
Who is This?

Matthew 21:1-11

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 9, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

There are some questions in life that one never dares to ask and there is one that is hard for me to articulate this morning. “If God is not a Tar Heel, then why is the sky Carolina Blue?” Congratulations to the Tar Heels on winning the NCAA National Championship, but there are some questions that can’t be answered about the sky or anything else and some questions, perhaps, that no one wants to really answer. But questions are a part of the life of faith. The first question in the Bible from the book of Genesis comes from the Garden of Eden, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Gen 3). The last question in the Bible is from the book of Revelation in light of the fall of the city of Babylon, “What city was like the great city?” (Rev 18). From the beginning to the ending of scripture, questions are raised demonstrating that inquiries are not antithetical to the life of faith but are critical to a genuine expression of faith. If no questions are asked, maybe we should question the strength and maturity of our faith. Some scholars estimate that there are approximately 3,300 questions in the Bible. And Jesus is included in this. A couple of years ago, TIME magazine produced a book titled, *What Did Jesus Ask?*, which are reflections by Christian leaders on the questions of Jesus, such as, “Do you want to be healed?” “Why are you bothering this woman?” “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” “Why do you call me good?” and of course, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus Christ asks questions! And when the whole city of Jerusalem encounters the presence of Jesus, they ask their own question, “Who is this?”

Posing questions is a vital spiritual practice of faithfulness. I’m not speaking of simple questions with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers like, “Are we there yet?” or “Is dinner ready?” I’m talking about questions like “Who am I?” or “Who is this?” Questions that lead someone to dig deeper and don’t have straightforward answers. “Who is this?” is a question that shows that people are trying to figure out what’s going on because they can’t make sense of life.

It’s a concern when someone stops asking questions because it could be a sign that they don’t care anymore or are no longer curious. A lack of questions may signify that one thinks that he or she has all the answers or at least has received all the answers that one can handle. Some may view faith as all about getting the right answers, but maybe faith is about asking really good questions. Interrogation of faith, even of Jesus, is an act of faithfulness and reveals that one is willing to learn and grow, showing that one does not know it all. If you think you know, perhaps it demonstrates that you really don’t. Questions are a path to understanding, a means of engagement with God, and critical to belief. You ask because you believe, not because of unbelief. And questioning, not answering, shows that you understand. You understand that you don’t understand everything about God or faith in its totality. Christianity, and more, following Jesus, is, to borrow the work of Rudolf Otto, a *mysterium tremendum*, which is why questions are key. It’s an awe-filled mystery. If we don’t raise questions, then perhaps we aren’t as faithful to God as we think.

Asking the right question at the right time may be the “aha” moment everyone needs. Mark Twain tells a story of “A hypocritical businessman, whose fortune had been the misfortune of many others... [The businessman said] ‘Before I die I intend to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I

want to climb to the top of Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud.’ “I have a better idea,” suggested Twain. “Why don’t you stay right at home in Boston and keep them?” Asking questions may not only help your understanding but may lead others to the threshold of their own knowledge.

“Who is this?” is not the only question in the Gospel of Matthew. We hear others ringing in our exegetical ears. “Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” “How did the fig tree wither at once?” “By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?” “Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?” “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing and it is amazing in our eyes?’” “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he? “For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred?” “When will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” “What will you give me if I betray him to you? “So could you not stay awake with me one hour?” “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?”

Scholars know how important a research question is in doing research. When you research, there’s usually a problem that you are investigating based on the orienting research question. If one doesn’t pose a research question, then there is no navigational direction to our study, no intrigue, no curiosity, and ultimately, no answers. How do you find answers if you never ask questions? There’s no potential for answers because we haven’t asked any questions. Research is rooted in questions. Dare I say, following Jesus, relating to God, is rooted in questions. Faith seeks understanding and how will you come to understand if you never ask seeking questions? How else will we come to know God better if we never ask, “Who is this?”

The city of Jerusalem was in turmoil so it shouldn’t surprise us that who Jesus is, is questioned in this setting. His very presence sparks questions, disturbs the status quo, provokes, even rocks the world. The last time Jerusalem was in turmoil was at the birth of Jesus, so whenever Jesus shows up, he ushers in disequilibrium. In the presence of Christ, when you think you have it all figured out, you realize that you don’t. Jesus doesn’t always comfort; sometimes, he will make you uncomfortable thus your questioning, not your well-structured and manicured answers, signifies that he’s present. Who is this?

