Thus the leader should choose and assign the table groups carefully, giving consideration to the following factors:

- Including a mix at each table of new believers and longtime Christians.
- Including a mix of those who are quiet with those who are talkative.
- Considering grouping people who might have similar interests or background.
- Considering separating some members, so that the groups do not underscore cliques in the community.

Each small group should have a discussion facilitator, selected by the leader in advance of the course.



PREPARING FOR CLASS

LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES

- The leader is responsible for organizing the course and for giving or assigning the weekly presentations.
- The leader should have a sound theological education and be confident in the material being covered.
- The leader should read each week's outline over many times prior to the class in order to prepare for the presentation.
- The leader should feel free to add personal stories or anecdotes to enhance the materials provided but should be careful not to allow the stories to overwhelm or distract from the material being presented.
- The leader should not participate as a member of a small group. This helps to dissuade a group from turning to the "expert" to answer the questions and instead invites them to wrestle with the questions on their own.
- The leader should discourage questions or comments during the presentation itself. The time for questions is in the small group, as members consider the questions together.
- The leader may leave a time for questions at the end of small-group discussion. One approach is to allow each table to bring one question back from their discussion to ask the leader before the closing collect and dismissal. Another approach is to ask participants what is one "take-away" they have from the session.
- The leader should carefully select small-group discussion facilitators for each table group.

SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION FACILITATORS

Each small group should have a discussion facilitator who is selected by the leader in advance of the course. Small group discussion facilitators should be spiritually mature individuals capable of facilitating group discussion and comfortable with silence. They are not asked to be the experts in the topics at hand but instead should be able to keep the group on track and invite the participation of all group members.

Their responsibilities include:

- Encouraging people to mention their names each time they speak, until everyone knows the others' names.
- Encouraging everyone at the table to use "I" statements, and to speak from their own experience and perspective. Talking about "other people" is rarely helpful, and doesn't allow personal engagement with these important questions.
- Making sure everyone who wishes to speak has a chance to speak. This may mean asking someone who has already spoken to wait until others have had a chance to share, or directly asking someone who has been quiet if they have anything to add.
- Trying to keep the discussion on topic. If the answers are wandering too far astray, reread the question to the group, and encourage them to return to the topic at hand. If you have finished all of the suggested discussion questions, you can return to the topic of interest, if it is appropriate.
- Being aware of the time, so that your group is able to address all of the questions. If you get bogged down in a question, encourage the group to move on to the next one. You can always come back to a particularly important question if you have time remaining at the end.
- Sharing anything that seems important with the Leader. If you are having trouble facilitating your table group, ask for his/her help in working toward a solution.



PREPARING FOR CLASS

LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES CONT.

Leaders should meet with the small group discussion facilitators in advance of the first session to go over these responsibilities and talk through possible situations that might arise and how to address them.

PUBLICITY MATERIALS

Groups are welcome to adapt the following course description for use in their publicity materials.

"Are you someone who has been a Christian for a long time, but sometimes still wonders about the basics? Or are you someone new to God and the Church who wants to get a better idea of what this Christianity thing is really all about?

Then come join us at {name of church} on {dates} at {times} for Transforming Questions. In this class, we will seek to move into deeper life in Christ by engaging in some of faith's most basic questions:

Who is Jesus?

Does God answer prayer?

How do I read the Bible?

Why bother with Church?

What do I have to do to be a Christian?

Each week we will gather for a meal, hear a talk on one of the central questions of the Christian faith, and then join in small-group discussion. Through both listening and sharing, we will wrestle with these foundational questions in the context of faith and in the company of fellow seekers. As we do so, we will learn more about ourselves, one another, and the Jesus we are seeking."

BIBLICAL QUOTATIONS

All biblical passages are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible. The NRSV is an ecumenical translation that is widely respected among both scholars and church leaders because it is faithful to the original languages of the text while also graceful and understandable in English. The NRSV is also the translation most commonly used in public worship in the Episcopal and Anglican Church. Other translations that may be helpful include:

- The New Jewish Publication Society's TANAKH (NJPS) translation of the Hebrew Bible
- The Common English Bible (CEB) is a translation of the Bible into easily readable English, less formal than the NRSV, yet still faithful to the original languages.
- The Message Bible is a rendering rather than a translation. It attempts to adapt the language of the Bible into contemporary idioms, so that readers can relate to the biblical texts more easily.



PREPARING FOR CLASS

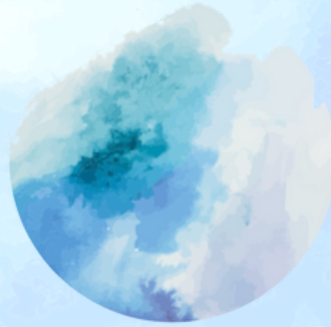
MATERIALS

For each class, the following materials are needed:

- Tables and chairs
- The meal (provided by the leader or supplied by one of the table groups), as well as: dishes (disposable or reusable), napkins, utensils, serving utensils, cups, condiments, etc.
- Name tags for each participant
- Copies of the handout or participant guide for each participant
- Bibles for each table (leaders can also invite participants to bring their own Bibles, but should provide extras in case they are needed).
- If meeting online, email or print for participants the participants' guide. Small group facilitators should have a bible on hand or online to read or share on the screen if necessary.

RESOURCES

The Leader's Guide and Participant's Book for Transforming Questions (original program) are both available as downloads from Forward Movement (www.forwardmovement.org). This adapted program from the diocese of New Westminster is available for download on the diocesan website (www.vancouver.anglican.ca). A printed Participant's Book also is available from Forward Movement. In addition, Faithful Questions: Exploring the Way with Jesus, a book based on the course lectures, is available as a companion for the course or for independent use by individuals or groups. It is available at www.forwardmovement.org or as an ebook at Kindle, Nook, and iBook. Visit www.transformingquestions.org for more resources.



Transforming QUESTIONS

DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

Thank you for agreeing to be a small group discussion facilitator. As the facilitator, it is not your job to be the expert on the topic of the course or to answer questions. It is simply your job to help keep the discussion at your table on track and ensure that everyone has a chance to share. Included below are a few guidelines that will hopefully help you in this task.

- **Please encourage people to mention their names each time they speak, until everyone knows the others' names. If online e.g. Zoom, please ensure people's names/pronouns are visible in their windows.**
- **Encourage everyone at the table to use "I" statements, and to speak from their own experience and perspective. Talking about 'other people' is rarely helpful, and doesn't allow personal engagement with these important questions.**
- **Make sure everyone who wishes to speak has a chance to speak. This may mean asking someone who has already spoken to wait until others have had a chance to share, or directly asking someone who has been quiet if they have anything to add.**
- **Try to keep the discussion on topic. If the answers are wandering too far astray, re-read the question to the group, and encourage them to return to the topic at hand. If you have finished all of the suggested discussion questions, you can return to the topic of interest, if it is appropriate.**
- **Be aware of the time, so that your group is able to address all of the questions. If you get bogged down in a question, encourage the group to move on to the next one. You can always come back to a particularly important question if you have time remaining at the end.**
- **Share anything that seems important with the Leader. If you are having trouble facilitating your table group, ask for their help in working toward a solution.**

Session 1

Can We Question
Our Faith?





Transforming QUESTIONS

Can we question our faith?

Opening Prayer

O God of the unexpected, you take what is old and make it new, and what is dead and bring it to life; you take our false expectations and transform them into your truth. Help us to accept the challenge of your call, so that, trusting in your promise, we journey by faith in Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

(Alternative Collects, p.80)*

Many people operate under the mistaken assumption that doubt is the opposite of faith.

- That to have faith means to accept something without questioning it.
- That you can't be a "good Christian" if you have a lot of doubt.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

- In fact, almost every single person in scripture who encounters God does so with a lot of questions—and more than a little doubt.
- When God tells Abraham and Sarah that they will be the recipients of God's promise, they repeatedly question God and even laugh at the impossibility of God's promise. (Genesis 15:1-15; 17:17, 18:9-12) *The biblical citations are provided for the teacher's information. You could choose to simply reference all the texts, or to have the group read and examine closely one or more texts, as best fits your church context.*
- When God appears in a burning bush to send Moses to set the Hebrews free, Moses first argues with God about his unworthiness, then finally begs God, "O my Lord, please send someone else." (Exodus 4:13)

The psalms are full of faithful people asking questions of God:

- 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? (Psalm 13:2)
- My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. (Psalm 22:1-2)
- Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. (Psalm 44:23-26)
- I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? (Psalm 121:1)
- Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? (Psalm 139:7)

Mary's immediate response to God upon being told that she will bear the Messiah is a question, "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)



Thomas is famous for his doubt; he will not believe the words of his fellow disciples, until he sees Jesus himself.

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:24-29)

When Jesus appears to Paul in a vision, Paul responds with a series of questions.

While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” I answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Then he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.” Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. I asked, “What am I to do, Lord?” The Lord said to me, “Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.” Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus. (Acts 22:6-11)

Even Jesus himself questions God!

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. (Matthew 27:45-50)

Questioning is not just possible for faithful people, it is essential!

- Asking questions follows the example of those in faith who have gone before us, who have asked many of the same questions that we ask.
- Asking and wrestling with questions is how we stay in relationship with God—bringing our thoughts and concerns and struggles to God, believing that what God has to say about them is important.
- It is how we grow and develop in our faith.
 - Jesus doesn’t encounter anyone and say “stay just as you are.” He is constantly challenging people to change, to be transformed.
 - Christians are “disciples.” Disciples literally means students. Students ask questions, knowing that it is through questions that we learn about ourselves, about one another, about God.

That’s why catechisms, a teaching tool for our faith such as can be found in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1962) on pages 544-555, are in a question/answer format. It is assumed that Christians will have questions, that these questions are the starting point of faith and the path to deeper faith.



Sometimes we head to the opposite extreme.

- Instead of saying we can't/shouldn't question, we say, "Question everything."
 - Our questions stop being a way of being faithful and become a way of being combative.
 - We ask questions, not to encounter God, but to trip God up.
 - Or we simply say that "anything goes," that you don't have to believe anything specific. You can just ask an endless series of questions and not worry about finding any answers.

But that's not what faithful questioning looks like. Perhaps the best example for faithful questioning in the Bible is the story of Jacob in Genesis 32.

- Read aloud or have someone else read aloud Genesis 32:22-31

The same night he [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

- Immediately before this story, we are told that Jacob has left the house of his father-in-law and is headed back to face his brother, whom he tricked and deceived the last time they met. Jacob stays alone by the river Jabbok at night "and a man wrestled with him until daybreak."
 - Jewish tradition has long held that Jacob is wrestling an angel, rather than a mere mortal.
 - Jacob himself seems to think that the person that he wrestled with was God; he says after the encounter that he has seen God face to face.
- All night long, Jacob wrestles with this representative of God. And as he wrestles, he asks questions:
 - He asks God for a name.
 - He asks God for a blessing.
- All night long, Jacob wrestles God, holding God close, in spite of exhaustion and frustration, not letting go.

That kind of wrestling is exactly what faithful questioning of God looks like.

- It isn't lobbing questions like missiles from a distance, seeing if they hit the mark and never waiting for a response.
- It isn't letting go, walking away, and saying none of it matters.
- It's not a hands-off, no contact, long-distance activity.
- Faithful questioning is wrestling.
 - It's sweat and breath and blood—up close and personal
 - It's clinging on tightly, as though your life depends on it, as though it really matters.
 - It's not letting go, in spite of exhaustion and frustration and pain.



Jacob wrestles all night long, and he doesn't even get his answers.

- Instead he gets a new name, a new identity: Israel, one who wrestles/strives with God.
- Jacob's willingness to cling to God in the midst of unanswered questions, to hold on and not let go, becomes his central, defining identity.
- And from Jacob—from Israel—comes the people Israel, the people understood as belonging to God. The pattern for faithfulness, for being people of God, starts with a wrestling match. God's people are called to be God wrestlers—willing to ask questions, to encounter God, and to not let go, no matter what.

So as Christians, the dilemma is not whether or not we should or can ask questions (we should, we can, we must!) but how do we ask questions about our faith? How do we ask questions of God? And what sources help us to wrestle with those questions and possibly find our way to answers?

- We ask questions in community.
 - Author Malcolm Gladwell in *David and Goliath* tells about a series of studies that have been done on ideal class size in schools. Those studies found that while a class that was too large was detrimental, so was a class that was too small. This is partly because, in a class, students learn not only from the teacher but also from one another.
 - This is fundamentally true in the life of faith as well. And it has been from the beginning. Jewish rabbis gathered in groups for teaching and debate. There were twelve disciples. The earliest Christians gathered to worship and pray and learn in community.
 - As people of faith, we learn by asking questions together. Asking questions in community
 - Reminds us that we are not alone—that all faithful Christians have questions and doubts.
 - Helps us to seek and find support in the process of discovering God and growing in our faith.
 - Helps us to learn from one another; others inspire both insights and questions.
- We ask questions of God, believing that God is big enough for our questions.
 - If we aren't asking our questions of God, then we are turning to other sources (culture, our own brains, etc.). While those sources aren't necessarily bad, they are limited.
 - You wouldn't consult a math textbook for an answer to a history question, or observe the stars to learn how to knit. Our questions about faith and God should rightly be addressed to God.
- We ask questions, consulting a variety of sources.
 - In our tradition, we don't believe that there's one-stop shopping for the answers to our questions (if answers are to be found).
 - It's not enough to quote one isolated verse from the Bible.
 - It's not enough to say "the church has always done it that way."
 - It's not enough to say "I think/my brain tells me it's the right thing."
 - As Episcopalians/Anglicans, we believe that we are called to consult at least three sources, together, as we explore questions: scripture, tradition, and reason. (These three sources are often compared to a three-legged stool; you need all three of the sources to balance one another.)



- Both our questions and our answers are nuanced and complex—so the sources we explore are as well.
- It is the sources in conversation with one another that might help us discover what God is saying, how God is calling us.
- We do this so that not only our answers but also our exploration is balanced and rich.
- In the coming weeks we will be asking a lot of questions. That process is not the opposite of faith it is part and parcel of what it means to be faithful.
 - So bring your questions and doubts—you are not alone in them.
 - Be prepared to wrestle with the questions in ways that will be both enlivening and difficult.
 - Be ready to discover surprising things:
 - Sometimes you'll discover an answer—possibly one more difficult and demanding than you had hoped. Maybe one more simple and surprising than you thought possible.
 - Sometimes you'll find more questions—raising a rock and finding a plethora of crabs, more questions, asking for deeper engagement, drawing you further in faith.
 - Often you'll discover company and conversation. You'll find the company of the presence of God, hearing your questions, even those in the silence of your heart, and the company of companions, fellow students who will remind you that you are not alone, and challenge you with their own questions and thoughts.

Perhaps the transforming question is not “Can we question our faith?” but rather “How can we question faithfully?”

- I believe; help my unbelief. (Mark 9:24)

CLOSING PRAYER

Eternal God, you create us by your power and redeem us by your love. Guide and strengthen us by your Spirit, that we may give ourselves today in love and service to one another and to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(The Book of Alternative Services, p. 130)

SMALL GROUPS

- The Bible is full of stories of faithful people who question God. Read the story of Nicodemus (John 3:1-12; 19:38-42) as a group. Explore the following questions:
 - What kinds of questions is Nicodemus asking?
 - Does he receive answers to his questions?
 - How does asking questions impact his faith and actions?
 - What in Nicodemus's story do you identify with?
 - How does his story challenge you?
- What questions do you bring to this class?
- Have you ever been reluctant to ask your questions of faith? Why or why not?
- What are you hoping to get from the next ten sessions together?

