

God With Us: God Stepped Up

December 16, 2017

I. Introduction: Asking the Right Questions

A. Familiarity with the Christmas Story sometimes keep us from asking the right questions.

1. A virgin? Having a baby?
2. A moving star? That everyone noticed?
3. A few years ago, during my viewing of “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” Linus’s familiar speech left me, finally, with the right question about our passage today. I’ll come back to that in a minute.

B. There is power in the right question. Aristotle said in *Metaphysics*, “if a person wishes to succeed, they must ask the right preliminary questions.”

1. This is because what we ask questions about reflects what we are focusing on. Let me give some examples.
2. If you’re planning to get on the Titanic, the WRONG question is, “can this ship be sunk?” The RIGHT question is, “Are you going to steer directly into a patch of icebergs because you think the ship is unsinkable?”
3. If you go to the doctor and he tells you that you have a cholesterol problem, the WRONG question is, “What do I have to stop eating?” The RIGHT question is, “What do I need to do to recover my health?”

C. Last week, Pastor Liz talked about Jesus coming to earth—God stepping down to come and be “God with us.” My task this week is to talk about God Stepping Up. Which brings me back to my question from Linus.

1. In Luke 2:8-21, we discover that the news about Jesus’ birth comes first to a group of shepherds. They are given information by the angels, and then go and find Jesus and given the information to Mary and Joseph, before going to praise God.
2. There are lots of questions we could ask, most of them good. Why did God choose shepherds for this reveal? Why the angel choir concert for the shepherds? What led them to tell Jesus’ parents what the angel told them? But for our purposes today, there is only one right question..
3. When the angel appears to them, and the glory of the LORD shines all around them, the shepherds were terrified. Why? Why were the shepherds afraid in the face of the best news humanity has EVER received?
4. If what the angel says is true: “...good news of great joy for all the people...a savior, who is Christ the Lord...” then why would the angels be terrified? When was the last time you were terrified when the good news party showed up at your house? Why terror?
5. Today, friends, we will explore the reason the shepherds were afraid, and we will have the opportunity to celebrate the fact that no one ever need fear God’s arrival ever again because of what Jesus Christ has done for us—he stepped up to save us.

II. What Did Jesus Step Up to Save us From?

- A. Matthew 1:21 gives us a clue about what Jesus’s mission was, and what he saved us from: our sins.
- B. This is basic faith we teach our children: Jesus saves us from sin. Everyone knows that, right? Thanks to the good work of many of you, our elementary school students in AWANA know that Jesus saves us from sin. And those materials say that sin is “...anything contrary to the nature of God.”