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, he shakes the city’s foundations. Matthew uses the word for ‘earthquake’ here which will reappear at Jesus’ death (27:51) and again at his resurrection (28:2). Earth shattering, seismic impact and aftershocks in Jerusalem and Jesus is still shaking things up today. He shakes the world by riding on a donkey as a parody of worldly power and authority. He doesn’t come riding on a milk white horse, ready for war. He rides a donkey to symbolize peace and to “lampoon” Roman power (John Dominic Crossan). This is not what was expected or what was counted on for the future—a meek, humble, peaceful king. No wonder the people of Jerusalem question.

In *Donkeys and Kings: And Other Tails of the Bible*, author Tripp York tells biblical stories from the perspectives of the animals. In one story, George, the donkey, finds himself stabled with the royal horses of the Caesar’s court and they are not happy with the commotion his rider causes. They are so outraged by this procession that one of these royal horses, Constantine, says to George:

“...your *kind* does not get to make history. History is made by the strong, the powerful—those in charge. It is made by kings, Caesars, warriors, government officials, nobility, and stallions. It is not made by the weak, the lowly, those filled with resentment for their small and insignificant place in life. It is not made by creatures like you or the one you gave a ride into the city.”

They can't help but question—Who is this? —because a Messiah on a donkey should disturb anyone. Christ's presence shakes up an entire worldview and traditional religious expectations. People didn't understand Jesus, so they interrogated his identity. What they were taught in Sunday School didn't match the reality in front of them. And we may give the people of Jerusalem a hard time for not understanding what was happening, but they teach us how to be faithful through questioning, by probing further, as a way to understand more. There's nothing wrong with querying God because this prodding signifies that one believes. One believes that which one does not fully understand. One believes so deeply that one questions because love yearns to know more about the loved. Who is this? The crowds were shouting 'Hosanna' but not everyone was dancing at the party. Life was about to change and change is never easy. Their very foundations were being shaken at the core and they couldn't shake the earthquake. It was a spiritual seismic shift and spiritual struggles can put you in turmoil.

Barbara Lundblad, a retired teacher of preaching, tells of the months after September 11th when a familiar skyline was changed forever. She said, “Children who lived nearby [the Twin Towers] at Battery Park City were often told by their parents, ‘If you ever get lost, just look for the towers, and you can find your way home.’ It didn't take long after September 11th for a child to ask, ‘How can I find my way home now?’ ... How can we find our way home? How, after so much that we counted on has collapsed?” When your world has changed forever, when you've been through so much in life, when the signs of the Messiah mess with your religious orthodoxy, it's not unfaithful or fear-filled to ask, “Who is this?” It is faith itself that raises that question. There comes a time when faith is no longer about your grandmother's or your parent's or your denomination's faith anymore. But about yours. Your belief. Your faith. Your questions.

Our conceptions of Jesus have become so captive to capitalism and nationalism that who Jesus is, is so clothed in the garments of colonial imperialism which pretend to be a theological orthodoxy before which all should bow. There's confusion in our day about Jesus because many are turned off from Christianity, wondering who the man from Nazareth truly is. “Who is this?” Jesus, the Christ, is anything but orthodox. Who is Jesus to you? What a great week to ask this as he comes to shake us up.

The one who is hailed today is nailed tomorrow. He descends on Jerusalem but will be lifted up on a tree. He's got the whole world in his hands but has to borrow a tomb for his burial. Who is this that comes riding on a donkey rather than sitting in a golden horse-drawn carriage to reign? Who is this that will disrupt the religious status quo and turn over tables to turn the world upside down? Who is this who asks his own questions even when he is God?

“This is our God, the servant King” (Graham Kendrick) and he comes to shake us into asking about who he is. You'll have to face that question this week—Who is this? It's not a quick answer. For some, he's a prophet, not a priest. For some, he's a Savior, not a Lord. For others, he's a rabbi, a teacher. But we'll soon discover, he's a King whose crown is full of thorns and he reigns from a cross. He's all of these and more because Jesus is a surplus God. Keep asking questions about him because that means he's present with you.