

January 6, 2012 The Epiphany

Happy New Year, everybody! If you were here the past few weeks, you probably know that today we begin a sermon series called Questioning Faith: Addressing the Tough Questions. I rather wish I'd called it "Addressing Some Tough Questions," because like other religions, our faith has too many tough questions to address them all in six weeks.

Sometimes the very idea of "questioning faith" seems a little scary. We might refer to a young college student and say, "Oh, she's really questioning her faith these days," with a sad shake of our heads, but think about it. Do you want to be afraid to ask questions of your faith? Do we believe that God can't handle questions or doubts or even disagreement? I'm glad that our student is questioning. And I don't believe that our scriptures are so sacred that we can't question them, either. I worship God, not the Bible; Bibliolaters are those who worship a book written by human hands rather than worshiping the God who inspired it.

My sister Ellen has been Unitarian since she was 18 and has been very active ever since. She doesn't wear a cross around her

neck since she's not a Christian; what she wears instead is a question mark on a chain, and on her Facebook page she says in the information about her, "I like questions."

Well, so do I. Here's one thing I believe with all my heart: God can handle our questions and our doubts. Do you hear that? If you think that God is going to smite you for having questions or doubts, you are really putting yourself above God. That might sound extreme, but I don't think it is. If I think my questions are too much for God, that's a lot of pride – wow! I've got the questions that will really stump God, and so God will be mad at me. I may as well worship myself if that's the case!

Second, I can't give you The Answers. I really do believe in Ultimate Truth, but I also believe it's something we can probably only apprehend in tiny bits and pieces during our lives. Liberals get accused of saying "everything is relative" a lot, but I'm uncomfortable with people who not only thing there is ultimate truth out there, but that they know what it is 99% of the time. Those are the people on Capitol Hill and I'm tired of them! My main point here, though, is that I this sermon series isn't called

Answering the Questions for a reason. The Episcopal Church is not a “my way or the highway” denomination, fearful that if we look too closely our religion might disintegrate. Heck, if you come every Sunday and don’t think you believe any of it, we won’t kick you out, we won’t deny you communion, we won’t berate you. We **will**, however, welcome your questions and your doubts and we will pray with you today and every Sunday in the hopes that you find here a spiritual home where you can safely approach God and say, “Hey, is that you?”

So today, the question is: “Is Christianity the only true religion?” or to put it another way “Are all the other religions wrong?”

We start off with our Gospel, a very good place to be, as Maria Von Trappe would have said. The cast of characters is colorful and diverse: we have Herod, the pathologically insecure king allowed by Rome to lead Israel as long as his primary allegiance and obedience was to Rome and Caesar. Herod, we soon learn, is capable of great evil. Then we have wise men from the East, looking for “the child born king of the Jews,” for they had observed his star at its rising and wanted to come and pay him homage. There are the chief

priests and scribes, who Herod gathers so he can find out more about the prophecies, and finally there is mention of the child with Mary his mother.

Who were these wise men? The text simply calls them wise men from the East. We don’t know how many men there were, but there were three gifts: gold, a gift for a king; frankincense, a type of incense burned as an offering to God; and myrrh, used to anoint the dead. Now, the traditional term “Magi” refers to a religious caste in Persia at that time – which is modern-day Iran – but we don’t even know for sure that they were from Persia. We do know that they were probably astrologers, seers and fortunetellers, possibly royal astronomers, advisers to kings.

So let’s get back to the question: Are all the other religions wrong?

When I was a child, I knew without a doubt that the only way to get to heaven was to be a Christian: everybody else was consigned to hell. Bummer, right? But that’s just how things are.

But now I’m an adult, and I know that if we had 1,000 people here, representing proportionally members of every religion in the

world, 300 of us would be Christians. Two hundred wouldn't have any religion at all. And the other 500 would be people of all the other religions combined.

Things are changing in our own country. How many of you remember that when you were young “religious pluralism” would have meant Protestant, Catholic and maybe, just maybe, Jewish? If you're anywhere near my age, that's how it was. But in the last 35 or 40 years “we have become the most religiously diverse nation in the world” [Borg, 208]. So it behooves us to get to know our brothers and sisters of other faiths, because we see them every day, we encounter them, we work with them, buy our groceries from them . . . you get the picture. In the old days, we proudly taught our children that the United States was founded on the freedom to worship God however you wanted to, but I think we really meant you could be whatever kind of Christian you wanted to. They weren't thinking of other religions. And when we said, “One nation under God,” we meant the Christian God revealed to us through scripture and tradition and experience.

