

What God Wants to Know: Where are You?

Genesis 3:8-13

Luke 15:1-10

New sermon series: What God wants to know: the questions God asks of people in the Bible. This series could be quite long, but for the next 5 Sundays we're going to look at 5 questions that God/Jesus ask people. I'm going to approach this as the questions that God asks *us*; because these questions are timeless, for us.

We love to ask questions of God and about God, and indeed we have our questions and doubts. And that is important to keep asking those because we do have questions, don't we? *Pastors* have questions and doubts too.

Historically, this is how faith & religion have been approached by us: the search for God and finding answers to our questions of faith. But as we read Scripture, from the very opening chapters we notice that *God* has questions of faith, too. Questions for us about *our* faith and our lives. As we read Scripture from Genesis through the gospels, we discover that God asks a lot of questions! Jesus asks a lot of questions.

As we begin our look at what God wants to know, here are a few lines from T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Rock." It was written in 1934, and he is commenting on American culture at that time, and the emerging information age, the quest for more knowledge and our thirst for knowledge and information.

Eliot writes:

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Oh my soul, be prepared to meet him who knows how to ask questions; there is one who remembers the way to your door.”

Eliot is reminding us that it isn't just the answers to *our* questions that matter, as we try gathering more information. There are things *God* wants to know, and God is very good at asking questions too!

It starts in the very first chapters of Genesis—as we'll see today—and continues on into the ministry of Jesus. When we read the gospels, we see that one of the ways Jesus engages with people is by asking questions of them.

If we train our eyes and minds to see it, we find that God does this *a lot* in the Scriptures. For example: where are you Adam & Eve (who are trying to hide)? What do you want me to do for you? (Jesus asks a blind man) Do you want to be well? (Jesus asks a crippled man) What is that in your hand (God asks Moses)? Who do you say that I am? (Jesus asks his disciples) Who will go for me? (God asks Isaiah) Why are you persecuting me? (the risen Christ asks Saul, who becomes the apostle Paul) What are you doing here? (God asks the prophet Elijah, who is

running away and hiding in a cave) Do you love me? (the risen Christ asks Peter)

Why are you afraid? (Jesus asks a lot of people). And so on...

What's interesting to think about in all this, is that God does not *have to* ask these questions—as if God doesn't know the answer to them. God knows where Adam is, trying to hide; but he asks anyway. God knows what Moses is holding in his hand; but he asks anyway. Asking a blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" seems obvious. But he asks him anyway.

Why does God ask so many questions?

Partly because it's a better teaching tool (or more accurately, a better *learning* tool)—answering a question requires us to dig a little deeper, so we come to better conclusions and reflect on our attitudes and assumptions.

Questions stimulate our thoughts and emotions and new insights are gained, and those insights stick with us better. This is the value of a well-timed and appropriate question. A good question is often better than a good lecture!

Another reason God asks questions, I believe, is because he just wants us to say the words, even if the answer to the question is obvious. "Has anyone condemned you?" Jesus asks the woman brought out to be publicly stoned to death. Obviously not, because everyone has left the scene, but it helps her to say, "No; no one has condemned me." She needs to say the words; then Jesus

follows up by saying, “Neither do I condemn you.” How powerful is that?!? She receives the grace of Christ more fully by saying the words, and then hearing Jesus’ words of assurance.

Mostly, I think that God asks questions because our Triune God is a relational God, and this triune God genuinely wants conversation and dialogue with us. Isn’t it incredible that God desires friendship with us? The nature of the trinity is relationship, and this triune God desires relationship with us.

And because God is relational, God asks us questions. And God asks us below-the-surface, relational questions, *transformational* questions. We don’t always ask the right questions. We like *informational* questions. But God doesn’t want our heads filled with more *information*. God wants our *hearts* filled with his love and his Spirit, which leads to *transformation*. That’s what TS Eliot was getting at in his poem: seeing that the acquisition of knowledge and information alone isn’t making us better people.

So, God has to redirect our questions and ask us new ones, better ones. For example, a man asks Jesus: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan and then asks him: “Who acted as neighbor?” Which is a better question.

