

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-12

Luke 4:14-30

"Is That Your Final Answer?"

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So, this is the end, isn't it? It's the end of summer, the last holiday weekend before the steady march of Autumn comes. It's the end of sabbatical. Chuck comes back this week, and I confess that I'm at least a little bit excited about that. It's the end of this sermon series as well. When I began this series on Frequently Asked Questions a few months ago, there were a few things that I hoped you, the hearers, would take from it. One of them was that throughout the series, the answers to the questions were not the focus. The questions were. I think that every sermon any preacher has ever preached is at its heart a response to a question, whether the preacher acknowledges it in the sermon title or not. My sermons throughout this summer weren't meant to provide answers, but responses to questions. A few of the sermons may have undone a tidy answer or two that you had thought was settled, and they may have left you feeling like you're back at square one with nothing but a question. Or maybe the answers to the questions only left you with more questions, and so where you had

previously put a period there is now a question mark. But that's the funny thing about endings. They make good beginnings as well.

If you're a Christian, you turn to scripture to find the period at the end of the sentence. The Bible is, without question, our only rule for faith and life. It's where we look for answers. It's been called life's instruction manual. If you go to the local book store, you'll see that books claiming to have all the answers on a particular subject are often called "Bibles". There's the Woodworker's Bible, and the Scrapbooking Bible, and the Fly Fishing Bible, and on and on and on. We think of the Bible as a place where we can look to get all the answers. But you know, I'm not sure that's fair to scripture.

If you heard more than a few of the sermons I've preached over the last several weeks, you may have noticed that some of the "answers" given by scripture really weren't answers at all. In many cases, there is more mystery in scripture than certainty. Questions like, "What happens when we die?" or "Why do bad things happen to good people?" are nearly universal questions, but we will find no clear or simple answers to them in scripture. We invariably run into the mystery of God, wanting things to make more sense but

unsettled that they don't. In some cases we read scripture and end up reading more into it than is really there because we want certainty. We want concrete, and clear, and simple answers. We don't like mystery. Prosperity gospel guru Joel Osteen once said, "Don't put a question mark where God has put a period." You can quote me as saying the reverse: Don't put a period where God has put a question mark. Some things we are simply not meant to understand.

That's one of the things that I had hoped to highlight during the course of this series. As much as we like for scripture to be cut and dry, nice and neat, and black and white with respect to any question we may ask, it simply isn't that way. One of my seminary professors used to say, "There is no baseball in scripture." You won't find guidance for how to play baseball in the Bible, because it doesn't mention it. The Bible also doesn't mention a variety of interesting situations that have arisen in the two-thousand or more years since it was written, some of which are very important social issues. This means that we are forced to rely on our interpretation of scripture in order to understand it. I've known plenty of people in my life who are convinced that scripture needs no interpretation,

that it makes plain sense in every single verse of every single chapter, and it has to be this way because God would never just leave us hanging in the middle of mystery. I don't argue with people who hold that view, but I do wonder what they do with the parts of scripture that speak explicitly about the act of interpretation. I think about Daniel interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, or Jeremiah interpreting God's word to his own people, or Philip in the book of Acts interpreting the scriptures for the Ethiopian eunuch. And then, of course, there's Jesus, who interprets scripture on a number of occasions, some of which leave his hearers with better understanding, and some of which simply leave them confused.

And then there's our Old Testament reading for this morning. In it, we see a particular community of faith, all gathered together to listen to scripture. We are told that all who were able to understand gathered to hear the scriptures read. They were gathered together in the context of worship, understanding that what they hear is not for their own personal use, but rather for the glory of God. And then Nehemiah tells us in verse 8 that the scriptures were "read with interpretation." Read with

interpretation. It's clear that interpretation helps the people to understand the scriptures, to engage with the scriptures, to encounter God's law. But it also allows them to connect with God's word to them in a way that they might not otherwise experience. Walter Brueggemann once wrote that "Interpretation is not the reiteration of the text; it is rather the movement of the text beyond itself in fresh, often formerly unuttered ways."¹ Nehemiah tells us that these people gathered to hear the Word of the Lord to them were first and foremost, worshipful. Secondly, they were open the power of the text to go beyond the page, beyond the printed word, beyond mere instructions and rules and regulations.

The result of this was that they all ended up weeping. Nehemiah gives us a vision of God's people, moved and touched deeply by their encounter with God's Word in their lives. Scripture does something to that community that a mere instruction manual or encyclopedia claiming to have all the answers could never do. It is God connecting with them in a way that we do not fully understand. It is God moving beyond the limits of the printed page

¹ *Christian Century*, January 3-10, 2001, p. 16.

to stir the hearts, souls, and minds of God's people. Scripture has the power to do this.

