

“Finding God in the Questions”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

April 15, 2007

Text: “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me’” (Job 40: 6-7).

Recently, I came across a book by Dr. Timothy Johnson entitled *Finding God In the Questions*. Tim Johnson is the medical director of ABC news. In addition to being a physician he is an ordained minister, having completed his seminary degree at the University of Chicago before going to medical school.

In his book, Dr. Johnson details a great deal of the struggles of his life as he sought to understand his faith. Having grown up in a devout family, he found his faith tested severely when he attended divinity school. But over the years he has found that faith and doubt are not necessarily adversarial, but can exist in a healthy tension. In his book Dr. Tim Johnson deals with a lot of important questions about the existence of God, the question of the meaning of Jesus, and how we understand God in our lives.

I.

One of the most powerful and perplexing books of the Old Testament is the book of Job. It, along with Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, is part of the Wisdom literature and deals with some of the most basic questions of human existence. The book of Job is the story of an innocent man, who is called to undergo great suffering. The prologue of the Book (chapters 1 and 2) tells of an encounter between God and Satan. God observes to Satan that Job is a “blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” But Satan points out that Job has every right to be a believer. He is a prosperous man who enjoys life and a wonderful family. Satan then challenges God to take away all of Job’s pleasures and then to see if Job is still faithful to God. So Job’s

wealth is all taken from him. His children are killed in a violent storm, and he himself is afflicted by God with loathsome sores that infect his entire body.

The bulk of the Book of Job is a series of speeches that are made by Job and his three friends—Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar. In these speeches, the friends of Job proclaim the accepted wisdom of Job's day. He is suffering because he has sinned. But Job declares that he is innocent.

In the final chapters of the Book of Job (Job 38-42), God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind. But the message of God is hardly comforting. God asks Job where he was at the creation of the world. God challenges Job to gird up his loins and to question God as a man.

At the end of the book Job stands before God and says: "I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42: 5-6).

In its own way the Book of Job is a remarkable guide for finding God in the hard questions of life.

II.

For one thing, Job affirms the Biblical distinction between the Creator and the Creation. This distinction was expressed in the Latin phrase "Finitum non est capax infinitum," which means the finite cannot contain the infinite. It is a way to understand the radical distinction between the self-existent being of God and the dependent being of the creature. For John Calvin it was another way of affirming the sovereignty of God. It is an affirmation that God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

In a practical sense this means that there are many things in life that we do not understand. We don't understand why innocent people suffer. We don't understand how certain diseases can drain the life of a young child, leaving a family devastated by the effects of such an illness.

This is precisely what is at stake in God's speech to Job. Job maintains his innocence, and wants to insist that God is not just. God replies to Job by saying that Job does not understand a fraction of what is happening in the universe. God questions Job. He wants to know where Job was when the universe was founded. He wants to know if Job can separate the oceans from the land. He wants to know if Job has ever entered the storehouses of the snow or the storing places of the hail.

In recent years scientists have come to know a great more about the origin of our universe than we knew even fifty years ago. Today, scientists believe that the age of our universe is anywhere from thirteen to fifteen billion years. Moreover, most scientists today believe that our universe began with what is popularly known today as the "big bang," an explosion that took place from a pinpoint of matter that suddenly began to expand with great force. Life on this planet is estimated to have begun about 3.5 billion years ago. Humanlike creatures appeared 3.5

million years ago and the first truly human species appeared about one hundred thousand years ago.

Or, if you wanted to envision it in a somewhat different way, think of the time since the universe was created as a single day. If the origin of the universe happened at midnight, then planet earth would have emerged sometime around four o'clock in the afternoon. Human life would have emerged less than a second ago and a lifetime of one hundred years would take up only six ten thousands of a second.

The Psalmist was right when he observed, "When I look at your heavens, the moon and the stars that you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8:3-4).

III.

A second theme that emerges from the Book of Job has to do with the freedom of a Christian to ask questions and to seek for meaning. The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that God alone is the Lord of conscience and has left it free of doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to God's word. Martin Luther and John Calvin, both great Reformers of the Sixteenth Century, were very much aware of the oppressive character of the medieval church with its impositions of religious practices and human laws.

Dr. Timothy Johnson, in his book *Finding God in the Questions*, speaks of the great influence on his life by the life and writings of Albert Schweitzer, one of the most remarkable people of the past century.

Albert Schweitzer was born in 1875 in the German province of Alsace. By age thirty he had accomplished more than most people do in a lifetime. He had earned a doctorate in philosophy and in theology. He was an ordained minister, a professor at the University of Strasbourg, a concert organist, a world authority of the music of J. S. Bach, a recognized expert on organ building and remodeling, and a prolific writer and author. At age thirty he decided to pursue a career as a medical doctor in order that he could become a medical missionary to Africa. Seven years later he and his wife went to Lambarene in West Africa where he established a hospital in the jungles there. For the next fifty-two years, he spent most of his time there building a medical compound that would eventually feed, house, and treat one thousand patients a day. From time to time he would return to Europe to give lectures and to raise money for his hospital. In 1952, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (in absentia) and he donated the prize money to help build a hospital for lepers.

But there was something else very special about Albert Schweitzer. Throughout his life he was captivated by the life and teachings of Jesus. As an ordained minister, he often preached and served in parishes. In addition he pursued the life of a scholar. In 1906 he published a book entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer began what was later called the first "quest for the historical Jesus." While many scholars today would find Schweitzer's methods and conclusions somewhat archaic, no one could doubt the authenticity of his life. Schweitzer was skeptical of how much any of us could really know about Jesus. But he did discover what he

called the “Spirit of Jesus” that allowed him to give up a life of great fame and fortune to pursue a life of service in Africa.

IV.

Then, finally, as Christians we hear the voice in the whirlwind in the person of Jesus Christ, whom we proclaim the “way, the truth, and the life.” As Christians, we do not claim to have answers to all of the hard questions of human life. At best we can only point people to Jesus Christ. Karl Barth, the great theologian, kept in his study the great painting by Matthias Grunewald of the Crucifixion of Christ. At the forefront of that painting is the figure of John the Baptist, who is pointing toward the body of Christ on the cross. For Barth that was the mission of the theologian and preacher—to point people to Christ.

The Christian claim is not that Christianity is a superior religion to the other religions of the world. The Christian religion, like all religions, is corrupted by human sinfulness. That does not mean that there have not been notable achievements and constructive influences by Christians through the ages. There have been many.

The Christian claim is not that the Christian religion is unique. It is that Jesus Christ is unique. According to the Nicene Creed, Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. Jesus Christ is God insofar as God can be embodied in a human life. In this sense Jesus Christ is the final revelation of God, not in the sense that God does not continue to reveal himself, but in the sense that every other revelation finally has to be judged in light of God’s revelation in Christ.

Reinhold Niebuhr, in his remarkable book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, has a chapter that he entitles “On Having and Not Having the Truth.” In that section he notes that as Christians, we believe that in Jesus Christ we have encountered the truth of God’s revelation. But there is another sense in which we do not have the truth. We are creatures, not the creator. We are sinful people who view the truth through the eyes of our self interest.

This past week we were reminded of how important words and judgments can be. In the case of Don Imus we witnessed the harmful impact of disparaging remarks made about a group of outstanding young women who were members of the Rutgers Women’s Basketball team. In the case of the three young men who were members of the Duke University Lacrosse team we were witnesses to what can happen when there is a rush to judgment before all of the facts are considered.

Surely, as Christians our faith is a faith that must ever be questioned. But just as surely we affirm our confidence in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that is ever sufficient for all our needs.

Amen.