- C. With that general definition, we have enough to have a vague sense of the thing we're being saved from. I have plenty of things I've done—things that are true of me—that run contrary to the nature of God. As hard as I try to do the right things—and I do try!—there is always a distance I can't bridge. I'm stuck in a seemingly constant state of being and doing things that are "contrary to the nature of God."
- D. If you start checking the Biblical language, you will discover that the Bible (OT/NT) uses about 10 different words to describe sin—different ways to be "contrary to the nature of God." Here are a few:
- a. We don't do what we're supposed to do.
 - b. We do do what we're not supposed to do.
 - c. We commit sins we don't mean to do, but it's just our nature to do—they're unconscious
 - d. We commit sins we know we commit and do it anyways—they're conscious acts of rebellion
 - e. We commit sins against strangers.
 - f. We commit sins against friends, family and our church family.
 - g. We commit sins against ourselves.
 - h. **BUT ALL OF THESE SINS ARE ULTIMATELY AGAINST GOD, AND PLUNDER HIM PERSONALLY.**
- E. For this reason, all of us could stand in the place of the Psalmist who wrote Psalm 130, when he says in v3 **"...If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?"**
- F. But see the curious thing immediately following in v.4? **"...But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."** There's that pesky fear again! Store this one away for later!
- G. But why are these sins such a bad thing? If everyone does it...if no one escapes it, then why would we be punished because of it? What kind of God punishes everyone for something everyone does?
- H. The question I just asked is the wrong question. I've deliberately led you to the wrong question to make a point. The fact that everyone sins has nothing to do with whether those sins deserve punishment. If you had an imaginary land where everyone lied, cheated, stole, raped and murdered every chance they got, would their behavior be less awful because everyone did it? No! It's just not a place you plan a vacation!
- I. But my wrong question still has a right answer: a Creator God—the one who made it perfect. A God that is holy and separate. A God who is the embodiment of the standards he sets. A God who is perfect and sinless and promises judgment to those who violate him.
- J. Our desire to minimize our own departures from God's standard demonstrates something important about us: our own tendency to minimize our own sin. We compare ourselves to others to try and make our sins less serious-sounding to us. We make certain sins worse in our own minds and in our church culture to make ourselves feel better. We hide sins inside the church and then point outside the church at "what they're doing" as a way of making ourselves feel better.
- K. In the end, we treat our sin like broke God's lamp or stole a quarter off of his kitchen counter.
- L. This is a vast underrepresentation of our actual issue. If you wanted to take the same familiar analogy and make it more truthful, we have stolen trillions from God, in a variety of smash-and-grab thefts and violations that it would take a cosmic court hours to read. We have taken his property and destroyed it. We have objectified his beloved people and broken them and abused them. We have taken what was pure and holy, and we have profaned it—treated it like a filthy penny on a street of gold. We have entered into a marriage, and then slept around knowing he was watching us do it. We have ignored him when he speaks, and then blamed him for the negative results of our decisions. We have refused to give him credit and worship for the good he has given to us. We have misused his name and misrepresented what He is like.
- M. And now we can answer my question: Why were the shepherds afraid?
- N. The answer is because when anyone in the Bible stands in the presence of the holy God, what they are and what they have actually done—what they have actually done to God—becomes painfully obvious, and in that moment, they know they deserve death. The shepherds are staring the killing holiness of God in the face. Their knowledge of the judgment they know they deserve blocks their vision of salvation proclaimed right in front of them.

III. How Jesus Saved Us

- A. What I've just told you, in my typical long-winded way, is that the shepherds, based on who they were and what they knew, were right to be afraid. They were sinners in the presence of holiness, and did what any one of us would do if we were sane. We would be afraid. How would you feel if the Angel of Death showed up at your front door? Would you be chill if the Grim Reaper came for you?
- B. If you buy my explanation/analogy for sin, you should also have a growing sense of the debt we owe to God for our sins.
- C. So how did Jesus save us from our cosmically crippling debts? How did he pay for it?
- D. In Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve sinned, God promised them that the consequence for their sin would be death—in v.22-24, we see they are driven from the Garden of Eden so that they would not be able to eat from the tree of life and live forever. The life they were destined to live, east of Eden, was one of toil and difficulty, in a world broken by their sin.
- E. From there until the end of the Old Testament, we see that God establishes a pattern for the payment of sin, most clearly expressed in the covenant God makes with Israel and Moses. In a sentence, the pattern for the payment of all sins is the shedding of innocent blood. There are some variations for type and kind of sin, but in the end, all require the shedding of innocent blood.
- F. We could question this method of payment, but this too would be a wrong question. Since God is the aggrieved party—the one we've stolen from, and since he is God and all, he is able to determine the rules of how it was paid for.
- G. While this system was marginally effective for paying for sins, it was never fully effective for restoring the broken relationship between God and man. Ultimately, God's people were judged for their failure to make even the system he gave them work appropriately. They were too broken.
- H. It became clear that only God was in the position to fix this broken arrangement, so He made a new promise through the prophets—that there will be a new covenant. A better one. An eternal one. One that will ultimately come through Israel, but be for all people. Jeremiah 32:38-40 says it this way: ***"And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me."***
- I. Jesus's arrival on earth in the form of a man was the inauguration of this new, eternal covenant, with Israel, and to all mankind.
- J. By his sinless life and atoning death, Jesus opened the door to this new way of seeing God—himself. To reopen the road to eternal life—to the tree of life—Jesus willingly went to the tree of death—the cross.
- K. Jesus did three essential tasks on the cross for us.
 - a. The first of these is redemption. Redemption is the act of buying someone or something back. The closest definition from that time period refers to buying someone back out of slavery. Rather than living inside the means God gave, we have all sold ourselves and everything we have into sin. The first step of Jesus saving us is buying us back.
 - b. The second task is propitiation. Propitiation is the act of paying for the debts someone has accrued. In other words, just because you're not a slave anymore doesn't mean that the debt you had has automatically been paid. Now that you're free, you have to handle the outstanding debt. Jesus did this for us on the cross. Romans 3:25
 - c. The final task Jesus accomplishes for us is justification. Just because we're not slaves and our debt is paid doesn't mean we get instant access to God. We still have to be holy to see God, or the holiness of his presence would kill us. But how would we ever get to this place from where we are? Because Jesus gives us his! When we trust in Jesus, we receive the benefit of his perfect life on earth, so that when we die, when God looks at us, all he sees is the perfect of Jesus Christ.
- L. He was able to do all of these things because he was something the world has never seen: fully human and fully God. ***Colossians 1:11-22, Romans 3:21-26***