RESOURCES

- *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* by Anne Lamott. Anchor Books, 2000.
- *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* by Luke Timothy Johnson. Image, 2007.
- *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* by N.T. Wright. Harper One, 2010.
- *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* by Marcus Borg. Harper One, Reprint edition 2004.

Session

2

Who is Jesus?





Transforming QUESTIONS

Who is Jesus?

Opening Prayer

Creator, we give you thanks for all you are and all you bring to us for our visit within your creation. In Jesus, you place the Gospel in the centre of this Sacred Circle through which all of creation is related. You show us the way to live a generous and compassionate life. Give us your strength to live together with respect and commitment as we grow in your Spirit, for you are God, now and forever. **Amen.**

*(A Disciple's Prayer Book**, Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples)

Perhaps the fundamental question of our faith as Christians is: Who is Jesus?

- After all, we bear Jesus' very name in what we call ourselves—"Christ"-ians, those who follow Christ.
- So it makes sense that to understand what it means to be a Christian, we must first understand who this Christ, this Jesus, is that we call ourselves after.

Now many (most) people, including Jews, Muslims, etc., believe that Jesus lived. In fact, there is plenty of historical evidence that Jesus lived. So we can begin answering the question of "Who is Jesus?" by exploring who history says that Jesus is.

- Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius both write about him.
- Another Roman historian, Josephus, born in 37 CE, writes:
 - **Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was[the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day. (Antiquities of the Jews)**
- So there's plenty of evidence that Jesus actually lived, and most people today, even those of different faiths, agree to that fact.
- They would say that Jesus was a real, human person.
 - That he lived.
 - That he did good things; that he was a "good person."
 - Many, including Jews and Muslims, will even go so far as to say that Jesus was a prophet—someone who spoke for God.
 - Jesus is described as a prophet throughout the Qur'an, the central religious text of Islam.
 - Some (though not all) Jews see Jesus as a kind of prophet.
 - Almost all of the people who say that Jesus lived also say that Jesus died.
 - But the unique claim of Christianity is that Jesus is not merely human, that he didn't just speak for God, but that he was and is God. And the unique claim of Christianity is that Jesus not only lived and died, but also that he was resurrected.

So how do we get from understanding Jesus as others do—as someone who was a good person, perhaps a prophet, as someone who lived and died—to understanding Jesus as Christianity does? That is, understanding Jesus as someone who was not only a good person and prophet but also God incarnate and as someone who not only lived and died but was resurrected.

- We get to this understanding through two main sources:
- What Jesus said about himself
- What others said and believed about Jesus

Who Jesus says he is:

- Jesus said that he existed before Abraham.

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58)



- Jesus said that he was equal with God the Father

But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. (John 5:17-18)

- Jesus claimed the ability to forgive sins, which the Bible says is something that only God can do.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

(Mark 2:5-7)

- Jesus said that he was one with the Father

“The Father and I are one.” (John 10:30)

- And Jesus said that he was the Messiah, the Son of God.

But [Jesus] was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said, “I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’” (Mark 14:61-62)

- We can’t diminish Jesus’ claims about himself. In fact, his claims to be God incited much of the outrage against him and contributed to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Jesus asked those accusing him why they wanted to stone him.

“It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.” (John 10:33)

Who others say Jesus is:

- Those who knew Jesus, the person, including the disciples, his larger group of followers, etc.
 - Peter: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16)
 - Thomas: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)
 - Even the centurion, who did not follow Jesus during his lifetime but witnessed his crucifixion: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39)
 - The belief of those who walked and talked with him, who lived with him day in and day out, was that Jesus was God. That belief was so persistent in them, that they were willing to die for it—eleven of the twelve disciples died as martyrs.
- Those who lived after Jesus but had a personal experience of Jesus
 - The most famous example of this group is Paul, who did not meet Jesus while he was living but had an experience of Jesus so powerful that it was akin to a firsthand encounter. (Acts 9:1-20)
- As a result of this encounter with Jesus, Paul spent the rest of his life preaching and teaching that Jesus was the Son of God. Thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are credited to Paul. And Paul, like the disciples, died a martyr, willing to die for the faith he proclaimed.
- Those who lived after Jesus, and believed through the witness and testimony of others, the testimony of the saints through time
 - Millions of people through the ages have been so persuaded by the truth of Jesus’ claims that they have called themselves Christians. These include some of the greatest minds in history, from Augustine of Hippo to Teresa of Avila, from Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta to Martin Luther King Jr. and Dorothy Day.

- Saints throughout the ages have proclaimed Jesus as God
 - They wrestled with, questioned, and doubted, yet believed.
 - They lived lives of extraordinary service and dedication in Jesus' name.
 - Some even died for their belief and profession.
- Perhaps one of the greatest arguments for Christianity is the testimony of the saints through time, the persistence of belief in the face of overwhelming odds. The fact that what Josephus wrote 2,000 years ago is still true: "And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day."
- Do we trust their testimony about Jesus still today?
 - On the other hand, some people who have trusted that Jesus is God, have found it very difficult to believe that Jesus is fully human too.
 - Yet scripture also keeps coming back to the very humanness of Jesus. He eats, laughs, cries, gets angry and feels abandoned. He works, has friends, rests, prays, and is a member of the Jewish people and faith of the time.
 - Early church thinkers often said that in order for all of human, created life to be redeemed, Jesus had to take on all aspects of human life – including flesh, feelings, society, growth, and death. We may have difficulties with or even hate aspects of our bodily life, but this belief means to say that nothing is outside God's plan of redemption.
 - And by uniting all these parts of his human life to his divine life, we are given a new form of life. And, we are even, according to some early thinkers, meant to become divine like Jesus.
- Now the understanding of Jesus' fully human and fully divine natures has been wrestled and struggled with for millenia. The paradox and mystery is deep, but maybe an analogy from physics could help us in this time.
 - This analogy is the particle wave duality of light. In a basic way, at the atomic level, things may be described as particles or waves. Particles and waves are different from each other and they have different properties. A particle can't be a wave and a wave can't be a particle. And yet light observed has the natures of both wave and particle. It has a dual nature. Albert Einstein remarked: "We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do."
 - This analogy or image might help us conceive of the two natures of Christ in one person. It's a paradox, but for Christians it has been a consistent observation of the reality of Jesus. It's still an extraordinary claim – Jesus, fully human. Jesus, fully divine.

In the end, the question is not “Who is Jesus?” but rather “Who do you say that I am?” That is the central question of the Christian faith.

- In fact, that is the very question that Jesus posed to his own disciples and that he continues to ask us, his disciples, today.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16:13-17)

Creator of the universe, watch over us and keep us in the light of your presence. May our praise continually blend with that of all creation, until we come together to the eternal joys which you promise in your love; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

(The Book of Alternative Services, p. 131)

CLOSING PRAYER

SMALL GROUPS

- What do you think is the most persuasive argument for Jesus?
- What is your biggest doubt or question about the reality of Jesus being the Son of God?
- Before today, how would you have answered the question, “Who is Jesus?”
- Does the analogy from the dual nature of light help you wrestle with the question of who Jesus is? How so or why not?
- When in your life have you felt like you knew Jesus best? When did you know him the least?
- What helps you grow closer to Jesus?
- How do you answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”

RESOURCES

- *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith* by William Placher. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction* by Richard Bauckham. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* by James Martin. HarperOne, 2014.
- *Thinking about God* by Dorothee Solle. T&T Clark, 1997.
- *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* by Stephen Charleston. Church Publishing, 2015.

Session 3

Why did Jesus
have to die?





Transforming QUESTIONS

Why did Jesus have to die?

Opening Prayer

O Holy and Immortal One, we veil our faces before your glory, and bow before the cross of your wounded Christ. With angels and archangels we praise you, our Mercy, and we bless you, our Compassion, for in our brokenness you have not abandoned us. **Amen.**

(Alternative Collects, p.20)



In the book *Faithful Questions: Exploring the Way with Jesus*, the authors tell this story:

“Not long ago, I was reading a Christmas story to a friend’s four-year-old daughter. Things seemed to be going pretty well, and both of us were enjoying the time together. And then, out of nowhere, she asked a question. “Why did Jesus have to die?” Right there as we were reading about angels and a manger, she brought me up short. There simply isn’t an easy answer to this question people have been asking for twenty centuries. “Why did Jesus have to die?”

And that four-year-old little girl is not alone in her question. Perhaps it’s a question that you have asked at one time or another.

- It’s a question that students debate about at seminaries and that clergy hear from young and old alike.
- It’s a question that faithful people have been struggling with since Jesus did, in fact, die.
- It’s a question that so many people have asked that there is a special name for it, and an entire area of theology dedicated to studying it: “atonement.”

We spend a great deal of our time talking about how Jesus lived—what he said, what he taught, how he interacted with people, etc. Most of the stories we hear about Jesus in the gospels are about his life. And of course, Jesus’ life and his example are an important part of our faith. Yet it is Jesus’ death and resurrection that are central to the Christian narrative.

- The cross is a foundational symbol of our faith. You see it on top of or inside every church; people wear it around their necks. The cross, the instrument of Jesus’ death, is the identifying mark of Christians.
- The story of Jesus’ death is central to the gospels. The description of Jesus’ death takes up more than a quarter of each of the gospel narratives and is one of the few experiences recorded by all four of the gospel writers.
- Jesus’ death also dominates his life. His death is mentioned early in the ministry of Jesus, and he references it throughout his teaching and preaching.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Mark 8:31-33)

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. (Mark 9:30-32)

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never

happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matthew 16:21-28)

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (Luke 18:31-34).

Beyond the four gospels, the rest of the New Testament centers on Jesus’ death and resurrection. It tells us again and again of the importance of Jesus’ death for us. Jesus’ life is important, certainly, but his death is a transformative, central tenet of our faith. As Christians, we understand that Jesus’ death teaches us something about God and accomplishes something for us and the world.

So why is Jesus’ death so important for Christians? What does it do?

The Bible and Christian tradition have used a lot of different images and metaphors for understanding Jesus’ death and for explaining both why it is so important and what it accomplishes. Jesus’ death:

- Redeems/ransoms us from slavery
 - For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)
 - You were ransomed...not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a Lamb without blemish or spot (I Peter 18-19)
 - In the ancient world, sometimes friends or family members could pay a price to buy back their loved ones who were enslaved. The ransom metaphor operates on the idea that all of us are captive and enslaved to the powers of sin, evil and death. We participate in bad systems and we suffer from them. Jesus invades the seat of these powers, and at the high cost of his own life, he redeems us and sets us free. Death and the systems of evil no longer have power over us. God personally invests and lays down God’s own life to liberate us.
- Jesus wins over death, but in a way that looks like defeat
 - But we do see Jesus, ..., so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone....he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death...that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:9,14)



- Jesus dies. And death looks like losing. The accuser of failure and loss is the diabolical one, the one who holds the power of death. But this image asserts that Jesus through his death brings our humanity through death and breaks its power. The lie that death is not within God's power is broken. Hell and the power of hell is tricked and emptied of its horror. This is sometimes called the Christus Victor image of the atonement.
- Atonement for our guilt
 - But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)
 - He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)
 - Humans are accountable for the evil they have done as individuals and communally. There are consequences for bad actions. Jesus represents us, the accountable, and drinks the cup of consequence to the dregs. He bears the whole brunt of our evil and from his action comes a fresh reckoning.
- Jesus recapitulates the human story
 - And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)
 - On the cross, Jesus reverses the pattern of human life that led to futility, injustice, and death. His forgiveness and death blazes a new trail for human life and restores the image and likeness of God that humans are meant to become. In a sense, we die, our shady ways and our illusions, and Christ lives in us and makes us new persons. Jesus' death and resurrection reformats our stories.

Fundamental to all of these metaphors is the idea that Jesus saves us.

- He saves us from evil, from the powers of this world, which seek to corrupt and destroy, which tell us lies about who we are and what we can or should do.
- He saves us from death.
- He saves us from ourselves, from believing that there is something we can or should do to earn God's love or to make ourselves right with God.

We say that Jesus died to cleanse us from our sins. Died to save us from death. Died to set us free from evil. These different understandings, these various metaphors for Jesus' death, teach us about atonement—about what happens when Jesus died and how Jesus saves us. Why is Jesus' death, as much as or perhaps more so than his life, central to our faith? His life gave us lessons to learn, a pattern to follow, the reassurance of God's solidarity and presence among us, but Jesus' death accomplishes our salvation. Maybe when we ask "Why did Jesus have to die?" we are asking the wrong question (or at least not the best question). Maybe instead we should be asking: "Why did Jesus choose to die?"

Scripture is clear that God chose to become human (incarnate) in Jesus, and Jesus chose to die.

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father. (John 10:17-18)

Why did Jesus choose to die? The answer is both shockingly simple and infinitely complex: Love. Jesus chose to die because of his great love for us.

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

Transforming the question changes the conversation.

The emphasis is not on what we've done wrong—our sin, our debt, our guilt, but on what God in Jesus has done right—God's overwhelming, redemptive love.

Redemption becomes not a problem to be solved but a gift to be received.

Jesus chose to die, for love of us

That we might know that we are never alone, that there is nowhere we can go that God has not already been. (Read Romans 8:31-39)

That we might see that, as terrifying and overwhelming as the powers of evil and sin and oppression are, there is a force much greater: God's love. (Read Ephesians 1:17-21)

That we might know that evil and death are not the end of the story. They do not have the last word. Jesus, through his life and resurrection, gives the story—his story, the world's story, our story—a new end and a new beginning.

As we reflect not on why Jesus had to die but instead on why Jesus chose to die, our focus shifts, from ourselves to God, from sin to love, from the circumstances of Christ's death to the consequences of his death and resurrection, for us and for the whole world.

Jesus chose to die, to lay down his life, to stretch out his arms of love. Once we learn that Jesus chose to die, our question changes once again:

Jesus chose to die for love of us. Knowing this, how are we called to live, for love of him?



CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious Father, You gave up your Son out of love for the world: lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion, that we may know eternal peace through the shedding of our Saviour's blood, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(The Book of Alternative Services, p. 132)

SMALL GROUPS

- Before today, how would you have answered the question, “Why did Jesus have to die?”
- Does it change the way you think about Jesus’ death if you ask “Why did Jesus choose to die?” instead of “Why did Jesus have to die?” If so, how?
- Which of the metaphors about Jesus’ death is most helpful to you? Why?
- Which of the metaphors about Jesus’ death is most difficult for you? Why?
- Knowing that Jesus chose to die, for love of you, how are you feeling called to live, for love of him?

RESOURCES

- *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith* by William Placher. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman. Beacon Press, 1949.
- *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* by James Martin. HarperOne, 2014.
- *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. HarperCollins, 1954.
- *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* by Marcus Borg. HarperCollins, 1994.
- *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* by Brian McLaren. Thomas Nelson, 2007.

Session 4

**How should we
live?**





Transforming QUESTIONS

How should we live?

