

We have all been in difficult times in our lives, those times where we want to ask all kinds of questions. Questions like, why is this happening? When will this come to an end? How long will this go on? And so forth. And sometimes we want to ask those questions of God. Why have you let this happen, Lord? Why do you continue to let this happen? But then perhaps we feel a bit guilty about it. We think that maybe we shouldn't ask God these kinds of questions, that it isn't right for us to do so. But those questions continue to eat away at us. We need an answer. We need some kind of closure. And so we begin to wonder: "Well, is it okay to question God or not?" But then we look at the Bible, and we still are left a little bit confused, because sometimes it seems to be okay to ask questions and sometimes it doesn't. Mary, for example, asked the angel Gabriel, "How can this be? How will I give birth to a son when I am still a virgin, when I have not known a man?" And Gabriel answers her question. And the Psalms sometimes ask very hard questions, even angry questions to God, and those are okay too. But then, on the other hand, you get somebody like Zechariah who wonders how he's going to father John the Baptist in his old age, and he is made mute for asking. Or you think of Sarah who laughs at the news that Isaac is going to be born, and she's rebuked for it. So which is it? Is it okay to ask questions or not? That's the question we need to wrestle with this morning.

Because John the Baptist in our Gospel reading for today is in an extremely difficult situation. He's in prison in the palace of Herod Antipas waiting for his trial, or to be more specific, waiting for his execution. That's a very difficult place to be indeed. Because Antipas was one of the sons of Herod the Great, Herod the Great being the one who tries to kill Jesus at Christmas when he was born. And after Herod dies, Antipas becomes ruler of Galilee in place of him. But Antipas also married Herodias, the ex-wife of his brother Philip. And John spoke against that marriage. He says it wasn't right, that Antipas should not have done that. In fact, in Mark chapter 6, he says: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." But unsurprisingly, Antipas used his power to silence John rather than listen to him. He used his power to have him thrown in prison, and he will be the one who finally puts him to death. A very difficult place indeed.

But while John is in prison, he hears about what Jesus is doing. And he sends out two of his disciples with a very simple question, verse 3 of our reading: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And the reason why he asked this question ultimately doesn't matter. If he's asking it on his own behalf, for himself, it would be hard on anybody to be in prison waiting to be executed. That's a very difficult spot to be. Or if he's asking for the sake of his disciples, that's understandable too, because they're going through just as rough a time with their teacher in prison. They needed the encouragement. And personally I think that's the way that this is going. But either way, it doesn't matter, because John is still asking Jesus this question: are you the one who is come, or shall we look for another? He is questioning God. What's going on here? What's going to happen to me? What's going to happen in the days ahead? So is it okay for John to ask this question or not?

Well, it is, actually. It is okay for him to ask this, and we know that because Jesus answers his question. If Jesus had refused to answer, that would've shown that it was the wrong thing to do. Jesus could've just flat out said, "I'm not going to answer that question." But that's not what he does. He answers John's question, but he does it in a way that's rather indirect, a way that we might not expect. Because instead of a simple "yes," Jesus points the disciples towards what he is doing, towards the miracles that he is performing. Verse 5 of our reading says: "The blind

receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." So the miracles themselves are the answer to John's question. The miracles point towards Jesus, showing that he is the one who is to come. And we know that partly because these miracles point back towards Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah 35, for example, says: "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped." And these prophecies were pointing forward towards the time when the Christ would come. They would show that the promised one was finally there. And for Jesus to be doing these things shows very clearly that he is the prophesied one, that he is the one who is to come. There's no need to look any further. But they partly also answer John's question because they show that God himself is here. Because who else could give sight to the blind or cause the lame to walk, except God? Who could cleanse lepers, or make the deaf hear, or raise the dead, except God? Jesus' works show that he is the promised one, that he is in fact the Lord. As Jesus says in John chapter 10: "The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me." So Jesus answers John with what he is doing. Those works show that he is the one who is to come.

That's good enough for John, we might say, but what about us? Is it okay for us to question God or not? Because we might find ourselves in some tough situation where we are filled with questions. Why are you doing this? Why is this happening? How long will this go on? So we need to ask ourselves, is it okay to ask God why? To answer that, we need to first stop and ask ourselves a different question, and that is: why am I asking? What is it that I hope to get from God by asking this question? That will show the difference between whether it is right or whether it is wrong.