- M. If that seems complicated, I want to explain it again, by an analogy. Imagine you're playing Monopoly because you've forgot that no one really like Monopoly, and you've reached the critical mass point about 2.5 hours into the game where all the property is owned, and you haven't done well. The entire board is owned by the other players. The situation we find ourselves in as sinners in this cosmic game of Monopoly is that...
- a. ...we have lost all of our property (which we had to mortgage to survive) and all our money to the jerk we're playing with...
 - b. ...and we are also in jail.
 - c. We have no resources to get us out, and no means to get to any of the nice places on the board—the jerk even owns the dice. There is an impossibly high wall between us and Boardwalk—we will never get back to GO!
 - d. The Jesus shows up, the Creator of the game, and joining the game in progress, taking back all the property on the board from the jerk.
 - e. In this analogy, redemption is a "Get Out of Jail Free" card. Jesus hands us the card. We play it and walk out of jail and are ready to roll the dice.
 - f. Propitiation is Jesus unmortgaging the little property we have and handing us dice and the ability to start moving around the board again.
 - g. Justification is having the person who made the game and has incredibly joined the game in progress handing you the deeds to all of the property he just bought back from the jerk you were playing with, which is now fully developed, and letting you know that when the game ends, you get to hang out with your own mansion on Boardwalk, forever, with him. You went from hopeless in jail with nothing, to kicking it in a mansion on Boardwalk eternally.

IV. What Did Jesus Save Us To?

- A. It's one thing to know that Jesus came. It's another to know that Jesus came to save us. Both are good.
- B. But now it's time for another question: why and for what did Jesus save us?
- C. Very rarely does anyone save a person and then not take interest in what happens after they've been saved.
- D. Very rarely does anyone pay off someone's debt and give them an enormous gift without having a stake in what they do with the gift.
- E. Every sermon you've ever heard about how we should behave boils down to an answer to this question. I could talk for a long time on this. But I'm not going to.
- F. I want to focus on one thing only: the only debt we have left to repay.
- G. If what I have just told you is true, we have had an enormous debt repaid. Jesus tells a parable about a person in our position who has such a debt forgiven who doesn't forgive in Matthew 18:21-35. Let me spoil the suspense: it doesn't go well for the one who has been forgiven who doesn't forgive.
- H. But to put it another, more positive way, I want to leave you today with the way that the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 13, especially v8. In verses 1-7 there, he talks about paying earth debts to the civil authorities, but then turns quickly to a debt he says we can never repay: the continuing debt to love each other.
- I. Jesus Christ did what He did for us because He loves us. And in the most basic way, what we have been saved for—what we have been saved to do—is demonstrate that love to the people around us.
- J. This goes both for us as believers, but also to those people who are still stuck in prison to their sin or mortgaged up to their eyeballs in it, despairing about their next roll of the dice. The practical and organic outflow of a person who knows they are loved is that they will love others—even those who are unlovable. Those who are forgiven much, love much.
- K. God stepped up and did something that only he could do—he died for the sins of humanity. But now it's our turn to "do likewise:" to let the love of God flow to those who are most in need of it.
- L. My challenge to you this week is to do 2 things: (1) consider what God saved you from. (2) find one way to show someone who God loves this Christmas season the love of God. It doesn't have to be a big thing, but make the step. Find a way. Do a thing. It's the simplest way for us to show who our God in this world.