Opening Prayer

Eternal Father, who at the baptism of Jesus revealed him to be your Son, anointing him with the Holy Spirit, keep your children, born of water and the Spirit, faithful to their calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

*(Book of Alternative Services, pg.
348)*



In our last session, we heard the amazing good news that Jesus chose to die for love of us. This way of looking at things, at seeing that Jesus didn't have to die but chose to die, invites a response from us: knowing that Jesus chose to die for love of us, how are we called to live for love of him?

A lot of people think of Christianity predominantly or exclusively as a system for living.

- Many families who contact the church about baptism want to bring their children up in the church so that they will “learn to be good people” or “learn values.”
- Many people equate Christianity with a list of “to dos”—behaviors or actions that are either required or prohibited.
- Shortly after hearing about Jesus, people start asking, “So what do I have to do to be a Christian?”
- The answers are both straightforward and complex.
- When thinking of a list of behaviors or guidelines for living, the first thing that comes to mind for many is the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 20:1-17, Deuteronomy 5:6-21)
 - That famous list of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” seems like a fairly obvious starting point for what it looks like to be a Christian, or at the very least a moral person.
 - It includes both things to do and things not to do.
- It includes ways that we act toward God and ways that we act toward one another.
 - Of course, that list is not exclusively Christian. It's found in the Hebrew Bible and is central to Jewish life and faith.
 - The Ten Commandments cover the basics—don't murder, don't steal, etc.—but they don't speak to every kind of action and behavior; there's a lot left unspoken.
- Jesus reiterates the importance of the Ten Commandments in Matthew 19:16-21 while also suggesting that something more might be expected of us than simply following those ten rules:

Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:16-21)

- In this passage, Jesus points out something that we all instinctively know: the Ten Commandments, though important, aren't “it.” Faithful people are called to other ways of living and acting, above and beyond those hallmark commandments.
- In fact, Jesus speaks a few times about what that “something extra” looks like.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:34-40)



- When asked what the “greatest commandment” is, Jesus responds in Matthew 22:34-40 not with one of the “big ten,” but instead with two different commandments, one from Deuteronomy 6:5 and one from Leviticus 19:18. Jesus says there are only two commandments: love God with everything we have, and love your neighbor as yourself. These commandments encompass far more than the Ten Commandments require.

- And on the night before he dies, Jesus gives the disciples a “new commandment:” “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”(John 13:34-35). This new commandment, to love one another as Christ has loved us, is disarmingly simple yet dauntingly demanding.

After hearing this message from Jesus, we might, at first, breathe a sigh of relief. Okay, not ten commandments but just one. Not lots of shalt and shalt nots, but just love.

- Then, if we are paying attention, we begin to panic.
 - Wait, we’re supposed to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength?
 - And we’re supposed to love other people as much as we love ourselves (and love ourselves as much as we love other people)?
 - And not only that...but we have to love other people, love one another, as much as Jesus loves us?!?! Jesus who loved us enough to come into humanity, live as one of us, suffer humiliation and pain and death.
 - Sounds like a pretty tall order, right?
- And then, because we want to be faithful, because we are in awe of all Jesus has done for us, we might be puzzled.
 - So what does loving one another in this way look like?
 - We know it’s more than just the ten basic commandments but what exactly is it?
 - How does that love get lived out in practice?
 - When I’m stuck in traffic or buying groceries
 - When I’m in the voting booth or at the soccer field
 - When I’m attending church and when I’m not
 - When I’m with family or friends or strangers
- What does it actually mean to love God with all my heart and mind and soul and strength and love my neighbor as myself? What does it look like to love one another as Christ has loved us?

Christians have been wrestling with these questions throughout the centuries, since Jesus first spoke those commands to his disciples. And though it might be easier if we had a ten-point plan for Christian living, God didn’t exactly give us one. He gave us the Bible for guidance about what faithful living does and doesn’t look like. God gave us Jesus, a living example of God’s love. And God gave us one another, to learn from and with.

In The Anglican Church, our liturgy proclaims what lives of love look like. The Baptismal Covenant poses a series of questions to candidates for baptism (or their sponsors). When we reaffirm our baptismal promises, we answer the same questions. (The Book of Alternative Services, p. 159)



- Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
- Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation and respect, sustain, and renew the life of the earth?

These questions summarize what we, as Anglicans and as Christians, are called to do, how we are called to live.

- We are called to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.
 - In practice, this means we are called to participate in Christian worship, to attend classes/formation, to join in the celebration of Holy Eucharist, to pray, both as a community and as individuals. To live this out, we need to put worshiping with a Christian community at the top of our list, not as a do-it-when-I-feel-like-it activity.
- We are called to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.
 - In practice, this looks like actively turning away from those things which we know to be evil, even if they are alluring. It means that when we sin (not if, but when—whenever, every time), we are willing to do what is necessary to be reconciled with God and with one another.
- We are called to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
 - In practice, this means sharing our faith, sharing the gospel, sharing the message of Jesus with anyone and everyone. Sharing it with words and with example—not either/or.
- We are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.
 - In practice, this takes on many forms and requires a great deal of effort on our part. We can't wait for others to show us the face of Jesus; we have to seek it in them. We must serve others, whether we feel like it or not, as though they were Christ himself.
- We are called to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.
 - In practice, this means we can't just wait for God's justice and peace to come, or ask other people to make it happen, but we must work for it ourselves. And we must respect every human being, whether they look like us or not, whether we agree with them or not, whether we think they deserve it or not.
- We are called to strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation and respect, sustain, and renew the life of the earth.
 - In practice, this means we commit to lives and healthy systems that uphold the sacredness of all creation. We honour in word and deed our interdependent relationships with the human and the non-human on this planet.

This is, according to our tradition, the shape of the Christian life. This is what it looks like when we take seriously Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved us. Living the Christian life is far more comprehensive and demanding than just refraining from murder and theft (though those are definitely part of it too!) This is how the Church has answered the question, "knowing that Jesus chose to die for love of us, how are we called to live, for love of him?"

And it would be easy to hear that list and just give up. To believe that it's all too demanding.

Modern theologian and evangelist Brian McLaren tells a story of a woman who comes to a priest, asking him to un-baptize her. "Please de-baptize me," she said. The priest's face crumpled. "My parents tell me you did it," she said. "But I was not consulted. So now, undo it." The priest asked why. "If it were just about belonging to this religion and



being forgiven, then I would stay. If it were just about believing this list of rituals, I'd be OK. But your sermon Sunday made it clear it's about more. More than I bargained for. So, please, de-baptize me." The priest looked down, said nothing. She continued: "You said baptism sends me into the world to love enemies. I don't. Nor do I plan to. You said it means being willing to stand against the flow. I like the flow. You described it like rethinking everything, like joining a movement. But I'm not rethinking or moving anywhere. So un-baptize me. Please." The priest began to weep. Soon great sobs rose from his deepest heart. He took off his glasses, blew his nose, took three tissues to dry his eyes. "These are tears of joy," he said. "I think you are the first person who ever truly listened or understood." "So," she said, "Will you? Please?"

This woman seems to recognize that the baptismal promises are serious; more serious than many of us imagine. Baptism requires much more of us than simply following the Ten Commandments or checking a short set of behaviors off of a list. Jesus never says that following him is going to be easy. Quite the opposite, in fact. Jesus says:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24-25)

If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. (Matthew 19:21)

As the woman in this story realizes, the baptismal life is a life of complete and total transformation, a life that is deep and demanding. The only true joy—God's abundant life—comes in following Jesus, and doing that will take us far outside our comfort zone. It means being committed to worship. It means serving the poor and others at the margins. It means giving away much of what we might think is ours—the tithe of 10% is really a minimum. We are asked to do a lot, but in doing so, we are given a lot.

We can't do it on our own. We need a community, and we especially need God. A key part of our baptismal promises is far too often overlooked: the response.

- The response required of us for each of the questions of the Baptismal Covenant is not a simple "I will," but the more complex, "I will, with God's help."
- We do not promise to do these things for God; they are things that we promise to let God do with us.
- The promises of the Baptismal Covenant are not duties or demands; they are promises. They are promises that we make to God, and promises that God makes to us.

In baptism, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. As Christians, we do not engage in the practices of our faith alone, but fueled by and filled with the very power of God, the Holy Spirit living and working in us.

- When he dies, Jesus promises that he will not leave his followers, will not leave us alone. (John 14:15-20)
- The Holy Spirit fills the community of believers and empowers them to do all sorts of wonderful things. (Acts 2:1-47)
- That same Spirit is what abides in us and allows us to fulfill the promises of our baptism. (Ephesians 3:14-20)



The promises that we make to God in baptism are impossible promises—if they rely on our own strength and power and dedication. But the promise that God makes to us in baptism is that we don't have to rely on our own strength and power and dedication; God's presence and power is with us always, and God can work in and through us to do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine.

Knowing that the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is with us, assured that all the promises of baptism are not something that we must do with our own strength but something that we get to do “with God's help,” our question and perspective changes.

- “What do we have to do for God?” becomes “What can we do with God in us?”
- “How should I now live?” is instead “How can I now live?”
- “What do I have to do?” becomes “What can I do, with God's help?”

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty God, through the waters of baptism your Son has made us children of light. May we ever walk in his light and show forth your glory in the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

(The Book of Alternative Services, p. 291)

SMALL GROUPS

- When you hear the question, “What do Christians have to do?” what things come to mind?
- Which baptismal promise resonates the most with you and why?
- Which baptismal promise is the most difficult for you and why?
- Do you ever do difficult things because of your faith? What is that experience like?
- How might it change the practice of your faith to focus on the power of God within you?

RESOURCES

- *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* by Parker Palmer. Jossey-Bass, 1999.
- *Crossing the Jordan: Meditations on Vocation* by Sam Portaro. Cowley Publications, 1999.
- *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* edited by Suzanne Farnham. Morehouse Publications, 2011.

Session 5

**How should we
read the Bible?**





Transforming QUESTIONS

How should we read the Bible?

Opening Prayer

Eternal God, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

*(The Book of Alternative Services,
p. 391)*



Most people would say the Bible is a pretty important book.

- There's an average of 4.7 Bibles per American household. It's the bestselling book of all time and probably would still top bestseller lists every week.
- With all those Bibles in houses, you would think that we know what it says. But though many Canadians may own a Bible, only 14 percent read the Bible regularly (Source: <http://files.evangelicalfellowship.ca/research/CBES-Report-Confidence-Conversation-and-Community.pdf>)
- Biblical literacy is very low.
 - Only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels.
 - Most Americans cannot name the first book of the Bible.
 - Ten percent of Americans believed that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/religion101/2012/07/religious-illiteracy.html#ixzz32Z1uivlW>
- Though we have Bibles, many of us don't read them. Why?
 - We are busy; we don't have time to read anything, much less the Bible.
 - Reading the Bible is something for the priests to do, or perhaps others from different Christian traditions.
 - I learned the Bible stories in Sunday school, and I hear them in church, so I don't need to read the Bible.
- For many of us, those are just excuses. The real reason that we don't read the Bible more is that we're intimidated. We know that we should read the Bible (that's why we have so many of them!), but we don't know how to read the Bible.

In order to understand how to read the Bible, we first have to understand what the Bible is, and what the Bible isn't.

There are a number of different images or metaphors people use (either explicitly or implicitly) for understanding the Bible.

- Rule book
 - Focus on the "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not"
 - Understand the Bible as a list of hard and fast rules to follow
- Operating instructions/manual for life
- Advice on everyday topics: How should I relate to the people around me? Honor my mother and father, be reconciled to my brother, love my wife, etc. What does God want from me?
 - With this perspective, the Bible becomes the answer book that you go to every time you have a question.
- Devotional/inspirational guide
 - Views the Bible as a place primarily to find comfort or inspiration: The Bible doesn't have guidelines so much as sage words of advice to help people feel better.
 - Features stories of other people who have struggled and ultimately triumphed
- Love story/love letters
 - The Bible as God's love letter to humanity: It tells the story (the ups and downs, the ins and outs, the nitty-gritty) of the tumultuous relationship between God and God's people.
 - It's intimate; it's God's love story to humanity, but also, specifically, to me.

The truth is, the Bible is all of those things (and more!)

- The Bible is a library or collection of books.



- The sixty-six different books that make up the Bible were written by different people in different places in different times (and even in different languages).
 - Some were written in Hebrew, some in Greek (and even a smattering of Aramaic)
 - Some (like the Psalms and Isaiah) are poetry, and some are prose
 - Some are first-person accounts and some are third-person narratives
- The Bible is not even all one “kind” of writing; it has many different genres.
 - Historical narrative

In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, King Shishak of Egypt came up against Jerusalem; he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king’s house; he took everything. He also took away all the shields of gold that Solomon had made; so King Rehoboam made shields of bronze instead, and committed them to the hands of the officers of the guard, who kept the door of the king’s house. As often as the king went into the house of the Lord, the guard carried them and brought them back to the guardroom. Now the rest of the acts of Rehoboam, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah? There was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam continually. Rehoboam slept with his ancestors and was buried with his ancestors in the city of David. His mother’s name was Naamah the Ammonite. His son Abijam succeeded him.
(1 Kings 14:25-31)

- Law

When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. If a ransom is imposed on the owner, then the owner shall pay whatever is imposed for the redemption of the victim’s life. If it gores a boy or a girl, the owner shall be dealt with according to this same rule. If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall pay to the slaveowner thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.
(Exodus 21:28-32)

- Poetry

1 As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
3 My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”
4 These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.
5 Why are you cast down, o my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help
6 and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
7 Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows have gone over me. (Psalm 42:1-7)

- Prophecy

In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,



“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:2-4)

- Narrative

As Jesus walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-22)

- Letters/Epistle

Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, “See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.” I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. (Colossians 4:15-18)

- Apocalyptic

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer. When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword. When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!” When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!” I looked and there was a pale green horse! its rider’s name was Death, and hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth. (Revelation 6:1-8)

- We have to understand that the Bible is all of those different things, so that we can stop trying to read it as only one thing.
 - If we read the laws as though they are prophecy, we will be confused.
 - If we read the poetry as though it is law, we will be confused.
 - If we read the letters as though they are narrative, we will be confused.
 - We have to encounter each part of the Bible on its own terms in order to better understand the whole.



And yet, in spite of its breadth, we understand that the Bible also has a unity.

- The diversity of the Bible reminds us that God can and does speak to people in many different ways.
- The common denominator in the Bible is not the form of speech but the inspiration of the speaker (or writer).
- We believe that those different people in different times and different places who spoke different languages and wrote in different genres were inspired to speak by God.
- So we understand the books of the Bible to be written by humans, but we believe the humans who wrote the Bible were all inspired by God.
- And we believe that God still speaks through them to us today.

So, do we take every word literally?

- No one takes every word of scripture literally.
 - Sometimes there are two stories that are told differently that may even have contradictions

And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. (Genesis 6:19-20)

Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. (Genesis 7:2-3)

- Sometimes there are things that are clearly meant as metaphors. For example, in Matthew 5:13, Jesus says that we are the salt of the earth. We know that he doesn't mean we are, literally, salt!
- But is the Bible "true"?
 - Truth is not the same as literal fact. In fact, sometimes truth is much deeper than fact.
 - Have you ever heard a poem or song that encapsulated a truth more deeply than an encyclopedia or dissertation?
 - Christians (Anglicans) absolutely believe the Bible is true. We believe the Bible reflects and conveys a deeper truth—the truth of God's power and presence and love.
 - But the best way to decide whether you think the Bible is important, whether you think it is the Word of God, whether you think it is true, is to start reading it!