Because let's take, for example, when we are dealing with death, especially some sudden or unexpected death. It is only natural for us to ask God, why? Why has this happened, O Lord? Why did you let this happen? But we need to stop and ask ourselves, why am I asking this question? What do I hope to get from God? Because, on the one hand, am I accusing God? Am I saying that this is somehow wrong or that he is somehow being cruel towards me for letting this happen? That I allow my anger to put myself in a position over God where I try to judge him for what he is doing? Am I condemning God by asking why? That is not good. That is not what we should be doing. Or am I asking why, and yet submitting myself into his hand? To say that I don't understand why this has happened, Lord, and I want to know why, but ultimately I know that you are my loving Father.

I want you to think of Job, for example. Job who went through a very difficult time in his life. In one day, Job lost almost everything that he had: his possessions, and much more seriously, all of his children, all died in the same day. And I'm sure that he was filled with all kinds of questions. Why did this happen? Why did this happen to me? Why did God let this happen? But Job in Job chapter 1 says this: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Because, despite all of his questions--and there were a lot of them. Most of the book of Job are his questions towards God--despite all of those questions, Job trusts in the Lord. He knows that he's going to care for him. And no matter what happens in the future, he knows that God will continue to give him what he needs. And may we do the same, Christians, knowing that God is our Father, our loving Father, even when he takes away.

Or think of another example, if we're dealing with a severe illness, something serious, especially life-threatening things like cancer. It is only natural for us to ask God, why? Why has this happened, Lord? When will you take it away? When will you heal me? But we need to stop and ask ourselves, why am I asking this question? What is it that I'm hoping to get from God? Because am I, on the one hand, accusing God? Saying that it's not right for this to be happening, that this is somehow unfair, that this shouldn't be happening to me, because I don't have time to deal with this. Putting ourselves into that position where we want to judge God for what is happening? That is not a good thing to do. Or am I putting myself into his hands, knowing that he can heal me? Or even if I am not healed, even if God never heals me, that I know that he still cares for me? Like Paul says in Romans chapter 8: "We know that, for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose." That is all things, not just good things. All things work together for good. Even our sickness is meant for our ultimate good.

Because I want you to think of Paul who said that he had a thorn in his flesh, although we're not told exactly what that was. Three times he prayed to the Lord, "Please take this away from me!" Three times God told him no. Because the Lord says in 2 Corinthians 12: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul's thorn kept him humble. It kept him from being puffed up with pride, so that he would fall into condemnation and the snares of the devil. Paul's thorn kept him in the faith. And for that reason, it was better for him to have that thorn than to have him take it away. And so Christians, yes, it is okay to ask God to take these things away, to ask God why, to ask him to heal us. But let us do so and be like Paul, putting ourselves into the hand of God, knowing that even if we are not healed that God will still care for us. Because whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

And we know all of this, Christians, because of what God is still doing among us. God gives us his Word to show us what he has done in the past, so that we know that God will also keep his promises in the future. God gives us the sacraments as a way of strengthening our faith. God comes among us today with his miracles so that we would trust him and believe in him more and more. God gives us Jesus to forgive us our sins. God gives us the Holy Spirit to make us his temple. All of these things together are meant to strengthen us. They are meant to answer our questions. So that just like John struggled in the prison until Jesus brought him that answer, so we also know that we can look at Jesus and what he is doing and see and find the answers to all of our questions. God is still taking care of us, and he will continue to take care of us even if we don't understand how.

So when we are in distress, Christians, and we want to ask God why, that's okay. We can do that. Even if we feel like yelling at God the way that the Psalms do, that's okay too. But let us ask those questions looking to God for good, knowing that he will care for us, no matter what situation we may be going through. Let us ask him why, knowing that God can and God will do something about it. Because we know that we can trust God, Christians, even in the hardest times of our lives, because God will answer those who call on him through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, though we do not always understand your ways, we know that you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to care for us. Help us always to trust in him, knowing that we can trust you in all things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.