This leads me to another point that I hope you'll take away from this series, and it's one that too many preachers would just as soon keep to themselves. The thing that many of us would never tell you is that a lot of the time, we preachers would be better off keeping our mouths shut. Scripture doesn't need us to speak for it, nor does God depend on our words in order to connect with the people. In the face of the awesome power of God's Word (with a capital 'W') anything we can say is just words (with a small 'w'). God does not depend on the words of the preacher, but God is certainly able to use them. That's my prayer and hopefully the prayer of every preacher who stands up on Sunday morning and proclaims the word of God to the community of faith.

On one hand, the act of preaching is an act of foolishness. It involves at least some belief that the preacher's words (small 'w') can be a vehicle for God's Word (big 'W'), and at times that's a foolish thing to think. But for that exact reason, the act of preaching is also an act of faith. We do believe that God's Word proclaimed in worship is the property of God and not the preacher,

and whatever mistakes or missteps the preacher might make, God is still able to use our small 'w' words to proclaim his big 'W' Word. I confess that there have been times when I've gotten chills up my spine as I was preaching, and it isn't because I thought what I said was particularly good. It was because at that moment, I knew and felt that the message being proclaimed was much larger than I could author. I've also had plenty of sermons that I thought were duds connect with the congregation in profound ways that I could not foresee. Most preachers simply try to do their best to proclaim the word, but at the same time acknowledge that every person who interprets the text does so imperfectly.

At the very heart of our search for answers is not the skill of the preacher, but our trust that in some profoundly mysterious way, God connects with this community in very deep and meaningful ways, and whether you're reading scripture on your own or hearing the proclamation of God's Word in a sermon, we trust that there is more going on here than just words. If you've listened to Garrison Keillor before, you may have heard of Pastor Ingqvist, the Lutheran minister in Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon. In one story from Lake Wobegon, Pastor Ingqvist has had a very busy week

and hasn't had time to properly prepare a sermon. He resolves to do the best he can, and maybe no one will really notice. To his disappointment, the church that Sunday is packed. He gets up in front of the congregation and preaches what he knows is a poor effort, a sermon that Keillor calls “a nervous and turbulent sermon with a bumpy landing due to the loss of one engine.” After worship his congregation one by one tells him it was a fine sermon, one of his best, which he knows is not true. It can't be true, unless... Unless there is something more going on here beyond his own effort, and his own poor interpretation. As his congregation compliments him on his poor sermon, Pastor Ingqvist at first thinks, “You have got to be kidding,” but then realizing Lutherans don't use much irony, he whispers a prayer preachers know very well: “Thank you, Lord. Thank you very much.”

Ultimately, the task of turning to scripture to find answers, the interpretation of God's Word, is one that should involve more thanksgiving than anything else. There have been times in my life that I have been absolutely certain that through those words, which were somehow more than words, God was speaking just to me, right where I was. Whether I read it or heard it through tears in my

eyes or with a smile on my face, God's Word came right off the page and found me, just as I was. I'm sure that many of us can recall similar encounters with God's living Word. If we approach scripture in the spirit of worship, with open hearts and open minds, it will speak to us in a way that no other book can. It will give our lives meaning, teach us how to live, and even transform us into better people. The task, though, is to read it and hear it worshipfully, with open hearts and open minds.

To do that, we need each other. We need each other because God's Word is so much more than a simple and self-evident instruction manual. God's word is best proclaimed and interpreted and understood not in isolation, but in community. We need each other because it is here, among our fellow brothers and sisters, that we believe Jesus reveals truth to us. We trust in some mysterious way, Jesus is here with us, working alongside our good interpretation as well as our misguided interpretations. We trust in Jesus, who was the only preacher who could every get up in front of the congregation and say, "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And ultimately, our understanding of scripture as we search for final answers is not dependent upon our skill as

interpreters, but upon Jesus Christ, the very fulfillment and embodiment of the word of God.

When we encounter those profoundly meaningful moments with God's Word, when we find ourselves weeping after hearing it, or celebrating because of its good news, understand that it is because God in Jesus Christ is moving beyond the page, beyond the printed word to stir your heart, and soul, and mind with God's great and wonderful news.

And in response to that, we simply offer a prayer:

Thank you, Lord. Thank you very much.

Amen.