We need to move from asking "How should we read the Bible?"—as though there is only one right way to read it and one right message or answer to find—and ask instead, "How can I read the Bible?" What are the many tools and methods and practices that will enable and empower me to read the Bible for myself?

- Get the right tools
 - To read the Bible, you need a Bible that you can read. Sounds simple, but many people have Bibles in their homes that they find confusing or boring. You won't read the Bible if it isn't approachable to you. So find a Bible that you love. Try a bunch of different Bibles before you settle. A Bible is very much a personal preference! Some suggestions:
 - A New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) study Bible (*New Interpreter's Study Bible* and *Oxford Annotated Study Bible* are two good ones). These Bibles have notes with further explanations that many people find interesting and helpful.



- *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. This is a modern rendering that is much easier to read than many traditional translations. This is a good place to start if you find the language of the Bible intimidating.
- *The New Jerusalem Bible*. If you like poetry, this is a very poetic and beautiful translation that is also very accurate.
- Any Bible you like. If King James makes your soul sing, read that!
- Many people also find other tools helpful for Bible reading. These include:
 - A Bible reading schedule—some Bibles offer a daily reading schedule so that you'll read the whole thing in a year
 - Forward Day by Day (available in print or online via app/website/email) has daily Bible readings and a meditation
 - Electronic resources—The Anglican Church of Canada has a daily lectionary (schedule of readings) available on the website: lectionary.anglican.ca
- Make reading the Bible a priority
 - Set a goal for a time of day you'd like to read the Bible (many find it easy to link this to prayer time, either before or after). Make time for this spiritual practice.
 - Set a goal for what you'd like to read. Do you want to focus on one verse each day? Would you like to set a goal of reading one book of the Bible each month? Do you want to read the entire Bible in a year?
 - The average American household watches TV around forty hours a week. You can read the Old and New Testaments out loud in just seventy-four hours!
- Pick an approach
 - Reading the Bible for any reason is great, but you probably want to get something out of it. Plowing through the reading probably won't be very fulfilling. Try picking an approach to the biblical text.
 - Do you want to see what the Bible says to you, today? Then after you read each day, spend some time reflecting on these questions:
 - How does what I read touch my life today?
 - What might God be saying to me here?
 - Have I ever felt like this, had an experience like this, or known of a situation like this? What does this Bible reading teach me about that feeling, experience, or situation?
 - Do you want to learn more about what the Bible meant in its own time? Read a passage from a study Bible, then read all of the notes and footnotes that your Bible has on that passage. Then read the passage again.
 - Do you want the Bible to be an intimate part of your life?
 - Pick a verse or passage and read it multiple times a day for a week. Intentionally try to memorize it.
 - Read scripture repetitively. With your daily reading:
 - Read the passage through once, aloud.
 - Reflect on what word or phrase jumped out at you. Write it down.
 - Read the passage through again, aloud.
 - Ask yourself, "Where does this passage touch my life, today?"
 - Read the passage through again, aloud.
 - As yourself, "How am I being called to change in response to what I've heard?"
- Start somewhere.
 - Once you have your goal and your approach, you have to decide where to start. Here are some recommendations:
 - If you just want to do some Bible reading but don't necessarily want to read the entire Bible in a set amount of time, start with the Gospel of Luke. Read one chapter every day. After you've finished Luke, try Acts or Genesis. Then move on from there.
 - Don't start at the beginning and think you'll read the whole way through. Ninety percent of people will stop reading in Leviticus.
 - If you want to read the entire Bible in a year (or two years, there are plans for that as well), pick your plan (online, printed schedule, daily reading Bible).

Then pick a start date (you don't have to start on January 1!). One resource is Forward Movement's book, *The Bible Challenge*, which guides you through reading the entire Bible in a year (www.forwardmovement.org).



- Cultivate the right attitude for reading the Bible.
 - The most important thing about reading the Bible is not how smart you are or how many resources you have, but the openness with which you approach the Bible and your willingness to be challenged and changed by it.
 - You'll know you're reading the Bible properly when you are not always comfortable (if you're always on the "right" side, then you're not reading it deeply).
 - You are reading the Bible well when you don't always understand it, or when you come back to the same passage and it changed while you were away. The reason the Bible has spoken to so many people in so many ways over all these years is that it isn't simple; it is rich and dense with meaning. If you're able to "get it" in one sitting, then you probably aren't reading it deeply. You know you're reading well when you are humbled by the text, and you want to read more.
- The Bible has words to say to us, inspiration for our lives, lessons to learn, encouragement to receive, wisdom to enlighten. It offers a window of revelation into how God has related to humanity in the past and it offers us a window into the heart of God's internal life as well.
- The Bible is not just a book.
 - The Bible is the breath of God
 - All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
 - "Inspired" is literally "God-breathed"
 - The Bible is a living thing
 - Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)
 - There is a tradition in Judaism and Christianity that you treat scripture (Bibles or Torah scrolls) the same way you would treat a human body—when it is worn out, you either bury it or burn it.
 - Give the Bible a chance. Let it breathe on you. Let it come alive for you.

CLOSING PRAYER

Eternal Word, you speak to us through the words of holy scripture. Here we have read of your mighty acts and purposes in history, and here we have learned about those whom you have chosen to be agents of your will. Inspired by the revelation of your Son, we seek your present purposes. Amen.

(adapted from The Book of Alternative Services, p. 700)

SMALL GROUPS

- Have you ever or recently read the Bible? How did it go?
- Have you ever read anything in the Bible that changed the way you act or behave?
- Have you ever experienced something that was "true" even if it wasn't factual?
- How does it change your understanding of the Bible to think of it as "God breathed" or as a living thing?

RESOURCES

- *Opening the Bible* by Roger Ferlo. Cowley Publication, 1997.
- *The Good Book: Discovering the Bible's Place in Our Lives* by Peter Gomes. HarperOne, 2002.
- *The Bible Challenge: Read the Bible in a Year* by Marek Zabriskie. Forward Movement, 2012.
- *How the Bible Actually Works* by Peter Enns. HarperCollins, 2020.
- *Bible Babel: Making Sense of the Most Talked About Book of All Time* by Kristin Swenson. HarperCollins, 2010

Session 6

**Does God answer
prayer?**





Transforming QUESTIONS

Does God answer prayer?

Opening Prayer

O God of peace, who taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength; by the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(The Book of Alternative Services, p.554)



One of the most frequent questions priests are asked is, “Does God answer prayers?”

- It’s a tough, tough question, because a person asking that question is usually a person in pain. The person is typically struggling with something difficult and is suffering, and we must always, always, tread carefully in tending the hearts and souls of those who are suffering and in pain.
- But it is also a tough question because it centers on a misconception about what prayer is and what prayer is for.

Most of us, most of the time, see prayer as:

- Something we do on Sundays—that thing we do when we go to church—but not something that’s involved in our daily lives.
- Something we do by rote, like checking a task off a long to-do list. Sometimes a routine grace before meals or a set bedtime prayer like, “Now I lay me down to sleep,” can become simply part of a routine.
- Leaving God a voicemail. An episode of the web-based parody show Mr. Deity portrays God sitting on his couch reading a book. He picks up his cell phone and calls his voicemail. It informs him he has 2 billion, 999 million 672 thousand 581 voicemails. He starts listening to a few of them (a grace, someone in the hospital, someone using the Lord’s name in vain) and then just deletes all the messages. We think of praying as leaving a voicemail—no one’s listening, but maybe if we leave a message, God will get back to us.
- A holy vending machine. We “say our prayers,” like putting our money in the machine. We press the buttons, and we want our candy bar to come out. And then we’re angry and disappointed when it doesn’t, or we decide that God doesn’t really answer prayers.

But none of those things is how the Bible and Jesus describe and see prayer. In the Bible, prayer is central, foundational, the most important activity in our lives. All throughout the Bible, we have examples of people who see prayer, not as an isolated action or a rote response or a voicemail or a vending machine, but as a way of life.

Prayer is first mentioned in Genesis 4:26: “at that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD .” From there we have countless examples of prayer throughout scripture; people are frequently described as praying, and sometimes we are even given the text of their prayers.

When the land finally dries after the flood, the first thing Noah does is offer prayers to God

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. “ (Genesis 8:20-21)

As soon as Moses and the Israelites safely cross through the Red Sea, they pray to God in song.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name.” (Exodus 15:1-3)

Central to our Bible is the book of Psalms, a record of prayers written when people felt all kinds of emotions—joy, sadness, anger, fear, disappointment, relief.

**Answer me when I call, o God of my right!
You gave me room when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer. (Psalm 4:1)**

**O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch. (Psalm 5:3)**

**Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. (Psalm 17:1)**



When people encounter angels or Jesus in the New Testament, they often respond with spontaneous prayer (frequently in the form of songs).

- Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56)
- Zechariah's Benedictus (Luke 1:67-79)
- Simeon's Nunc Dimmitis (Luke 2:25-32)

Paul, in his letters, tells us that he prays at all times and in all circumstances, and he urges all believers to do the same.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

James encourages believers to offer prayers, in good times and in bad.

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. (James 5:13-16)

And, most importantly, Jesus prays.

- Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. (Luke 6:12)
- In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. (Mark 1:35)
- Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." (Luke 22:41-42)
- Prayer was so important to Jesus that he, personally, often took time away to do it. It wasn't just something he recommended for others or only for the disciples, but something he did often. Jesus was continually taking time from his busy schedule of teaching, preaching and healing to PRAY, of all things. And Jesus assumes that we will all take prayer as seriously as he does

In Matthew 6:7-13, when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he says "when you pray," not "if you pray."

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way:

**Our Father in Heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our
debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:7-13)**

Jesus, by his life and teaching, tells us that prayer is not a once-a-week obligation, something we check off a list, a voicemail that we leave, or a holy vending machine but a conversation that takes place in relationship.

So what do we mean by that? Well, exactly what it says—prayer is a conversation, and prayer is part of a relationship.

Imagine yourself coming to the end of the day and sitting down with a loved one—a spouse, a friend, or a family member. This time of sharing our lives with one another—the good, the bad, and the ugly—is important. The conversation may include times of comfortable silence, as you sit together and enjoy one another's presence.



That is what prayer is like—it's like that kind of conversation in relationship.

- It involves both talking and listening, as you share your life
- It involves times of comfortable silence
- It's not always about getting answers to questions or about receiving things

In fact, it would be pretty damaging if you approached your relationship with a spouse or a friend like a vending machine.

- If every time you talked to him, you were asking for something.
- If you ignored her in the time in between, when you didn't need something.
- If you were always upset when he didn't give you exactly what you wanted.

The same is true with God. We need to approach our prayer, our conversation with God, in the way that we approach a relationship with a loved one—not the way that we approach an obligation or a machine.

And that's why the question "Does God answer prayer?" is the wrong question—or at least not the best question.

This question assumes:

- Prayer is a one-way street
- Prayer is about bringing questions to be answered
- Or bringing problems to be solved
- Or even bringing demands to be met

Yet there is another way to think about prayer. "Prayer is not asking for what we think we want, but asking to be changed in ways we cannot imagine." (Source: Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 61)

Or, said another way, "The real value of persistent prayer is not so much that we get what we want as that we become the person we should be." (Source: Phillip Yancey, *Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference* (Zondervan, 2008), 153)

When we change our perspective, we begin to ask not, "Does God answer prayer?" but "Does God meet us in prayer?" The answer to that question is a resounding "Yes!"

God promises to show up, to meet us in prayer, to be present in relationship. But no relationship can be one-sided. When we neglect prayer, it's like God is waiting for us on a date, and we never show up.

For God to meet us in prayer, we must also meet God in prayer. We must make prayer a priority in our lives. We have to make space for our relationship with God—make space in our homes, make space in our calendars, make space in our hearts.

So how can we do that?

Tips and tricks for making prayer possible

- Set a time (when)
 - Just like everything else, you have to make time for prayer. It's not going to happen if you aren't intentional. Any relationship will wither and die if you don't intentionally set aside time to be together. A relationship with God is no different.
 - Set aside a specific amount of time to pray (10, 15, 30 minutes). Start small. After some practice, work to increase your time.
 - Pick a time of day that works for you—first thing in the morning before everyone is up? Last thing at night? While you're in the car? Lunch break? Know yourself and your schedule. Don't always give God your "left overs" (whatever is leftover when you've already given time and energy to everyone else).
- Find a place (where)
 - It's hard to pray if you're being constantly interrupted, or if the place you are isn't conducive to prayer. Whether it is having a special chair or dedicated prayer area, set a mood by lighting a candle or ringing a bell, or simply being outside. Choose a place that works for you.
- Keep a list (who/what)
 - Some prayers will come unprompted (things you didn't even know you were thinking about!), but you also might need your memory jogged.
 - Keep a list of people or things you have been asked to pray for; you could even start with a church prayer list.
 - When something arises during your day or week that is troublesome or delightful, jot yourself a note. This can serve as a reminder to share that thing with God during your prayer time.
 - Allow time for unprompted prayer as well—don't stop praying as soon as you've gotten through your list. Some of the things that we most need to talk to God about arise when we allow time for silence.

- Find ways of prayer that work for you, and try new ways, too (how)
 - There are lots of ways to pray. “Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.” (*The Book of Common Prayer* (ECUSA, 1979), p. 856)
 - Spoken prayer can take many forms: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition. Our prayers need not (and should not) only be a list of requests for ourselves or on behalf of others. We should spend time enjoying God’s presence, praising God’s being, thanking God for blessings, confessing to God our failures, offering ourselves fully to God, and bringing our needs and the needs of others into God’s presence. In fact, many people find the ACTS form of prayer helpful (adoration, contrition/confession, thanksgiving, supplication). Going in that order helps prayer to be rightly oriented and not focused on our needs or wants alone.
 - In The Anglican Church, we often use formal, written prayers. These scripted prayers are beautiful and ancient and can help as an entry into God’s presence. But it’s also okay to use extemporaneous (made up) prayers using our own words, as though you were having a conversation with God. Try to integrate both into your prayer life.
 - Remember, you can also pray without words! There are dozens of active or creative forms of prayer—journaling, music, walking a labyrinth, art, praying “in color,” doing chores as a way of praying (wash dishes as though you were washing the feet of Jesus), etc.
 - Start with your comfort zone. Are you a talker? Then talk to God out loud on a walk (ignore what other people think!). Are you a writer? Try journaling. Do you love music? Try playing music or listening to music as part of your prayer life.
 - Remember to challenge yourself to pray in new ways. Don’t only pray “the way you’ve always done it.” Your prayer life will get stale.
 - Try new ways of praying, then be generous with yourself if they don’t work out like you planned.
 - Keep practicing!

The following are some ways to start praying

- Offer grace at meals. Every meal, every time. There are prayers in *The Book of Common Alternative Services*, page 694-5, if you need a place to start.
- Start a practice with your family at bedtime or over meals to talk about the day (this is actually an ancient kind of prayer called examen.) Go deeper than just asking, what happened? Ask things like: Where did you meet God today? Where did you fall short today? When did you feel the Holy Spirit today?
 - Try to perform a daily practice with greater intention, as a way of prayer. When you are driving your car, turn off the radio and pray for each person you see (even the ones that cut you off) as well as those on your prayer list. While you are doing dishes, thank God for all the blessings that make that possible (the food you ate, the hands that grew and prepared it, the warm water, etc.) Wash the dishes as though you are washing Jesus’ feet. Anything you do can be prayer, as long as you are doing that thing with God.

