



Is There Any Room for Questions?

A Sermon for Advent
Matthew 11:1-11

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Each year as we re-tell the Christmas story, we often ponder the question posed by Joseph as he sought lodging in Bethlehem: Is there any room? And, of course, the answer was the same from each of the innkeepers he questioned: Sorry, no room in the inn.

With this question in mind, “Is there any room?”, let’s skip over to this 11th chapter of Matthew’s gospel and take another look at our friend John the Baptist.

Dr. William Barclay puts it this way: “The career of John [the Baptist] had ended in disaster.”¹ We are aware, of course, that John did not soften the truth for anyone, and now we see him in prison. Why? Because he dared to speak a word of condemnation to King Herod.

It seems that King Herod (Herod Antipas AHN-tee-pahs) of Galilee had paid a visit to his brother in Rome. During that visit he fell in love with his brother’s wife. When he came home to Galilee, he divorced his wife and asked his brother’s wife to come and marry him. Yes, I know, it sounds like a steamy soap opera, doesn’t it?

John the Baptist, never one to back down from controversy, publicly and sternly rebuked Herod. Well, you can imagine how Herod took this public rebuke from this prophet, and he threw John into the dungeon of the fortress of Machaerus² (muh-CHEE-ruhs) in the mountains near the Dead Sea.

If there was ever a fish out of water, it was John in this dungeon. All his life he had lived in the open spaces, the spacious sky the roof over his head. Possibly, John had not lived in a house in his adult life, and the confines of this dark dungeon must have been agony for him.

John, of course, had been certain that his cousin Jesus was the long-promised Messiah. He had preached that to those who came to him to be baptized. But now in the confines of this prison cell, questions began to form in his mind.

So, he sent some of his friends to go see Jesus and ask him directly: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

I am sure you are aware that in some Christian groups there is no room for questions. But when you wonder about something, it is nice to have room for questions. John needed to know. He was soon to lose his life and he needed to tie up any loose ends. If Jesus was not Messiah, the Chosen One of God, John needed to know that so he could look for someone else.

You may recall that when James O’Kelly and his colleagues founded the Christian denomination in Surry County in the 1790’s, they adopted the Six Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church³. One of those principles states that each of us has “The right of private judgment, interpretation of scripture, and liberty of conscience.” I take that to mean that in our church questions are always welcome.

It has been suggested that John’s question to Jesus was a question of faith and hope⁴. John had seen Jesus at his baptism. There in the prison he thought about Jesus more and more, certain that Jesus was the One promised by God. So this may not be the question of a doubting man but a question of one who simply asked for confirmation of the hope in his heart.

And notice Jesus’ answer: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are

cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”

Jesus’ response to John’s disciples was essentially to say “Don’t tell John what I am saying; tell John what I am doing. Don’t tell John what I am claiming to do; tell him what is going on here.”

Jesus was all but demanding that the strictest test should be applied to his ministry, the test of results, of actions taken, of good things happening. And even today he says to each of us, “Look what I can do for you; see what I have done for others.”

Is there any room this Christmas for questions? Of course there is!

But still, we know that questions can cause some discomfort. In some churches questions are seen as a sign that someone is losing their faith or simply causing trouble. In some homes questions are not permitted. I certainly hope this is not true in our church or in our homes.

Questions are often the way we sort through all the options, a way of gaining information that we need to form opinions or decide on a course of action.

With our son undergoing chemotherapy for these past several months, I have often pondered the role of those who have made great medical discoveries. They are women and men of science who are not satisfied with the knowledge we presently have; they want more knowledge, more understanding of the human body, more information about disease, more options for treatment. If they did not ask questions, there would be no treatment or healing. And, believe me, they all have been on my personal prayer list, giving thanks to God that, yes, they question everything!

Eugene Peterson, whom we know as the author of *The Message*, a modern translation of the Bible, tells the story of wanting to discuss some

feelings he was having that he believed had to do with God. It was the summer after his second year of college. His first two attempts at finding someone who would listen to him didn't work out very well. Those two were more interested in telling Dr. Peterson about their concerns. Finally, Dr. Peterson encountered a man⁵ who treated his interest in God and his hunger for prayer with respect and dignity. This man listened to the young college student and let him ventilate all his thoughts and feelings without judging him.

Years after that wonderful encounter, Dr. Peterson wrote, "He let me be. He didn't mess with my soul. He treated me with dignity. I felt a large roominess in his company -- a spiritual roominess, room to move around, room to be free."⁶

Is there any room for questions this year at Christmas? I sure hope so! As one writer⁷ put it, "Questions aren't bad, but not allowing them to be asked is. Questions are a way of loving God with our minds. Through questions we reach and explore and gain a better understanding of important matters. And even if someone else already has the very same answer, it is still worth the journey for us to come to know it firsthand."

So let's not be disturbed by John's question, or the questions of other people, or even by your own questions. Rather, let's give thanks that our faith is alive and growing and that there is still lots of things we don't know yet. And also, let's give God thanks for all the people in our lives who accept us and love us and give us space and encouragement to grow in our faith and our knowledge.

And as we allow room for questions, I pray that we will end up at the feet of our Lord Jesus, learning from him. "The things that Jesus did in Galilee he still does. In him those who were blind to the truth about themselves, about their fellow-men and about God, have their eyes opened; in him those whose feet were never strong enough to remain in the right way are strengthened; in him those who were tainted with the disease of sin are

cleansed; in him those who were deaf to the voice of conscience and of God begin to listen; in him those who were dead and powerless in sin are raised to newness and loveliness of life; in him the poorest man inherits the riches of the love of God.”⁸

So, yes, there is room this year at Christmas, and every day, for those questions we must ask. And God listens to us, loves us, and saves us from our sins. May Jesus truly come this Christmas once again to your heart and life.

Let us pray:

O Gracious God, we thank you for this marvelous story of John and his struggles there in prison. We thank you for Jesus, for his ministry here on earth, and for his continuing ministry in our own hearts and lives yet today. May we always love you, always serve you, and always love your people. We pray this in the name of Jesus our Lord and Saviour.

Amen

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1. *William Barclay's Daily Study Bible*, <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/matthew-11.html>. Dr. Barclay (1907 - 1978) was a Church of Scotland minister and Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow.
2. A palace-fortress located about fifteen miles southeast of the mouth of the Jordan River on a site rising 3,600 feet above the sea. See "Machaerus", in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, edited by Trent C. Butler, <http://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/hbd/m/machaerus.html>, c. 1991.
3. The principles are as follows:
 1. Christ, the only head of the Church.
 2. The Bible, the sufficient rule of faith and practice.
 3. Christian character, the only measurement for membership.
 4. The right of private judgment, interpretation of scripture, and liberty of conscience.
 - 5 The name "Christian", worthy for Christ's followers.
 6. Unity of all Christ's followers in behalf of the world.
4. Dr. Barclay, cited above.
5. His name is Rueben Lance.
6. From Dr. Peterson's book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 186.
7. The Rev. Dr. William B. Kincaid, III, *And Then Came The Angel: Gospel Sermons for Advent/Christmas/Epiphany* (CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), pg. 23 ff. Dr. Kincaid serves as the Director of Field Education at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana.
8. So well-said by Dr. Barclay, cited above.