But here's a question for you, and it comes from Marcus Borg, in his book The Heart of Christianity: he says, “When we think about the claim that Christianity is the only way of salvation, it's a pretty strange notion. Does it make sense that [God], creator of the whole universe, has chosen to be known only in one tradition, which just fortunately happens to be our own?” (Borg, 220)

Remember those 1,000 people I referred to? Are we really willing to say that God created a world in which 700 out of 1,000 people would be born in areas where worship and religion look different than ours and all those people are going to hell? I can't tell you what to believe, but that doesn't sound like the God that has been revealed to me through Jesus Christ. And it's good to remember that if I was born in Saudi Arabia, there's a 99% chance I'd be Muslim, so a lot of it has to do with our cultural roots.

Now, what does scripture have to say about all this? Well, there's John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to God except through me.” Then there's Acts 4:12, which says, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

Marcus Borg has an interesting take on this, one that I've heard before. These scriptures, he says, are both true and devotional. By true, he means that Jesus has shown us the way, "the path of death and resurrection, that path of dying to an old identity and way of being and being born into a new identity and way of being that lies at the heart of Christianity *and* other religions. . . . For us as Christians, Jesus is *the way* . . ." So that's one point: Jesus speaks to us, his followers.

Then it gets very interesting. He talks about the language of love; think of a man who has fallen in love and says to you, "She is the most wonderful woman in the world!" or she says, "He's the most handsome man I've ever met." Is she the **most** wonderful? Is he the **most** handsome? Perhaps not, but when we deeply love someone we speak in the language of love. Such language is "the poetry of devotion and the hyperbole of the heart," language that expresses the truth of the heart, but not doctrine. (Borg 221-222). And, I would add, if you believe that God has a method and purpose in our world, that God is active and personal, then there's probably a very good reason you have been given the revelation of Jesus

Christ. It is God's gift for us, and we really ought to listen. There is no other name under heaven that **we** have been given by which we must be saved. We don't come to God except through Jesus Christ. That is our path, that is our way, that is our destiny.

Now, let's get back to scripture, because there are lots of other verses than the two I just quoted. First of all, the wise men. These guys aren't Jewish; there aren't any Christians yet, except maybe Mary and possibly Joseph; the wise guys are probably Zoroastrians. AND they are astrologers! Now if I walked into a strictly fundamental church today and said, "Hey, I've got a couple of Zoroastrian astrologers out here who would like to come in and spread the good news," people would run screaming! I was taught that any kind of divination, astrology, looking at stars to figure things out, is pretty much demonic. So why are the wise men in the picture? Why are they aware of the significance of Jesus' birth when Jewish King Herod, one of God's chosen people, can't see it?

And there's one last little story I'd like to remind you of.

The story of Cornelius in Acts 10 tells of a Roman centurion. Cornelius is "a devout man who fear[s] God with all his household;

he [gives] alms generously to the people and [prays] constantly to God,” and he is “well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation.” This man pleases God, and so God sends an angel, who tells Cornelius to go find Peter. Meanwhile, Peter has had a vision, and listen to what he says: “ You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” **I should not call anyone profane or unclean!** And then listen to this! Peter wraps things up by saying, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” **In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him!!!**

In many ways Cornelius’s religion was similar to today’s Islam. He believed in one God, worshiped God, gave alms to the poor, prayed daily, and lived an ethical life. Although “Cornelius was not a Christian or a Jew, the Bible says that his prayers and alms were pleasing to God. This is extremely important. Even though Cornelius was neither Christian nor Jew, his religious practices pleased God. In this story the apostle Peter—who believed all Gentiles were

pagans, cut off from God, with no hope of salvation—learned otherwise.” [Thielen 41]

Ah, there’s so much more we could talk about here! I’m hoping to put a lot more in a “blog” on the All Saints’ website, and maybe we can even figure out a way to have comments so that it can be a conversation, but I’ll finish up by saying what I think might be the most important point of all.

Marcus Borg says it better than I can: “. . . there is a specifically Christian reason for rejecting Christian exclusivism: the . . . Christian emphasis on grace. If one *must* be a Christian in order to be in right relationship with God, then there is a requirement, and we are no longer talking about grace, even though we might use the language of grace. If our relationship with God is based on grace, then it is not based on requirements, not even the requirement of being Christian. Of course, deepening the relationship depends upon paying attention to it, but the relationship is not about requirements.” [Borg 220]

Ultimately, we trust that God is good, and that God’s purposes are higher than our own. We are all in God’s hands, every one of us,

Christian and non-Christian alike. . There's so much we don't know,
but I believe that God's ways are higher than my ways, and that
God can always be trusted to do what's right according to God's
ultimate law, the law of love.