Pray as you are, not as you aren’t. Pray as you can, not as you can’t. You don’t have to get everything in your life right in order to start praying. Don’t wait until you’re sure, or you’ve memorized the right words, or you have your life under control. Just start, and the rest will follow. The important thing about prayer is to keep at it. It’s a practice, something you learn by doing. Give it a shot tonight, and start, or continue, your conversation and your relationship with God.

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being. Guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(*The Book of Alternative Services*, p. 130)

SMALL GROUPS

- What was your childhood experience of prayer? Is that the same as or different from your experience of prayer today?
- What about prayer is difficult for you?
- Does thinking about prayer as a conversation in relationship, rather than questions to be answered, change your understanding of prayer? How so or why not?
- Prayer happens in many different forms. Is there a different way of praying that you would like to try? What goals could you set to make that possible?

RESOURCES

- *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* by Richard Foster. Zondervan, 2002.
- *Practicing our Faith* by Dorothy Bass. Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- *An Altar in the World* by Barbara Brown Taylor. HarperOne, 2010.
- *Praying in Color* by Sybil MacBeth, *Writing to God* by Rachel Hackenberg, and other books in the Active Prayer Series. Paraclete Press, 2010.

Session

7

**Why is there
suffering?**





Transforming QUESTIONS

Why is there suffering?

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, who art afflicted in the afflictions of thy people: regard with thy tender compassion those in anxiety and distress; bear their sorrows and their cares; supply all their manifold needs; and help both them and us to put our whole trust and confidence in thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

(Book of Common Prayer (1962) p. 54)

Basically every meaningful conversation about religion addresses the question “Why?”

- Why does evil exist?
- Why is there so much suffering and pain?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?

It is a question that all of us have asked at one time or another

- After an inexplicable accident
- A devastating diagnosis
- An untimely death
- A natural disaster

In these kinds of circumstances it is understandable, it is natural, it is human, to ask “Why?”

And that “Why?” is a fundamental question of faith; in fact it is one of the greatest struggles of our faith. We are forced to ask “Why?” because what we see in the world comes into conflict with what we believe about God.

- Traditionally, people have believed that God is:
 - Omnipotent: all-powerful
 - Omniscient: all-knowing
 - Omnibenevolent: all-loving; all-good
- But if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, then why do bad things happen to good people? Wouldn't an all-loving, all-good God want to remove all suffering and pain? And if God wants to remove all suffering and pain, wouldn't an all-powerful God be able to do so?

We are not, of course, the first people to ask these kinds of questions. This has always been a fundamental question of faith. In fact, there is even a name for this kind of questioning: theodicy. Theodicy is the branch of theology and philosophy that attempts to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with what we know and believe about God. Theodicy is church-speak for asking the question “Why?”

Over the centuries, Christians have come up with lots of answers to that question, some far less satisfactory than others.

Explanations include:

- 1) People deserve what they get and get what they deserve. God causes people to suffer because of something they did, because of some sin they committed
 - *Bible verses*

Tell the innocent how fortunate they are, for they shall eat the fruit of their labors. woe to the guilty! how unfortunate they are, for what their hands have done shall be done to them. (Isaiah 3:10-11)

No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. (Proverbs 12:21)

- *Example:* We've all heard instances of this, right? Some people believe that something bad happens in response to some wrong they've committed. They believe that an illness is punishment for not having gone to church enough, or served the poor enough. This cause-and-effect understanding surfaces in nearly all of us, as we experience some nagging doubt when something bad happens: “What did I do wrong?”
- *Benefits*
 - The world is orderly and comprehensible. There is a logical relationship between what we do and what happens to us.
 - We can then maintain an image of God as all-loving, all-powerful, and totally in control. This view justifies God.
 - A lot of us secretly like this explanation, in part because it helps us believe that “bad” people will get their just desserts!
- *Problems*
 - This answer is not terribly comforting to a grieving person. It teaches people to blame themselves and creates guilt.
 - This answer is also at odds with our experience: we see people who do bad and aren't punished and people who are seemingly good and are.

2) A variation of the “people get what they deserve” theory is to extend the timeline: People may not get what they deserve in this world, but they “get it in the end!” The scales of justice are balanced in the afterlife.

◦ *Bible verses*

[Jesus said] “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. in hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ” (Luke 16:19-31)

- *Example:* Those who continue to do bad and yet prosper in this world will get their punishment when they meet God. And good people who suffer will eventually receive their reward.
- *Benefits*
 - All the same benefits as the first explanation, just a longer timeline.
- *Problems*
 - When we push punishment into the realm of eternity, God’s goodness comes back into question. Is eternal punishment really a “just” response to wrongs done in this world?

3) Evil/Sin is a privation (or lack) of good (Saint Augustine, and to a certain extent, Saint Thomas Aquinas explored this concept); evil is not a thing in itself; is actually just a lack of the good. God is all-good, and evil is the absence of good. Human beings (and all things) were created good, but any choice away from God/the good is evil.

◦ *Bible verses*

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31)

No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. (James 1:13)

- *Example:* Hungry children around the world exist because of the absence of enough good—that is what we call “evil.”
- *Benefits*
 - Reconciles beliefs about supremely good God with existence of evil.
 - Evil is simply a gap between what is and what ought to be (most of us know and understand that things are not “as they ought to be” in the world, and evil is our experience of that reality).
- *Problems*
 - Does “absence of good” really explain the horrors of the Holocaust?
 - Evil in other parts of scripture is portrayed as an active force, rather than an absence.
 - Could you really say this to someone suffering?

4) God has a reason for suffering; it teaches us or other people things. In fact, some would go so far as to say that suffering is part of what purifies us and forms us into the people that we are called to be. Saint Irenaeus believed this and called it “soul-making”—suffering, evil, and our response to evil is part of what forms and shapes our souls.

◦ *Bible verses*

For the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in who he delights. (Proverbs 3:12)

See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity. (Isaiah 48:10)



- *Examples:* The person who suffers from a degenerative disease, but believes that it makes him/her (or the people around him/her) into a better person. The person who, after the loss of a limb, turns around his/her life and does amazing things for others.
- *Benefits*
 - It gives suffering higher purpose. It sanctifies suffering and makes it holy. It makes the times when we suffer bearable because it means that some good might come from our pain.
 - We experience this as true. Sometimes personal suffering gives us a deeper capacity for compassion.
- *Problems*
 - This condones individual pain as part of a higher purpose; it justifies those who cause suffering and evil. If a human purposely inflicts pain on someone in order to “make them better” or “teach them,” we put them in jail (spousal/child abuse). Why do we think it would be okay for God to do that?
 - It also may not be a good answer for someone who is suffering. Rather than allowing them to suffer, it makes them feel like they have to see their suffering as “good.”

5) The free will defense (developed by American philosopher Alvin Plantinga) proposes that human free choice is what causes suffering in the world. Human freedom is the greatest good. God’s gift of freedom means that sometimes people choose erroneously, misusing that freedom to commit evil acts. Still, it is better to have freedom than a world of robots that would be “forced” to choose good all the time.

- *Bible verses*

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live. (Deuteronomy 30:11-19)

- *Example:* It all goes back to the garden, where Adam and Eve were given free will and allowed the choice—to eat or not.
- *Benefits*
 - Explains the evil that we see and the reality that people often choose against the good, causing bad things to happen to themselves and others.
 - We don’t have to blame God for the bad things that happen.
- *Problems*
 - Does human choice explain all the evil in the world? What about diseases or natural disasters?
 - Couldn’t God have created people who would always choose good?

6) What we mistakenly see as “evil” is just beyond our limited, human understanding. The larger/ wider tapestry of God’s plan in the world is beyond the scope of our understanding. Thus, what we see as evil is really just our myopic view of the wider working of God. Think about seeing a tapestry from the front versus from the back

- *Bible verses*

But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.” (Genesis 50:19-20)

- *Examples:*
 - Picture a man holding down a person while other men cut the person open with a knife; all the while the person is screaming in pain, crying out for them to stop. On the surface it seems like a horrible, cruel thing these men are doing to the person. But if we add the information that the person is bleeding to death,

that there is no time for anesthetic, and that the men using the knife are doctors trying to save the person's life, then the problem of evil disappears. The evil doesn't disappear; it is still there (just ask the person being cut open!), but the problem of evil is no longer present, because the intention is good.

- The ancient theologian Origen understood the betrayal of Judas in this way. Judas' betrayal of Jesus was a necessary part in the "tapestry" of God's salvation.
 - *Benefits*
 - It allows for our suffering to be redeemed, if it's ultimately working toward a greater good.
 - It underscores the connectedness of humanity and time and place, taking the "long view."
 - *Problems*
 - It is offensive to someone who is suffering to hear, "This looks like good if you see it from the other side!"
 - Are we really willing to say that great evils like genocide are "good" when seen from another angle?
- 7) God does not cause our suffering. It happens for some reason other than the will of God.
- *Bible verses* (and example): The book of Job
 - The biblical book of Job is a long poem that essentially explores the nature of evil and suffering. The book begins with a conversation in the heavens, when Satan tells God that the only reason that Job is faithful is because his life is going well. Satan then uses his powers to test Job. The suffering that comes to Job as he loses his wealth and his children and even his own health is not caused by God; it is caused by Satan, the adversary.
 - *Benefits*
 - We don't have to blame God or ourselves for the suffering in the world.
 - We can then stop asking "Why" and start figuring out what to do in this new situation.
 - *Problems*
 - Does this mean that God is not omnipotent? How do we understand the power of God? Can God do anything? Is God capable of doing the impossible? That is, is anything impossible for God? Are there such things as mutually exclusive possibilities with God? (i.e. that God create a rock so heavy that God cannot move it?) Author C.S. Lewis says, "It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of his creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because God's power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God." (Problem of Pain, p. 25)
 - If God doesn't cause suffering, does God allow it? And is that, in the end, any different?

We have a lot of possible answers to the question of "Why?" Some are more satisfying than others; all have their benefits and problems. It is perhaps unsatisfying, but true, that the question of "Why?" does not have an easy or obvious answer. It is one of those questions that we will wrestle with in this life, and in the age to come, can ask God face-to-face.

But, as Rabbi Irving Greenburg writes, "Why?" is not the only, or perhaps the best, question to ask in the face of unspeakable suffering.

It's hard to speak of a loving God, it's hard to speak of even being in the image of God, infinitely valuable and unique, in a world in which babies were burned alive by the Nazis and no one lifted a finger, in which people were gassed en masse. For example, there was a department of the SS that was in charge of bringing down the price of that gassing to make human life even cheaper. How do you speak, then, of a God who treasures humans or, in Christian terms, of a God who loved the world so much he would sacrifice his own son, and yet, here it is that, to save a half a penny's worth of gas, people were burned alive? The answer is, it's very hard, and for many Jews, it has been a crisis of faith. In the presence of burning children, how could one talk of a loving God? I once wrote that no theological statement should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children. What could you say about God when a child is burning alive? My answer is there's nothing to say. If there's anything you can do, jump into that pit and pull the child out. And if you can heal that child, if you can pour oil on their burns, then you are making a statement about God... But you have to live in the contradiction... I would constantly torment myself, 'where was God? where was God?' Then one day it hit me very powerfully that, if I was suffering this way and I hadn't been in the holocaust, how much more in a certain sense was God suffering? If a human felt this pain, what did an infinite consciousness feel?

I think that was a turning point in my personal religious development, because I suddenly felt a certain sense, if I can say so, of compassion or maybe even pity for God, and an overwhelming sense, suddenly, that this God had not stopped the holocaust maybe because this God was suffering and wanted me to stop the holocaust. As a Jew I always hesitate to use language of God suffering, because it seems to be a Christian patent. But it's not so. I came to see this has been a central belief of the Jewish people—that God shares our pain. Indeed, Christianity was never more Jewish than when it expressed it in those terms—that God suffers with humans. I said to myself I'd asked the wrong question when I asked where was God? The answer was obvious: where else would God be, but suffering with God's people?"

*("Easing the Divine Suffering" by Rabbi Irving Greenberg in *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the world* edited by Bob Abernathy)*

Rabbi Greenburg reminds us of an incredibly important point—asking "Why?" is important. But trying to answer the question of "Why?" especially in the face of one who is suffering, is at best hubristic and at worst incredibly damaging. It is our right, perhaps our need, to ask the question "Why?" when it is we who are suffering. But we must be very careful about proposing our own answers in the face of other people's suffering. For both ourselves and for others, we might need to learn to ask some different questions.

Moving from "Why?" to "Where? Where is God when suffering happens?"

◦ *Bible verses*

Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Ahdrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than was customary, and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counsellors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king," he replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god." (Daniel 3:19-25)

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

- To the question "Where is God?" Christians proclaim Emmanuel, "God is with us." When we say that, we aren't just talking about a baby being born in a manger. We are talking about God, our God, being born as a vulnerable, naked, helpless human baby who comes into this scary, broken, tragic world that we live in.
- As Christians we proclaim that our God became human, lived, suffered, and died an untimely death, so that we would never again have to go through the brokenness and grief and suffering and death of this world alone.
- Where is God when bad things happen?
 - God is with each person who dies, for God has died before.
 - God is with each family who grieves, for God knows the grief and loss of a child.
 - God is with each of us who grieves and questions and yearns and longs for a world where this is not possible, for God grieves and questions and yearns and longs for that world as well.

It is understandable, normal, excusable, perhaps even required that humans ask the question of "Why?" We join the ranks of centuries of faithful people when we do so, when we wrestle with God and engage deeply in this fundamental question of our faith. But it is inexcusable if we let our questions stop there. If we ask "Why?" we must also be prepared to ask "Where?"

- Where is God, in the midst of suffering and pain?

And then, perhaps we can ask the further questions, those which demand something, not of God, but of us: "What?" and "How?"

- What am I being called to do in response to the evil of this world?
- How can I respond to the suffering that I encounter?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of saving power, remember us in times of sorrow and despair. Redeem us with your strength and guide us through the wilderness. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

(The Book of Alternative Services, p. 805)

SMALL GROUPS

- Which of the answers to “Why does evil and suffering exist?” do you find most compelling? Why?
- At a time when you were struggling, did you ever have someone give you an “answer” that was unsatisfying or hurtful? What was that experience like?
- All of the different “answers” for the presence of suffering and evil are supported by Bible verses. What might the presence of so many different answers in the Scriptures say to us?
- Does it surprise you to see so many different ways of understanding this in the Bible?
- How might what you’ve heard inform the way that you interact with people who are suffering?
- What are some ways that we can be with people who are in pain without diminishing or explaining away their experience?
- Have you ever had an experience of God’s presence with you in a time of suffering or pain (your own or someone else’s)? How did that experience inform your understanding of suffering?

RESOURCES

- *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner. Anchor, 2004.
- *Where is God When it Hurts?* by Philip Yancey. Zondervan, 2002.
- *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis. HarperOne, 2009.



Session 8

**What happens
after death?**





Transforming QUESTIONS

What happens after death?

Opening Prayer

God unlimited by mortal fear or the tomb's cold grip: in the lingering dark give us grace to know your life triumphant, your love undimmed, and your grace affirmed in the face of Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead. **Amen.**

(Alternative Collects, p.22)

We've probably all seen the signs held by street preachers or billboards that promote eternity.