We begin at the beginning: Genesis, chapter 3. I'll be reading verses 8- 13.

To set the scene: On the last day of creation God creates Adam places him in the garden and says, "It's all yours; you can eat of any tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Then the triune God says, "It's not good for this person to be alone" so *they* create Eve. After that, life is good! They have communion and community with God and each other.

Well, then the serpent comes along—crafty and deceitful—and he begins to create doubt in their minds by asking *manipulative* questions (like, "Did God really say you shouldn't eat from any tree?"). So they are deceived; Eve eats, then Adam eats. Their eyes are opened, they discover their nakedness and cover themselves up. We pick up the story from there...

Genesis 3:8 *They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' ¹⁰He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' ¹¹He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' ¹²The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' ¹³Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'*

This is the word of the Lord!

I begin with the reminder that the great question of the creation account—of the entire creation account—is not “how?” but “who?” Many people get stuck on the “how” part of it: was it a literal six days, or millions of years of evolution? and all that. That misses the point because the intent of the creation story is the “who” of the story—the relationship God had with his creation, especially the first humans.

We read just a few sentences earlier in Genesis that God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden; doesn't that sound delightful? Daily walks with God in the “garden of delights” (“Eden” means “delight” in Hebrew). This is a significant part of the Genesis story—the relational nature of God and God's creation. There must have been rich dialogue, and even playfulness and laughter, in those daily walks. I would encourage you to take some time and reflect on just that aspect of the story.

But Adam and Eve broke the one and only command they had been given, and their eyes opened and they became ashamed. They hid from each other behind fig leaves and they hid from God behind trees and shrubs. And the very first question God asks is, “Where are you?”

This question is so simple and so direct, and in the wake of Adam and Eve's actions, that question reveals much about the nature of our Creator.

Before we reflect on that question, though, let's look first at the questions God did **not** ask. They are just as revealing.

First, God did not ask, "Why did you do that?" He did ask '*What* have you done?' which is a way of saying, 'Tell the truth. But he didn't ask "Why did you do that?" That's probably a question that most of us parents have asked of our children in a similar situation. I learned over the years that it's not a very helpful question, though. When our kids were little I did that constantly, asking "Why did you do that?" (why did you cut the cat's whiskers off of her face??) The answer is always the same... That response always frustrated me because I assumed that these little persons had been thoughtfully scheming their mischief.

I learned over time that when they said "I dunno" they were telling the truth. Then I think about my own actions and ask myself, "Why did I do that??" I dunno! Why did I say that dumb thing? I dunno.

So, it's not a helpful question. Because many of us would go to a bad place if we answer it ("Why did you do that?" "Because I'm an idiot..." —that's bad self-talk, and it isn't true. We are not idiots. That question can take us to a bad place).

Notice, however, that Adam and Eve try to answer the "why" question (even though God doesn't ask it): Adam: "because that woman that **you** gave me..." Eve: "because the serpent deceived me." God didn't ask that question; but

they want to try to pin the blame somewhere—on someone else! Notice that with the question, “Where are you?” you can’t blame anyone. You have to tell your own story. Even the question “What have you done?” is a question that requires us to tell our own story and take responsibility for ourselves.

God didn’t ask why (did you do that).

God also did not ask, “Now what am I going to do?!!” “My eternal plan is foiled!” It seems to me that God was not entirely surprised at this turn of events. God created people with free will and understands his creation far more completely than we do. God must have known all along that the potential existed that there could be a price to pay at the heart of his creation if God was to continue in relationship to his people who had free will. I believe that God was prepared, from the beginning of creation, to have a plan to restore relationship, and continue relationship with his creation, his people. We see signs of it through the Old Testament, especially the prophets, who point us to the coming of Christ, which was the plan all along. So, God did not ask “Now what?”

Finally, God did not ask, “How could you do this to me?” and thus separate himself from Adam and Eve. What we learn here is that *God is not fragile and easily offended*. God is not so over-holy that he cannot now associate with Adam and Eve: you know, they are now irreparably stained and spoiled, while God is

perfect and holy, so therefore God cannot tolerate association with such sinfulness. It's not that way. God's holiness does not equate to some kind of picky perfectionism or untouchability, or unrelatability. What makes God holy is unfailing mercy and grace, and heart of love. Unwavering faithfulness.

