

A Faith of Adventure

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Psalm 8

As most of you know by now, the questions of faith have always played a major role in my faith development. I am sure that this is because of the importance *the queries* play in our Quaker faith and practice. I admit that the constant asking of questions can become annoying...Questions about the Bible...Questions about God and Jesus...Questions about who we are as humans, and questions about religious tradition. Annoying as they may be, I am convinced that questions are important to our spiritual growth.

Jesus understood this. Jesus was in the great prophetic tradition of Israel, challenging the orthodoxies of his time...healing on the sabbath...letting his disciples pluck grain on the holy day...not conforming to the purity rituals at meal time, and so forth. Jesus asked more questions than he gave ready answers. He prodded us to be forever unsatisfied, and he launched us on the adventure of a questioning faith. “Ask and it will be given to you...Seek and you will find...Knock and it will be opened to you.” The promises are to those who pursue the imperative verbs...*to ask, to seek, and to knock*, not to those who are willing to accept easy answers to complex issues.

With this background, I want to lift up three areas of human concern and suggest that in each of these areas the Bible is filled with questions.

The first area is that of human worth. How are we to think of ourselves? I would suggest that most of us move between arrogant pride and object despair...A kind of bi-polar understanding of human worth. We have moments when we think we are the most clever and brilliant creatures ever produced, and then we fall into depression when we under value the capacities that we have. I am reminded of what a Sports Commentator said about Russell Westbrook, my favorite NBA basketball player. He said, “Westbrook’s greatest strength is that he thinks he is the best player in the NBA, and Westbrook’s greatest weakness is that he thinks he is the best player in the NBA!” Within the pages of the Bible we find a healthy middle ground of human worth by asking questions which help us to see ourselves as children of a good and loving God. One of the best loved of these questions is one that is found in Psalm 8, which I just read: *“When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon, and the stars which thou hast established; what are humans that thou art mindful of them?”* When faith asks the questions rather than making the dogmatic assertions, it puts things in balance, and helps us answer our own questions.

A second area is that of human suffering. Suffering is a huge stumbling block to anyone seeking a closer relationship to God. Bart Ehrman, the Chair of the Department of Religion at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, wrote a book about suffering, calling it “God’s Problem.” Of course, in the Bible, Job is the leading figure when it comes to suffering. He lamented, “Humans are born into trouble.” And, as we know, the *Book of Job* ends with no answers, just questions.

Humans have experienced pain and frustration, sorrow and disappointment since time began. No philosopher has ever given an adequate answer to the problem of evil and suffering in the world, for no rational theory is equal to the anguish of the human soul. Sometimes things do happen with no apparent reason, and sometimes it does feel that God has given us more than we can handle. I remember Anthony Hopkins as C.S. Lewis in the movie, *Shadowlands*. When his wife, Joy, dies of cancer, one of his Oxford colleagues talks to him after the memorial service and says, “Jack, you must accept the fact that this is God’s Will.” To this Lewis, responds: “This is not God’s Will, this is a mess!” The only way that I can cope with suffering is to stop making excuses for an all-powerful God, who if God was all powerful could have prevented my suffering, and move to a different kind of “all-powerful” and that is love. In love, God is all powerful. As I process my pain, God is in the

process with me, loving me, comforting me, and walking through my pain with me.

Finally, there is the area of human destiny. What future is there for humanity? Is there life beyond the grave? When a person dies, will she or he live again? These are questions that humans have asked since the beginning of time, and they are questions that can only be answered by faith.

One of the greatest testimonies of the Christian Testament is given by Paul in the 8th Chapter of his Letter to the Romans. Characteristically, it begins with questions...questions that prod us to seek, to explore, to discover. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor anything else shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

And so, faith asks several questions...The areas of human worth, human suffering and human destiny are filled with them. It is the recognition that as we try to understand God’s universe, it is best understood as a wondrous mystery. When Albert Einstein was asked what he had learned throughout

his many years of study, he responded, “The universe is filled with mystery.”

And so is our faith...

I want to conclude my thoughts this morning with some fitting words from a little-known school teacher that were used by King George the 6th in his 1939 Christmas speech to the citizens of Britain. It was at the time of what has been referred to as their darkest hour. You may remember these words from the movie, *The King’s Speech*. He said, “I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, ‘give me a light that I may safely tread into the unknown.’ He replied, ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be better than a light, and safer than a known way.’”