- If you die tonight: Heaven (with pretty blue clouds) or Hell (with menacing flames)?
- "Life is short. Eternity isn't." –God
- Where are you sitting for eternity...smoking or non-smoking?
- Stop, drop, and roll does not work in Hell.
- If you think it's hot here, imagine Hell!
- They all place an emphasis on where you're going when you die.
- They usually try to instill a sense of fear
- All portray belief in God or being a Christian as a means to an end.
 - It's about where you go when you die
 - It's about getting your ticket to heaven.

And the reason that these kinds of ads are so pervasive (and many would say so powerful) is that they tap into a common human concern. Most of us worry, or at least wonder, about what happens when we die.

But much of what we think about heaven and hell, and about the importance of either, comes not from the Bible or our faith but from popular culture.

- When you envision Satan as a serpent...you have Milton's *Paradise Lost* to thank.
- When you think of hell as a place where "the punishment fits the crime," look to Dante's *Inferno*.
- The devil's pitchfork comes from Greek mythology; the halos of saints and angels are nowhere in the Bible but plentiful in art and iconography.
- Greek mythology; the halos of saints and angels are nowhere in the Bible but plentiful in art and iconography.
- You've seen Saint Peter at his pearly gates or people walking streets of gold in too many paintings (and cartoons!) to mention.

So let's see what the Bible actually says about hell and heaven...

Hell

- When you hear the word "hell," what do you envision?
 - Flames, fire, and brimstone
 - Down, below, underground
 - Devil with pointy tail
 - Circles of hell with punishment for different kinds of sinners
 - Darkness
- What does scripture say about hell?
- There are three words that get translated into English as "hell"
 - *Sheol*
 - Hebrew
 - It is the only word in the Old Testament translated as "hell," "grave", etc.
 - Used 65 times in the Bible (all in the Old Testament)
 - Job 24:19, Job 21:13, Isaiah 14:9-11, Psalm 139:8
 - Sheol almost exclusively is the realm of the dead—where all people (not just bad people) go when they die.
 - Sometimes it is understood as a transitory place, where people go to await judgment (Isaiah 26:19, Daniel 12:2)
 - *Hades*
 - Greek
 - The literal meaning of Hades is "unseen."
 - It is associated with Greek mythology, where Hades is both the god of the underworld and the word to describe the underworld, the realm of the dead itself. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the "sheols" became "hades." The concepts in the use of the two words are similar.
 - Hades is used 11 times in the Bible (for example, Wisdom 16:13, 1 Corinthians 15:55, Revelation 20:13-14).
 - Again, this is largely understood as the place where all people (not just bad people) go when they die
 - *Gehenna*
 - Gehenna occurs both in Hebrew and Greek
 - The literal meaning of Gehenna is "the valley of Hinnom"
 - It was an actual, geographic place
 - Originally Gehenna was the site of Baal worship (Jeremiah 32:35). It then became a garbage dump outside Jerusalem, where trash perpetually burned
 - In the Old Testament, Gehenna is never translated as "hell." In the New Testament it is translated as "hell," even though to the original audience of the Bible, it would have been an actual, familiar place. Because of this, Gehenna functions largely like a metaphor rather than a literal identification (Mark 9:42- 48, Matthew 10:28).
 - Perhaps the most iconic image of hell in the Bible is in Luke 16:19-31. But this passage is far from clear and raises some important questions.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:19-31)

- The word here is "Hades." Does this resemble some of the other verses about Hades? What about the mythological understanding of Hades?
- The text describes a "great chasm" between Hades and the unnamed place "with Abraham." Is this heaven? Abraham says no one can cross from one side to the other—does Jesus' death and resurrection change this?
- This is a parable told by Jesus (as indicated by "there was a rich man who" and other elements of a parable). Does knowing this is a parable affect how we understand Hades or hell as portrayed here?
- What becomes clear is that hell, as described in scripture, is not very clear at all. We don't know exactly what it is like. Is it eternal, or is it transitory? (There are examples from scripture and tradition supporting both perspectives.) Does it exist for punishment or purification? Does Jesus' death and resurrection change the reality of hell? What does it mean to say, in keeping with the belief of the early church as testified to in the Apostle's Creed, that Jesus himself "descended into hell"?
- And lest we think that confusion is limited to hell; let's look at heaven.

Heaven

- When I say "heaven," what do you envision?
 - Streets paved with gold, Peter at pearly gates
 - Comfort, happiness, peace
 - Doing things we love and enjoy
 - Our loved ones, just as we remember them
- Biblical view of heaven
 - Old Testament: The Hebrew word that is often translated as "heaven" in the Old Testament is *shamayim*, which means the "place in the sky where God lives." This is not a place where people go when they die, because in ancient Jewish understanding, people don't live where God lives. God lives in heaven, not us.
 - New Testament: Much of the understanding of heaven echoes the Old Testament — heaven is where God is, where God lives but with the addition of the fact that it is where Jesus comes from and returns to.

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the son of Man. (John 3:13)

"Look," [Stephen] said, "I see the heavens opened and the son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:56)

- And that Jesus, by virtue of coming from heaven, dying, being resurrected, and returning to heaven (the place where God is), opens the passageway to heaven (the place where God is).

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my father, that all who see the son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." (John 6:35-40)

- But what, precisely is that heaven like?
 - There are almost no actual descriptions of heaven in the scriptures.
 - The streets of gold and pearly gates so often referenced in descriptions both come from the Revelation to Saint John: "And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass." (Revelation 21:21)



- These descriptions are part of John's elaborate vision, which is full of imagery and metaphor—some of it seriously “trippy,” almost certainly not meant to be literal.
- But neither Revelation nor any other scripture describes heaven as a place focused on our comfort and happiness, on our enjoyment and leisure. Instead, every reference to heaven makes it clear that God is at the center of what is to come.
 - We learn that what will be most memorable about heaven is the nearness to God's presence.

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.” Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:9-17)

- We learn that our activity in heaven will be, not playing games, but joining with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven in the worship and praise of God.

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped. (Revelation 5:11-14)

- We learn that it is not only about us as individuals, or even the whole of humanity, but that through Christ all creation is being redeemed.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:19-23)

- Though the vision of Revelation is not a literal description of what heaven is like, it does give us a good idea of what the central focus of heaven will be—God. God's praise, God's glory, God's presence.

So with few actual descriptions of heaven and hell, and a lot of debate and open questions about what they are like (not to mention who goes where!), it would be easy to say “forget it all” and just ignore both.

- But scripture and tradition both include hell and heaven; our creeds proclaim them, and we cannot ignore that Jesus talked about them both. We can't throw the baby out with the bathwater.
- All descriptions of eternity include an aspect of God as judge. God is consistently described as a merciful judge, but we can't dismiss the reality that all of what we've done will be brought into the light of God's presence and that God says there will be consequences for the way we lived and treated one another in this world.
- And God's judgment is, in many ways, reassuring. Who would want to live in a world where there were no consequences for actions, where what we do doesn't matter? When we understand that judgment is the time when the truth is spoken, when all our life is brought into the light, and that God's love and mercy shines through it all, we perhaps begin to see God's judgment as something to be embraced, rather than eschewed.
- The Episcopal Church expresses their understanding of this clearly in the Catechism, on page 862 of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979): “What do we mean by heaven and hell? By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by hell, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God.”



Thus it is, that while acknowledging the reality of God's judgment and affirming the historic faith in the reality of both heaven and hell, The Anglican Church describes them in little detail, instead relying largely on mystery. So what can we say about heaven and hell?

- Though Jesus didn't describe heaven in detail, he talked about the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God a lot. Here's some of what he said:
 - Jesus speaks about the kingdom of heaven mostly in parables (Matthew 13:24-47). The kingdom of heaven is compared to a king giving a wedding banquet, a pearl of great price, a treasure hidden in a field, a net that catches many fish, seed that is sown, or someone who sows seed. In the parables, the kingdom of heaven is usually valuable, worth giving everything for. It is something surprising, which is not what you would expect. It is something both large and small, something that grows and multiplies exponentially.
 - Jesus tells us to pray for the kingdom of heaven to come (remember the Lord's Prayer?)
 - Jesus repeatedly says that the kingdom of heaven is near (very near or at hand) (Matthew 4:17, 10:7, and in 3:2, it's John the Baptist). Jesus actually goes even further and says that the kingdom of God is already here or is among us (Luke 17:20-21).
 - From the parables and Jesus' talk about the kingdom of heaven, we learn two incredibly important things:
 - The details of the kingdom of heaven are mysterious, described most fully in poetry and metaphor and story.
 - The kingdom of heaven is not exclusively a place, removed from this world, but is in some way already here, near, among us, and at hand.
 - The rest of the New Testament continues this understanding of heaven and the kingdom of heaven—that it is both mysterious and somehow something that is already here, that we already belong to.

But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:7-9)

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philippians 3:20)

This leads us to our transformed question of the session. Because if we simply ask "Where do we go when we die?" then we fall into a well of fallacies.

- We get bogged down in questions about the details of heaven and hell and what they are like when so much of that is shrouded in mystery and metaphor.
- We start arguing about who is going where (as if we knew!) when scripture clearly proclaims God as the ruler and judge of all. We would do better instead to focus on working out, with fear and trembling, our own salvation.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

- We make eternity about us, when it is clearly and emphatically about God.
- And perhaps most distressingly, we spend our time focused on what is to come rather than living in light of the kingdom of heaven here and now.

But Jesus and our tradition are both pretty clear that the goal, the emphasis, the important thing is not getting our ticket punched to heaven, but about life here and now.

- Jesus spends a great deal of time talking about "salvation." And we think that he means salvation at the end of time. But what most people don't realize is that the idea of salvation, *sozo* in Greek, is about health, wholeness, fullness. Salvation is about life. It emphasizes, not some future state, but wholeness and fullness here and now, as well. Jesus does not say to the broken and suffering people who come to him, "It's okay, you'll be saved when you die." He heals them now; he brings them to health and wholeness in this life. And he commands them to use that health and wholeness in service of God. And when Jesus talks about "eternal life," he speaks of it as something that is a current reality, not a future possibility.



- **Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:24)** Notice here the present tense verb: those who believe have eternal life, not they will have it in the future.
- **The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)** Jesus comes so that people can have abundant life. That is fullness of life, here and now.

So instead of asking where we go when we die, perhaps we might borrow a different question from The Episcopal Church’s Catechism instead. On page 861, the Catechism poses the question: “*What is the Christian hope?*” In response we read this: “The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world.”

- Though we have been given the promise of heaven in Jesus Christ, that promise alone is not our hope. According to our faith, life is not some holding period, waiting to get our ticket stamped for the train to heaven. Our hope is not in heaven alone.
- The Christian hope is about life, not just what happens after death. It’s about living with confidence in newness and fullness of life—this life.
- The Christian hope is that the kingdom of heaven that Jesus proclaimed is here and now, in addition to there and then.
- The Christian hope is that heaven is a completion of what is already begun here and now.
- The Christian hope is that this completion will be of God’s purpose for the world.
- Completion implies beginning, what God is doing is beginning that work now—and bringing it to fulfillment at that ultimate day.
- It is the completion of God’s purpose, not our purposes.
- It is the completion of God’s purposes for the world, not just ourselves, not just humanity, but the whole world.
- That is a much bigger hope, a much richer promise, a much fuller reality, than just getting to go someplace nice when we die.
- The kingdom of heaven, for Christians, is not a life or death choice; it is a life-and-death promise—that the presence of God is here and now, made close in the coming of Jesus. We currently see that presence “through a glass darkly,” but the promise of God is that we will, at length, at some unexpected day and hour in unexpected and unimaginable ways, see God face to face.

CLOSING PRAYER

Maker of the universe, Source of all life, give us grace to serve you with our heart, that we may faithfully perform your will and joyfully participate in your creation, to the praise and glory of your name. Amen.
(The Book of Alternative Services, p. 909)

SMALL GROUPS

- What images of heaven and hell did you grow up with? Where did they come from?
- What images of heaven and hell do you now hold? Where did they come from?
- What is difficult for you in thinking about heaven and hell? What is comforting to you?
- How might it change your outlook to focus on the Christian hope, instead of where you will go when you die?

RESOURCES

- *Love Wins* by Rob Bell. HarperOne, 2012.
- *Surprised by Hope* by N.T. Wright. Zondervan, 2010.
- *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis. HarperOne, 2009.
- *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* by Lisa Miller. Harper Perennial, 2011.

Session 9

**What is the
Church for?**





Transforming QUESTIONS

What is the Church for?

Opening Prayer

Most gracious God, we humbly beseech thee for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth; in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where any thing is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen and confirm it; where it is in want, furnish it; where it is divided and rent asunder, make it whole again; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

(Book of Common Prayer (1962), p. 39)

“Spiritual, but not religious”

- It is becoming more and more common for people to say: “I’m spiritual, but not religious.”
- This is unsurprising, given the largest growing religious affiliation in Canada is “none.” (Source: <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape>)
- There are an astounding number of people who say they are Christian but don’t go to church. And they have lots of reasons:
 - I don’t need to go to church; I connect with God on the golf course, in nature, etc.
 - I tried church, but it didn’t work for me. I didn’t like the sermon, the music, or the people.
 - I was hurt by the church. I don’t like the clergy. Christians are hypocrites.
 - I’m just so busy.

And many of those reasons are valid, in some sense. They contain accurate critiques of the church and of “church people.” But all of them reflect misconceptions about what church is and what it is for.

- Some operate out of a belief that church = worship services
 - Then, if the worship service is flawed (or boring), there’s no reason to go to church
- Some operate out of a belief that church = building
 - If that’s true, then the church is just another building that might sometimes contain or point to God. But there are other equally valid places to meet God, like in nature or on golf courses.
- Most operate out of an understanding that church is for me, for us.
 - The purpose of church is to make us feel good (so we stop going if it doesn’t make us feel good or if something else makes us feel better).

But the biblical understanding of the Church bears little resemblance to a building, or a place that is just about worship services, or something that exists primarily for a singular person. The Bible gives us a much richer and more demanding account of what the Church is and should be. The Bible describes for us Church with a big “C,” the universal Church, the body of all the faithful, which is not about a building or worship services or about an individual or even a single congregation. The Church in the Bible is described as:

- **Holy Temple**
 - Biblical examples

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10)

- We think we know this—that the Church is a building. But the only church building the New Testament talks about is one made, not of stones, but of people.
- Christians are “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (Ephesians 2:22)
- We are, each of us “living stones.” And that is a corporate, rather than an individual identity. This means that it is in the gathering together of people that the Church is built—it is through our presence together, rather than through the construction of a particular place.
- And it means that, in the absence of individual people, the structure becomes unstable—there are “holes” in the wall when one living stone decides to stay home.
- The church building is just a building were we gather to be Church. We, not the structure, build the Church.

- **Body of Christ**
 - Biblical examples

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to



the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4-8)

- In both of these passages, we see the importance of unity (we are all one) yet at the same time there is an emphasis on diversity.
- We are all different members with different parts to play.
- This is variety; not superiority. There is no “better” part or function; we are in it together. There is no competition, only collaboration.
- There’s also dependence; we can’t say, “I have no need of you.”
- We are literally hurt when we don’t have one another, and our senses and actions are impoverished by the absence of a “member.”
- There is a story about the golfer Jose Maria Olazabel. He hurt his foot, so he began to walk awkwardly. His walk began to affect his back. His back pain affected his golf swing...and his career never was quite the same again. In the beginning, he sustained a relatively minor injury, but since it was not properly handled and allowed to spread, it almost ruined his entire golfing career.
- Similarly, our parts are connected. We are the Body of Christ, with many members. We must recognize that one member that is not necessarily healthy or functioning properly can impact lots of others in ways that are not obvious. We care for each other because we love each other. But we must also realize that caring for each other is what keeps the whole body healthy.