What has always struck me about this Genesis account is that it is *the humans* who moved away from the relationship, and not God. *They* are the ones who are hiding—or trying to. God did not distance himself and now they have to grovel and crawl back on hands and knees into that relationship. It is *God* who now pursues *them*. God did not withdraw. Again, God is not fragile and easily offended. We read a bit later on in Genesis 3 that God, in a tender and caring act, clothes Adam and Eve. And even though he subsequently removes them from the garden (because it's a natural consequence of their action), he continues his relationship with them. He doesn't just banish them and cast them into oblivion.

They experience the consequences of their actions, but God continues to love them and provide for them. God pursues them, just as Jesus illustrates in his stories of the lost sheep, and the lost coin, and the lost sons. God's heart propels God to pursue people, not distance himself from them. So, God did not ask "how could you do this to me!?"

These are some of the things God did not ask in that original dialogue; but what do we learn from the simple question that he did ask: where are you?

The question indicates, first of all, that God is faithful in his pursuit of us, even in our failures. God never withdraws from us. God loves us no matter what; God is our companion and provider who will not abandon us. The entire ministry of Jesus shows this. It's why Jesus came! To seek and to save the lost, as Jesus said at one point in his ministry (and again, as he illustrated in his parables). In our Genesis account, Adam and Eve got lost. Not to God, but to *themselves* and to God's good purposes for them. And so, God goes to find them. Or, to help them find themselves again, in God. For decades, and centuries, we have called this the account of original sin. I wonder if we should call it the account of original lostness. Or original wandering. Where humans lost their sense of identity; they wandered from God's good purposes, and chose self-will and ego over God's will.

God's question 'Where are you?' also indicates that God knows the worst, but still hopes for, and works for, the best—for us and from us. He knows the wrong that's been done, and yet God persistently loves us. Again, God is not shocked or offended. Or angry. I wonder how many people grew up with an image of an angry God, the picky perfectionist who is quick to criticize and find

fault. That is not the God that Jesus came to reveal. Jesus said, “God so loved the world that he gave his son.” Not, “God was so mad at the world that he sent Jesus to go straighten us out.” So God, in love, works for the best.

What this Genesis account tells us is that God knows that it’s useless to try to hide (if that’s something we try to do; kind of like a small child who thinks, if I just cover my eyes no one can see me). We cannot keep secrets from God; so God calls us out of hiding so we can be honest before him and receive his grace fully.

Psalm 32:3-4, which provided our words of assurance this morning, say: “When I kept silence (when I hid) my body wasted away... my strength was sapped...” What David is saying: trying to hide from God had physical effects & consequences. Hiding only hurts *us*; it drains us of strength. And God only wants the best for us; so... don’t hide! David goes on to confess and finds out that God forgives and heals! *God* is our hiding place, as he says. If you’re gonna hide, hide in God! The safest place to hide.

So, then, the simple question “where are you?” reveals God’s forgiving nature. Whatever Adam and Eve have done, God expects the relationship to continue; and it does. God does not storm off in anger and say “that’s it; now you’ve done it.” God pursues the relationship, and chooses to forgive and restore.

Finally, I think God asks this question because he wants Adam & Eve to make an honest confession. Again, to just say the words. God knows where they are and what's been done. So the question is an invitation to open up, and trust God. It's their opportunity (and ours, if we see Adam and Eve as our representatives, standing in our stead)—it's their opportunity, and ours, to be open and honest with God about who we are and what's going on in our life. Adam came clean; he says: "I was aware of your presence, I heard you, and I was afraid, and so I hid." That's an honest answer. Unfortunately, he then goes on to make excuses ("It's not my fault!"). That's the bad part.

God's first question is a good one for us all. God still wants to know, "Where are you?" God calls us to come out from our hiding places and trust him. To be honest with who we are and where we are, and take steps towards God and not away from him. Because God always takes steps toward us. Even if—or when—we wander.

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing