



The Trinity Pulpit



Is He The One? And Other Nagging Questions Matthew 11:1-11

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Can you think of nagging questions? There are some that all parents know like “are we there yet?” There are ones that are just constant from two year olds like “why?” There are other nagging questions for teenagers like “where have you been, who were you with, and how did this dent get in the car?” There are the nagging questions of dating such as “what do you do, where are you from?” and, of course, “what is your sign?” These are just some of the nagging questions we all have asked or been asked at one time or another. Yet, let me suggest there are some nagging questions that are really deeper and more profound than these. How can I know that the Bible is true? How can I be sure that I am a Christian? How can I know if heaven and hell are real? How can I know if God loves me and forgives me? How can I know that God is guiding me? When we begin this exercise, what we discover is that we have many more questions than we do answers. Now I know that some of us don’t believe that. Some of us really think that our short Sunday School answers can and should answer all of life’s questions. We live by the old bumper sticker that said, “God said it, I believe it and that settles it.” That really is a great statement of faith, but many of us do not have that level of faith just yet, so we spend a lot of time with the questions.

If you are one of those who live with the questions, please know you are in good company. In fact, in our text today we find John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ, asking one of those nagging questions. John is not someone who has not studied the law and the prophets. John is someone who has lived his life by faith. He is the son of a priest. He is also a promised child from God. He has lived his life preaching a new word of repentance and proclaiming that the new age of the Messiah was about to arrive. Now as John comes to the end of his life, he finds himself in prison

for things he has said against King Herod. King Herod had taken his brother Phillip’s wife, Herodias, and John had been preaching that King Herod did not have the right to take her and should not have taken her to be his wife. Herodias was furious with John and so Herod had John arrested and silenced. That is where we find John as chapter 11 of Matthew begins.

The bold, eccentric and gifted preacher has been silenced by the King and put in prison. John had preached about the coming of the Messiah and the judgment that would come against the wicked, and yet judgment had not come to the wicked but to him. He was the one in prison, and he would be the one who would be killed for his words. It is in this moment of waiting, wondering and reflecting that we find John’s nagging question. John, it seems, was allowed to meet with his disciples from time to time and they were reporting the things Jesus was doing. John, reflecting on the ministry of Jesus, has his disciples go to Jesus with one simple question: Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?

Some believe that John did not have his doubts about Jesus. He was the one who declared at Jesus’ baptism that Jesus was the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sins of the world. John had said of Jesus that he (John) was not worthy to remove the straps from Jesus’ sandals. John had told Jesus that Jesus should have baptized him and not him Jesus. John was a man who had believed with all of his heart that Jesus was the Messiah. But now, in prison and faced with death, he simply asks the nagging question, “Are you the one who was coming, or should we expect someone else?”

Some scholars believe that John asked this question for his own disciples’ sakes. He


wanted them to hear for themselves that Jesus was the promised one. Did John have his doubts? Did John just want to know for sure? I tend not to think that John, like us all, would have wanted to know that his life had been worth his effort for the kingdom. I think John wanted one more word from Jesus that his proclamation of the kingdom was correct. John had not missed something or misinterpreted something. So, John calls out with that nagging question, "Are you the one, or should we expect someone else?"

According to Hershel Hobbs, this question is a question that is two sided. He suggests this question is one of impatience and also a question of perplexity. This is one of those nagging questions we ask when life does not make sense. Things don't add up. Life is not fair. God does not do what we were sure God was going to do. That is the question of perplexity. This is also a question of impatience. It is like the questions we ask when we are just tired of waiting on God. It seems like God's timing is indifference more than compassion. It is just like those nagging questions we ask when we pray, "God, what are you waiting on?"

The key to understanding this question is to look at its setting and intent. John is not asking this question in a vacuum. John is in prison and he has spent his life preaching that the Messiah would come, but what type of Messiah had John preached about? He had preached about a Messiah that would come in judgment. John's words were "the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire." In John's theology the time for works and words were finished. Finally, judgment and justice would come. Finally, everyone would get what they had coming to them. Finally, the wicked would be repaid and the righteous who had suffered would be vindicated. That was John's message.

It is important to note that in the Old Testament we really get two pictures of the Messiah. The Major Prophets tell us of a suffering servant who will come in love and mercy. The Minor Prophets speak more of the one who will come judging the world and the sin of people and bring destruction. What we know is that Jesus is the complete picture. Jesus came in love and mercy the first time and Jesus will come in judgment in the second coming, but John seems to have half the picture.

John hears reports of Jesus and the reports are not judgment but healing, forgiveness, restoration and hope. John's question is, "Are you the one who was coming, or should we look for another?" What is interesting about John's question is that the word he uses for another is *another kind* or *a different kind*. John literally asks Jesus, "Is this what the kingdom of God is about, or is there another kind of Christ to come?" What he is really asking is where the judgment is.



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John's question is not doubt but perplexity. John is trying to make sense of what Jesus is doing and what he was expecting Jesus to do. That is where our nagging questions begin. For most of us our questions are not the result of doubt as much as they are about being perplexed at the events of life and the mystery of God's involvement within those moments. Our nagging questions come when it seems God has forgotten us or what God is doing does not fit our

preconceived notions about the activity of God. John found himself in prison and instead of the wrath of God, the Messiah Jesus was showing grace, love and forgiveness.

There is another root to John's question, and that is impatience. John wanted the wrath of God to come, but he would have to wait on that as well. Jesus had come not to condemn the world but to die for the world. Jesus had come to bring life not death. Now to be sure the Bible is clear that one day there will be judgment for us all. One day we will all give an account for what we have done with our lives and most importantly we will give an account about whether we have accepted Jesus, God's only son, as our Lord and Savior. That eternal question will have to be answered. Judgment will come. Just not yet. John would have to be patient. It is the waiting on God that brings the nagging questions to our lives.

It is hard to wait on God when we are ill. It is hard to wait on God when there are more bills than paychecks. It is hard to wait on God while we sit by the phone waiting for a job offer. It is hard to wait on God while we long suffer with a teen waiting for them to mature. It is hard to wait on God while we wait for children to be able to care for themselves. It is hard to wait on God when the workplace is miserable. It is hard to wait on God when there is more silence than communication in our homes. It is hard to wait on God while the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer. It is hard to wait on God when we

pray earnestly for the salvation of family members. It is hard to wait on God when it seems someone is out to get us and ruin us. It is hard to wait on God when there are wars and rumor of wars. It is hard to wait on God when there is no rain and when there is too much rain. It is hard to wait on God.

It is our lack of patience and misunderstanding of God's timing that leads us to the nagging questions like "Are you the one, or should we expect someone else?"

One question which reveals John's impatience and struggle to understand the work of God in his life and in his world. It seems to me that the nagging questions we ask find their origin in the same discontent. We find ourselves like John having to sit by ourselves in the quiet in the prisons of our own making and wait on God.

This is the Advent season, and the Advent season is a time of reflecting and waiting. Advent requires our imagination. What we must do this time every year is, in our imagination, return to the time before Jesus' holy birth and try to grasp what it was like to just wait on God's Messiah to come. Now we know the story and the rest of the story. We know that Jesus was born, he lived, and he died and rose again. We believe by faith that the story will not be finished until Jesus returns for the church and judges the living and the dead. But every now and then it is good for us to use our imagination and go back to the moment before the promise was fulfilled. It is good for us to sit in the darkness and wait on God. Why? Because most of life is not lived in the light of Christmas Morning and Easter Sunday but in the waiting of Advent and the mystery of the cross of Good Friday. Most of life is lived in the shadows with unanswered nagging questions and not in the light of full revelation. It seems to me that what we can learn through imaginative thought during Advent is very important to how we will live most of the days of our lives.

How then shall we live? What are we to do in the time of waiting and wondering? Let us look to Jesus' answer to John's disciples. When Jesus gives them an answer it is not the answer they were looking for. It is not a yes or a no but *observe*. They were to observe the kingdom of God at hand. Jesus says, "Report what you see and hear. The blind have received sight, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the one that does not fall away on account of me."

The answer to the perplexed questioning was, "Tune into the kingdom of God." The kingdom of God was not going to be about John's agenda but God's agenda which was grander than even John had imagined. It would not simply be about judgment and wrath, but it was going to be about love and salvation. The kingdom was going to be about lives being changed and hope coming to those who did not have hope.

The kingdom of God is not ultimately about our way but God having his way in our lives. The kingdom of God is not about our perspective but God's eternal perspective. What we must do as we live with the questions is to learn to focus ourselves on where we discover the kingdom of God at hand. What is occurring in your life and in your church where you can say "That is the work of God"? It is in this ministry or your involvement with this group or this person that you sense the movement of God. That is where you and I should be focused. Where are lives being changed and people receiving hope they have never had before? There is the kingdom of God.

Max Lucado tells the story of a group of climbers who were climbing a mountain in Europe. On clear days there was a breathtaking peak of snowcapped rocks that reigned as king on the horizon, inviting admiration and offering inspiration. On days that were clear and they could see the peak, the hikers made great progress. They climbed as one, all looking to the same summit. Yet, on some days the peak was hidden from sight. In those days the climb became difficult. Everyone's eyes were downward and the goal forgotten. Lucado writes that we are like that. As long as our goal is within eyesight, there is no summit we can't scale. But take away our vision and discouragement results. That is why God came near. To be seen and so we might understand how close God really is and know we will reach the top. We just need to climb toward him.

In our moments of nagging questions it is easy to take our eye off the kingdom's work and purpose. It is so easy to find our gaze downward and inward and not outward and upward. Jesus tells the disciples of John to observe the kingdom of God. That is where our attention must be.

Jesus also says, "Don't fall away on account of me." The word Jesus uses means don't be scandalized on my account. Don't fall from faith with these questions just because my actions are not what you expected. Jesus is encouraging John and the others to



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remain faithful no matter what might come in life.

It is true the nagging questions can soon lead to doubting and the burden of little faith. Jesus simply says remain faithful. Don't fall away on my account.

John was not the first person in his family to deal with nagging questions. In the birth account of John the Baptist, the gospel of Luke tells us of John's father Zechariah's response to the angel when he was told that John would be born. Zechariah's question was "How can this be? I am old and my wife is along in years. How can this be?" Zechariah was struck mute until John was born because he had doubted the angel's word. Zechariah was a priest who was fulfilling his duties at the temple. Yet, we are told even after the nagging question and after being struck mute, Zechariah fulfilled his duties at the temple and then returned home. Don't miss that statement. Zechariah remained faithful to his calling even when he had questioned and when he had suffered the consequences of his questioning. He kept on praying and serving.

When we are living with nagging questions, the answer is to focus on the kingdom of God and to keep on praying, serving, and sharing. The answer is to remain faithful even with the questions still on our lips.

I want to tell you this morning one of the great growing edges in a Christians life is to be faithful and proclaim God's goodness even when in this moment that is not your experience. Anyone can be faithful when they are walking in a time of blessing, but the Christian who is growing is the one who can be faithful when blessing seems like a distant experience.

The Bible gives us examples of those who were faithful even without receiving the blessing. The heroes of faith in Hebrews never received the promise of the Messiah we are told, but they were commended for their faith. The ancient character Job lost his family, home and health for no reason we are told. His friends came to him and told him to go ahead and curse God and die. What was Job's

response? "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, blessed be the name of the Lord." David writes in Psalm 43:5, "Why are you downcast, O my Soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

Are you the one? Should we look for something else or someone else? These are nagging questions of faith. We definitely have nagging questions in life and maybe even more when it comes to the end of life. Henri Nouwen comments on the resurrection with these words:

The resurrection does not solve our problems about dying and death. It is not the happy ending to our life's struggle, nor is it the big surprise that God has kept in store for us. No, the resurrection is the expression of God's faithfulness to Jesus and to all of God's children. It is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost—not even our mortal bodies. The resurrection does not answer any of our curious questions about life after death, such as, How will it be? How will it look? But it does reveal to us that indeed love is stronger than death. After that revelation we must remain silent, leave the whys, wheres and hows behind and simply trust. (*Our Greatest Gift*, Henri J. M. Nouwen)

Advent leaves us in the same place. Advent leaves us with questions, some of them nagging questions. Advent requires us to wait and be patient. It requires us to learn to be faithful without all the answers. It requires us to live in a complex world with perplexing experiences and yet to discover the kingdom of God that is within us and all around us and to be faithful participants in the kingdom. It means that nagging questions are ultimately answered with a determination of faith found in David's words, "Put your hope in God, for yet I will praise Him my Savior and my God."