- **Family or Household**
 - Biblical examples:

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:25-29)

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

- This is the most pervasive metaphor for the Church in the New Testament, usually implicitly, by reference to God as a parent (Father or Mother) and us as God’s children.
- But we are also clearly called to be related to one another. We aren’t family only by virtue of our relationship to God but by virtue of the way we relate to one another. “Brother” or “brethren” (this includes sisters or females) is the most common word for Christians in the New Testament.
- This is often the most misunderstood and abused understanding of what the Church is called to be. Typically, when people say that their church is like a family, what they mean is that their church is a group of nice, like-minded people who always get along. But think about your family...do any of these characteristics accurately describe your experience of family?



- Is your family full of people whom are always nice, who always accede to your every desire? Or does your family have people who challenge and stretch you and tell you the truth even when it's hard to hear?
- Is your family full of people with whom you agree with all the time, and do you always get along with them? Or is your family a group of people with a vast variety of viewpoints (so varied that you wonder how you could possibly be related to them) but with whom you are inextricably bound?
- Is your family full of people who you always, every day, like and are glad to see? Or is your family a group of people that you are bound and covenanted to in love, even if you don't like them at all in that moment?
- A church is like a family when it has wildly different people who don't always like each other, who have bad days and bad ways, and yet somehow belong to one another anyway. A church is like a family when it has a crazy Uncle Joe that everyone's a little embarrassed about but they keep inviting him to family dinners anyway.
- A church is like a family because we don't choose the members; and some days the only thing that we share in common is that we are all chosen by God.

- **Light**

- Biblical examples

As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (Revelation 1:20)

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16)

- In Revelation 1:10-12, the image of a lampstand is used as a metaphor for churches. The seven lampstands correspond directly to seven specific churches.
- The idea is that the churches are called to stand as God's light amidst the world. The churches carry the torch of the light of Christ. (John 1:1-9)
- This is an image that Jesus himself uses too. In Matthew 5:14-16, we hear the familiar, "You are the light of the world." The Greek "you" here is plural. It really says "y'all are the light of the world." This is not an individual identification akin to "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." It is the community, the gathering together, the Church, which is the light. The people (plural) together are the light (singular).
- We are called and commanded to be a light that is not hidden, but that is on a lampstand, to "give light to all in the house."

If we listen to the images present in the Bible, then we begin to understand that the Church is far more than just worship services, or a building, or something that exists for us at all. In fact, the Church described in the Bible has little to do with any of those things. And in fact, when we listen to the words of scripture, we stop asking "Why do I need church?" and instead begin asking "What is my role in the Church?"

- Rather than being about worship services, the Church is about:
 - A Holy Temple of God. A place where God is recognized, a place in the heart of God.
 - The Church is far more than a building, a place or the place where God is contained.
 - It's like this cartoon of Church/God: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2012/11/god-and-church-two-views.html>
 - The Church does not contain God—but the Church is not outside of or separate from God either; the Church stands in the center of God—the heart of God.
 - Not as a building, but as God's presence in our midst- where two or three are gathered together in my name; that is "the Church." (Matthew 18:20)
- The Body of Christ: Being the presence and action of God in the world
 - Quote attributed to Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body but yours: no hands, no feet on earth but yours; yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world."
- The Family of God
 - Related both to God and one another.
 - As the refrain of a song goes, "They will know we are Christians by our love." We are the family of God when we love one another the way that Christ loved us.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not

know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:12-17)

- A Light in the World
 - Our light (not merely as individuals but as a community) stands as a testament to the light of the world, which illuminates the darkness of this present time.
- And church is not for me, for us, at all.
 - Worship is for God
 - Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard posits the theory of theater of worship, with God as the audience.
 - "Church exists primarily not to provide entertainment or to encourage vulnerability or to build self-esteem or to facilitate friendships but to worship God; if it fails in that, it fails. I have learned that the ministers, the music, the sacraments, and the other 'trappings' of worship are mere promptings to support the ultimate goal of getting worshippers in touch with God. If ever I doubt this fact, I go back and read the Old Testament, which devotes nearly as much space to specifications for worship in the tabernacle and temple as the New Testament devotes to the life of Christ. Taken as a whole, the Bible clearly puts the emphasis on what pleases God- the point of worship, after all. To worship, says Walter Wink, is to remember Who owns the house." (Source: Phillip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* (Zondervan, 2001) pp. 23-24.)
 - In the words of writer Annie Dillard: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day an take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."(Source: Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (Harper & Row, 1982) p. 52.)
- The Church is for others
 - Archbishop William Temple said that the Church is "the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members."
 - Martin Luther called Christians "God's masks." Because the world cannot withstand the direct force of God's glory, God uses human beings to express himself.
 - For the watching world, we ourselves offer up proof that God is alive. We form the visible shape of what God is like.
- Although the Church does not exist for us, that does not mean that we don't need the Church.
 - "The virtuous soul that is alone...is like the burning coal that is alone. It will grow colder rather than hotter." (Saint John of the Cross)
 - The Church offers the opportunity for us to gather together to fan our flame, to make the world brighter by combining our lights rather than dividing them. The Church challenges us to live the way that we are called to live, not because it feels good but because it is what God is calling us to do.
- Church often misses the mark
 - Many of the critiques offered against the Church are valid, and that is true. The Church often misses the mark. As individuals and as a community, we fail to do the things that we are called to do and be the people we are called to be. But that doesn't mean that we should give up.
 - Phillip Yancey writes: "Marriage is the beginning, not the end, of the struggle to make love work; every Christian must learn that church is also only a beginning." (Source: Phillip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* (Zondervan, 2001) pp..68-69)
 - Have you ever seen the bumper sticker that reads: "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven"? The same could be said of the Church. The Church isn't perfect, just a community of people working out their salvation, relying on the forgiveness and grace of God.
 - A wise seminary professor told the story of a confirmation class he once taught.

The students were required to learn to recite the Apostles' Creed by heart. One of the boys, with a shaky voice, stood up at his turn. He got all the way through flawlessly. Then, at the end, as if in one breath, he said, "I believe in the holy spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of sins, the forgiveness of saints, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." The communion of sins, the forgiveness of saints. The priest sat for a moment in silence, as the boy stood awaiting judgment on whether or not he'd completed the assigned task. After a moment's thought, the priest said, "That's right. That's just right." The holy catholic Church, the communion of sins, the forgiveness of saints.



If we understand the role of the Church as a Holy Temple, the Body of Christ, the Family of God, a Light to the World...if we see the Church, not as perfect, but as the communion of sins and the forgiveness of saints...if we see the Church not as for or about us, but for and about God and others, then we might begin to move from the question, "Why do I need Church?" to "What is my role in the Church?"

- Which stone am I of God's Holy Temple?
- What part am I called to be in the Body? What indispensable function do I offer to the whole?
- Who are the members of my family, related whether I like it or not?
- How can I join my light to the lights of others, so that we might testify to the Light of the World?

CLOSING PRAYER

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light, look favourably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery. By the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation. Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(The Book of Alternative Services, p. 313)

SMALL GROUPS

- How does it change your understanding of Church to see it as for God or others, rather than for yourself?
- Which biblical understanding of the Church is most helpful for you, and why? Which is most difficult, and why?
- In what ways does our church fulfill the vision for church that you heard tonight?
- In what ways does our church need to change in order to become the church that God wants us to be?
- How would you answer the question, "What is my role in the Church?"

RESOURCES

- *Church: Why Bother?* by Philip Yancey. Zondervan, 2001.
- *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. HarperOne, Reprint 2009.

Session 10

What does it mean
to be Anglican?





Transforming QUESTIONS

What does it mean to be Anglican?

Opening Prayer

O God, who wonderfully created and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. **Amen.**

(Book of Alternative Services, p.275)

What does it mean to be Anglican?

What are some of the first things people associate with when thinking about being an Anglican?

- The story of Henry VIII. He needed to get a divorce a number of times, and therefore we have The Church of England.
- Other people think of it as 'Catholic lite.'
- Some, particularly who are in relationships, in which maybe one person was a Methodist and the other person was a Catholic think Anglicanism is the compromise Christian tradition.
- And then for some people in Canada who are kind of outside Anglican circles, they associate it with tea cups, strawberry teas, scones and squares. And there's nothing wrong with those things, by the way.

But these associations are not full enough and not fully appreciative of what Anglicanism is. Anglicanism is broader than the Anglican Church of Canada. It's a broader sort of worldview and approach to the Christian faith that is a special calling, and perhaps it is your special calling. For some people it's their vocation for forever. For others it is maybe for a shorter time as they are on a broader journey that takes them to other places.

We have people who come into our tradition because they're disappointed and angry about the ecclesial tradition they're in for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes they come and feel quite at home and stay a long time, and for others it's a brief time.

Because the character of an ecclesial tradition matters. It feels like it's home or not. According to Paul Avis, there is something right at the heart of what it means to be Anglican. Anglicanism, he says attempts to hold together aspects of the church that in some traditions are allowed to drift apart or become polarized or remain seriously imbalanced.

Anglicanism seeks to hold these truths together in theology and practice, in order that it may hold people together. And this creates a kind of tension that doesn't get easily resolved; it's not just one or the other. Some people say Anglicanism has a sensibility of both/and at its heart and its motivation. And what's so important about this is not just because it's intellectually interesting to hold together what seems to be paradoxical things, its motivation is the love of holding people together. At the heart of that is the belief that in Christ we have been made one, and therefore who are we to split it up?

So Avis goes on to say it's across 5 basic areas that Anglicanism attempts to hold together theology, practice, and people.

Catholic and Reformed

So the first area is Catholic and Reformed. Anglicanism values continuity with the ancient church, the Apostles, the martyrs, the church fathers and mothers. It holds together continuity with scripture, the creeds, the threefold shape of ministry bishops, priests, deacons, and laypeople, and the sacraments. And, at the same time, it recognizes its debt to the Reformation, which is a spirit of reform and questioning.

A theology Professor once said there's a thing called the Protestant Principle, which means we can question anything; that nothing is beyond.



Episcopal and Synodical

Anglicanism holds together Episcopal and Synodical. Episcopal meaning bishops.

It holds together a designated leader or leaders who are not meant to be autocratic, but they are to derive their ability to lead by being in Synod, which means being in community.

So these things go together and we have all these canons that designate the role of what the Bishop does, but the Bishop is supposed to be in dialogue with and in collaboration with the people of God, who are the Synod elected by all of us. So Anglicanism both honors the Episcopal, the role of the Bishop, which is part of that continuity with the Catholic tradition, and the power of the Synod, the power of the community of people who are gathered.

Universal and local

Anglicanism is, of course, a global community, made up of member churches all throughout the world, and it's held together, really, by a series of conversations that bishops and other entities have with each other. It's staying at the table, talking, talking, talking. That's what holds this universal together.

And that's held together right with the local. That is, the specific diocese, the specific congregation, the personality, the flavor of the specific and the zest of that, and the mission of that.

An example of the universal and the local is PWRDF – the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund, that's kind of like a bigger picture of mission and the dinner program in a parish in Burnaby, BC, that's the local expression of mission. Anglican keeps both of those together, universal and local.

Biblical and Reasonable

Biblical: we believe in the holiness and the sanctity of the stories of the people of God as reflected in scripture.

For example, during the practice of lectio divina. Here we take a passage out of the scriptures. We reflect on it. We receive its wisdom in kind of a unfettered way. You know we're open to that. We're open to the big stories of scripture in in an unfettered way, almost like a discovery of the beginner mind. It's like the rediscovery of kind of an enchanted way of receiving the Bible.

Reasonable: This word reasonable can have a lot of connotations, and it has quite a pedigree in our tradition.

We do not hold ourselves back from all the critical and useful hermeneutical tools that help us better understand the extremely complex picture and history that the Bible represents.

So we probe at it. We study it. We take it apart and put it back together and those tools of our reason allow us to do that. And we hold the Bible as being Holy Scripture and therefore to be honored and to be revered.

Faithful to tradition and open to fresh insights.

So we listen to scripture and listening to me is what holds these together. We listen to scripture, we listen to other sources of information as well. We honor tradition. We are rooted in tradition and if you look at the word tradition it means to give across. To take what is the tradition and to help it have an expression in this current day in a fresh way. Tradition isn't just magnificent monuments to dead ideas. The tradition is in an ongoing opening to a fresh way of casting. It grows what has been a seed in the tradition all along. So: faithful to tradition. We don't toss it out. We're very interested in that. We're interested in the insights of the early church and scripture and in the ongoing history of the church, and that God is doing a new thing. And what might it be in dialogue with that tradition?

Qualities of Anglicanism

You'll notice these following qualities are similar to what Avis says, but I'm just going to say a little bit more about these qualities in a different way.

People who are rooted in tradition.

I often heard with people from other ecclesial traditions who then came to my very Anglican parish in Seattle, WA. They said, "Wow, this wasn't invented yesterday." And they meant that was a good thing. We are a people who love having a heritage.

And that that heritage goes way back to the Apostles, to the ancient church as expressed in the book of Acts to Jesus himself and those clueless disciples trying to do the best that they could, and the way then the history of the church as it goes forward.

So we are people absolutely rooted in tradition and you see that reflected in our liturgies, you see that reflected in what we study, you see that reflected in how we think about things. We listen to the tradition.

People who love the questions.

This is from Rilke's letter to a friend and young poet. He said, love the questions...and if you love them long enough, you just might just live your way into something that might be construed as an answer.

And this does come from that Protestant spirit, that Catholic and Protestant, Catholic and Reformed tension. The fact that this course is called Transforming Questions is pretty wonderful, that even the proposing of a question takes us into an openness to the Spirit.

And it's an openness to our own befuddlement or curiosity that is exciting and energizing for us.

And so Anglicans love the questions.

People open to living their life in the light of the stories of the people of God.

So you may not know this, or maybe you've touched on this, but when you look at the BAS or the The Book of Alternative Services, the prayer books that we use for worship. By and large, most of the words in there come right out of scripture. Anglicans are willing to be immersed, you know we are immersed in the words of scripture.

In our liturgy, we are immersed in them through study. We are those who discovered the use of the Psalms in morning and evening prayer. We are immersed in scripture through our worship, through our study of it, and I think out of that, we are open to seeing our lives as written by those stories, seeing our lives as lived in response to those stories, or lived as a re-enactment of those stories.

For example, in the Easter vigil when we read the story of the liberation of the children of Israel, that's our liberation. In the Easter vigil when we hear about the resurrection, that's about us. So we have a real willingness to not just to study scripture as an objective thing, but to open our lives to be informed by those stories and by the God who animates those stories.

People who both savour and protect God's creation.

Do you want to save the world or savor it? Well, Anglicans wanna do both!

The Incarnation is the key Scriptural theological foundation of Anglicanism. It is God became flesh, flesh, and tabernacled among us. What that means is the world for us is joyful. In the world we see the good of the world.



And out of that we are asked in our baptismal promises to protect that world. That's one of our baptismal promises. So we both live in it and drink from it. Savor it. Joy in it. And out of that we want to protect it. We want to enact the kinds of very difficult actions that will contribute to its protection.

People who believe in community.

We believe that community is constituent. It is so counter to a lot of modern culture that wants to see the individual as the constituent.

For Anglicans, it's the community that's primary. We hold fast to community.

And we are people who are held fast by community and discovering the community has been a great insight; we hunger for the physical presence of others because God became flesh after all and dwelt among us.

We believe in community gathering as a communal discernment process. All the facilitations and conversations we do in parishes is to figure out the things that we actually believe in the wisdom of the community.

Anglicans understand their lives as a journey.

So, there's some ecclesial traditions that are more focused on making a confession of faith or coming to our Lord, and you give your life to God and you're kind of converted right then and there. For Anglicans, it's a slow burn.

We believe that God works over time through our interactions with others, through the prayers that we offer, through moments we are touched in all kinds of ways, to shape us to become more Christ-like.

There's a quite a lot about this in the writings of Saint Benedict that it is a process, it's not instantaneous, it's a process. And so we believe that it's a gradual, a gradual internal turning to Christ.

It's like when you put something in a marinade over time. Things come into it. The spiritual journey is not instantaneous and God is generous in the working with us over time.

People who enact God's compassion and justice.

In our baptismal covenant we make promises. We make some pretty strong promises about respecting the dignity of every human being, about working for justice and peace, and doing that out of a heart of compassion.

And so you see little bitty Anglican churches doing their best with their minimal resources to do some kind of justice work, to do something that helps with compassion. Do something to meet the needs of up the least in our communities, and this is so universal among Anglicans.

If God's heart is a compassion heart, God is the one thirsting for justice, and so we are the hands and the feet and the heart of that locally and globally, and so Anglicans are committed to that. And do what they can do to actually enact that.

Anglicans live creatively in the tension between apparent opposites

On our best day we live into the tension between apparent opposites; we are both/and people. We are shades of gray.

We try to do that not because it's a pain in the neck and we just have to get through it; or it's our duty to do it and in some kind of grit your teeth way we do it. Really we live it in the apparent opposites of the people in our parishes, whether it's personality, inclination, gifts, or theology.

We actually believe it's important to hold what seem to be opposites: theological, in terms of practice, in terms of tolerance of one another, to hold those together. It is part again of our vocation to live creatively in the tension rather than quickly coming down and planting our feet in just one place or another. It's about holding together; and we feel called to do that.

So, the question becomes not so much what does it mean to be an Anglican, but what is the vocation of Anglicanism? What is the calling of this specific branch of the church? And this calling is something that's not finished once for all, but is the calling of God to a specific people to keep stepping into God's future, with all our particular gifts and characteristics and to grow into them and give them for the sake of a world which God fully loves.

CLOSING PRAYER

O God of delight, your Wisdom sings your Word at the crossroads where humanity and divinity meet. Invite us into your joyful being where you know and are known in each beginning, in all sustenance, in every redemption, so that we may manifest your unity in the diverse ministries you entrust to us, truly reflecting your triune majesty in the faith that acts, in the hope that does not disappoint, and in the love that endures. Amen.

(PRAY WITHOUT CEASING Morning and Evening Prayer for the Seasons of the Church Year, p.317. Authorized by the Anglican Church of Canada, 2019. Available: <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/Seasonal-Daily-Prayer.pdf>)

SMALL GROUPS

- What was it that first attracted you to the Anglican Church of Canada?
- Which of the dimensions of the personality/character of Anglicanism do you most resonate with?
- Which of the dimensions of the personality/character of Anglicanism is still a "stretch" for you?

RESOURCES

- *The Vocation of Anglicanism* by Paul Avis. T&T Clark, 2016.
- *To Love and Serve* by Scott Gunn and Melody Shobe. Adapted for the Anglican Church of Canada. Forward Movement, 2022.
- *A People Called Episcopalian* by John Westerhoff. Morehouse, 2002.
- *Backpacking through the Anglican Communion* by Jesse Zink. Church Publishing, 2014.

Session 11

**Where do we go
from here?**





Transforming QUESTIONS

Where do we go from here?

Opening Prayer

Draw your Church together, O Lord, into one great company of disciples, together following our Lord Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving him in his mission to the world, and witnessing to his love on every continent and island. We ask this in his name and for his sake. **Amen.**

(Book of Alternative Services, p.676)



Hanging in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston is Paul Gauguin's famous triptych. It's a painting full of color and movement, large and imposing. Widely acknowledged as his masterpiece, the painting's title is inscribed in the upper left corner: D'où Venons Nous/Que Sommes Nous/Où Allons Nous- Where have we come from/ What are we/Where are we going. These are among the fundamental questions of human existence, and they are the questions that frame our reflection in this final class.

Where have we come from?

- We came from many different places to gather here for eleven sessions. Some of us came flush with faith; some full of doubt. Some of us have been church members for a long time; some are seekers brand new to this community. Some were looking for refresher course; some were coming to hear these things for the first time.
- And then, over the past ten weeks, we have traveled together, asking questions of ourselves and our God, and seeing those questions transform, even as the act of questioning transformed us.
 - We asked whether it is possible to question our faith, and found that questioning is an essential part of faith, and as God-wrestlers like Jacob we must learn how to question faithfully, holding on to God even as we struggle.
 - We wondered who Jesus is, listening to the testimony of history, of faithful people through the ages, and of Jesus himself, and found ourselves ultimately confronted by the question: "Who do you say that I am?"
 - We asked why Jesus had to die and encountered a variety of metaphors for how Jesus has brought us back into relationship with God through atonement, choosing to die on the cross as a testimony to his great love for us.
 - We wrestled with how we are called to live in light of Christ's love, exploring the laws of the Ten Commandments, the promises of our Baptismal Covenant, and the way that the Holy Spirit empowers us to do things beyond our own capabilities.
 - We learned how to read the Bible as God's Word, even when we aren't sure exactly what that means.
 - We wondered whether God answers prayer and acknowledged the ways that we are called to engage in prayer, not merely to change God or the world but also to be changed ourselves.
 - We wrestled with why bad things happen in this world and why evil exists and were reminded of Christ's presence with us always, even in the darkest of times and places.
 - We explored the Christian understanding of afterlife: the reality of heaven and hell, the limits of our knowledge about either, and the call to live transformed lives here and now, even as we await the life that is to come.
 - We questioned why we need to go to church and found ourselves faced with the reality that Church is far more than a building and that we are called to take our place in the imperfect community of saints.
 - We discovered the unique vocation of being Anglican: holding together apparent opposites and sharing in some distinct qualities.
 - Over the past eleven sessions we have come through those questions, wrestling with them, even if some remain unanswered.

What are we?

- And with each class, we have learned something about what (and who) we are.
 - We are questioners, God-wrestlers, an identity not mutually exclusive with faithfulness.
 - We are Christians, those who bear the name of Jesus Christ, believing him to be who he says he is—both human and God.
 - We are saved, whatever metaphor we use to understand that salvation, by Jesus Christ who chose to die, for love of us.
 - We are people called to live in light of Christ's self-sacrificial love, empowered by the Holy Spirit to embody the reality of our baptismal promises in this world.
 - We are people of the Book, the Bible, understanding that the messy and difficult stories included in its pages are also the Word of God.
 - We are people of prayer, bringing all of our lives, all of our hopes, hurts, love, and anger to God in holy conversation.
 - We are a light in the darkness, a living proclamation of God's love in the midst of the sin and brokenness of the world.
 - We are people of eternity, who live not in fear of hell but in the grip of a Christian hope, which proclaims that we will all be judged by the God of mercy.
 - We are the Church, the Holy Temple, the Body of Christ, the Family of God, the Light of the World, flawed and broken but forgiven and holy, God's people just the same.

That's where we've come from. That is what and who we are. So now we must ask: Where are we going?

Where do we go from here?

- We go forward, building on where we've come from, remembering what we are, as we move forward into where we are called to go and who we are called to become.



- We must resist the temptation to say “whew, that’s over with, I’ve finished that class” and move forward unchanged. We must resist the idea that we have “answered” the questions of faith or even asked all the questions of faith (we could have made this course twelve sessions, or twenty-four, or 112—there are plenty more questions to ask!)
- The reality is that one of the most powerful images for the life of faith is that of a pilgrimage or journey
 - Abraham’s act of faith was to get up and go, beginning a lifelong journey with God.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb. (Genesis 12:1-9)

- The call that Jesus issued to the disciples is the same call that he issues to all of us who believe in him: “Follow me.” (Matthew 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21, etc.)
- Part of our job as Christians is to continue on a lifelong journey of asking questions, reflecting on where we are and where we are going, wrestling with God and our faith.
- This journey is not always straightforward—Abraham was not told his final destination, but he stepped forward in faith. The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, a circuitous journey of faith indeed. The disciples and the apostles found their journey taking them places they never imagined going, and they strayed from time to time.
- So where do we go from here? We go on pilgrimage. We continue on our journey, not always sure of where we are going, sometimes wandering, but pilgrims on the way, just the same.
- We don’t travel the road of the journey of faith ill-equipped. When we gather for classes like this, when we come and worship together, we receive tools for the journey. We pack our bags, if you will, with the things that we will need on our pilgrimage.
 - We have, of course, the Bible, the beautiful, powerful book that tells the story of God’s great love for us from before creation up to this very moment. The Bible, on its own, is an important tool in our backpacks. But sometimes (many times!) we might need some help reading and understanding the Bible.
 - A good study Bible with notes is a great place to start. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, *HarperCollins Study Bible* and *New Interpreter’s Study Bible* are all great options. Some people prefer a more contemporary rendering like *The Message*.
 - *Introducing the New Testament* by Mark Powell. Baker Academic, 2009.
 - *An Introduction to the Old Testament* by Walter Brueggemann. Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.
 - *The Good Book* by Peter Gomes. HarperOne, 2002.
 - *Bible Babel* by Kristin Swenson. HarperCollins, 2010
 - We have *The Book of Alternative Services* and *The Book of Common Prayer* (1962), another resource in our library. The pages of both are full of opportunities for prayer: The Daily Office (starting on p. 35, pg. 1 in BCP) Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families (starting on p. 687, pg. 728 in BCP) Prayers and Thanksgivings (starting on p. 675, pg. 37 in BCP). New morning and evening prayers can be found on the national church website: www.anglican.ca/about/liturgicaltexts
 - *A Disciple’s Prayer Book* (Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples, 2018) offers a daily pattern of prayer and meditation on the scriptures for the day. <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/A-Disciples-Prayer-Book.pdf>
 - Forward Movement publishes *Forward Day by Day*, a daily prayer resource that can be ordered in print form or that can be accessed by app or online. The website www.prayer.forwardmovement.org also includes the Daily Office—a great way to follow the ancient tradition of saying the Daily Office in modern form.
 - *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* by Richard Foster (HarperOne, 2002) offers some other ways to pray.



- We have as a tool the history of our faith, the tradition of what the Church has chosen to do through the ages, and the way that tradition can strengthen and nourish us in our day.
- *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* is an expansive dictionary of many of the terms of the church with references.
- *The Story of Christianity* (Volumes 1 and 2) by Justo Gonzalez (HarperOne, 2010) is a great, readable overview of Christian history.
- For something even more in-depth, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* by Diarmaid MacCulloch (Viking Adult, 2010) is a long but excellent read.
- The stories of the saints are a great place to learn and be strengthened in the faith; they are a witness to the work of God in Christ.
 - *Lent Madness* (www.lentmadness.org) includes biographies, quotes, and kitsch from past saints. If it happens to be Lent, you can join in the madness, voting for your favorite saint in each match-up until someone is granted the golden halo.
 - *For All the Saints*: the calendar of Saint's days with prayers, biographical information, and primary source material. Available online: www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/ForAlltheSaints.pdf
- We also have as a tool the practices of our faith—things like daily prayer and reading the Bible, sabbath time, and tithing. Those practices are like an exercise regime: the stretching and weight lifting we need to be able to walk this path every day. If you are looking for ways to integrate spiritual practices into your life, try:
 - *Practicing our Faith* by Dorothy Bass. Jossey-Bass, 2010.
 - *The Heart of Christianity* by Marcus Borg. HarperOne, 2001.
 - *Being Disciples* by Rowan Williams. Eerdmans, 2016.
- And we don't go on this pilgrimage alone. We have companions on the journey.
- The community of faith—the disciples—were gathered as a group of twelve and traveled two by two. We, as Christians, are called to be companions to one another on the journey of life and the pilgrimage of faith.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

- That's why it's so important for every Christian to have a faith community.
 - Not a perfect one (there is no such thing!)
 - Not one where you agree with everyone all the time (again, no such thing—and what fun would that be?)
 - But an imperfect place where other imperfect people gather to be nourished and challenged and grow.
- And for that to happen and work, every Christian must not only have a faith community but also be faithful to his/her community.
 - Make the commitment to regular attendance and participation. Even when it's hard or you don't feel like it.
 - That's what it means to be a companion to others on this journey, and that's where you will find companionship on your own journey.
- In addition to the members of your congregation, your priest should be glad to talk to you about any questions that you have about your faith.
- But above all, even when we feel most alone and far from our community of faith, we have another companion. We travel always with God in Christ, the one whom we follow.
 - Jesus, the one who loved us so much he was willing to come among us, to be incarnate, to be Emmanuel.
 - Jesus, the one who promised to be with us always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)
 - Jesus who stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross for love of you, for love of me.
 - That Jesus is also the one who walks with us along the way (Luke 24:13-35)



- So we travel onward in the pilgrimage of faith, a journey of questioning and questing and doubt. We travel, not always knowing where we are going, but well equipped, with packs full of the tools we need for the journey. We travel with companions, with the community of faith which surrounds and upholds us, the great cloud of witnesses, too many to number. And we travel always with Jesus, the Christ whose name we bear. So come on, let's go. The journey has just begun.

CLOSING PRAYER

Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God, from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.

(The Book of Alternative Services, pp. 214)

SMALL GROUPS

- What has been the most significant learning for you from our time together?
- What questions are you still wrestling with as you continue on your journey?
- Which of the "tools" for the journey are you most excited about using, going forward? Which tools seem most intimidating?
- What help do you need from your companions as you continue on this journey?

About the Authors

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About Forward Movement

Forward Movement is committed to inspiring disciples and empowering evangelists. While we produce great resources like this book and the Transforming Questions course, Forward Movement is not a publishing company. We are a ministry.

Our mission is to support you in your spiritual journey, to make stronger disciples and followers of Jesus Christ. Publishing books, daily reflections, studies for small groups, and online resources is an important way that we live out this ministry. More than a half million people read our daily devotions through Forward Day by Day,

which is also available in Spanish (Adelante Día a Día) and Braille, online, as a podcast, and as an app for your smartphones or tablets. It is mailed to more than fifty countries, and we donate nearly 30,000 copies each quarter to prisons, hospitals, and nursing homes. We actively seek partners across the Church and look for ways to provide resources that inspire and challenge.

A ministry of The Episcopal Church for more than seventy-five years, Forward Movement is a nonprofit organization funded by sales of resources and gifts from generous donors. To learn more about Forward Movement and our resources, please visit us at

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We are delighted to be doing this work and invite your prayers and support.