

September 14: What Would Jesus Say? (John 1:1-14)

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Welcome, my friends, to our Fall sermon series titled, “What Would Jesus Say?” Usually, when a pastor gets up to preach, the congregation expects them to “bring the word”; to share a message that they can chew on and take home with them. For the next ten weeks, however, Pastor Meg and I won’t primarily be bringing you a word. We’ll be bringing you a question – a question Jesus asked 2000 years ago, and a question we believe Jesus is still asking us today. As we hear and study Jesus’ questions together, our hope is that they won’t just arouse curiosity in us, but will challenge and transform us as individuals and as a community. We are excited that you’re with us on this quest. Before we jump into today’s words and questions, please pray with me.

Jesus, you are the Word, the divine Logos. Thank you for choosing to dwell with us, for entering into our burning questions, for living them out with perfect grace and truth. Thank you for the questions you invite us to live into. Please take my own words and empower them to challenge and connect. Be our guide and companion today as we come to you with open hearts. In your name, Amen.

I’m going to begin this whole sermon series with a joke that came from my Dad, king of the Dad jokes, many years ago. I won’t tell it as well as he did, but I’m going to try to do it justice. Are you ready?

Once upon a time, there was an eager new Sunday School teacher who took over a class of 5 and 6-years-olds. On her first Sunday teaching, she sat the kids down in a circle and told them that she was going to give them some clues, and see who could be the first to guess the right answer. The students all looked excited and eager, and she could see them getting ready to shoot their hands into the air.

“Okay,” she began. “I’m thinking of a little animal with a bushy tail that lives in trees and likes to collect acorns. Can anybody guess what it is?” To her surprise, nobody raised their hand – in fact, everybody suddenly looked bewildered. “Does anybody want to try to guess the answer?” the teacher pleaded after a long pause, and finally a brave little girl put up a tentative hand.

“Teacher,” said the little girl, “I know the right answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel.”

If you grew up going to church, you probably get this joke, because in many, many Christian spaces, the right answer is *always* Jesus – and not just in Sunday School. Jesus is presented as the answer to every problem, every dilemma, every question, no matter what age you are. The images on the screen there come from a quick Google image search, and they represent just a few of the many products that claim Jesus as the answer, the *only* answer, to everything. My favorite is the coffee mug that says, “Life happens. Coffee helps. But Jesus is the answer.”

And it’s not much of a jump from proclaiming that Jesus *is* the answer to everything to claiming that Jesus *has* the answer to everything, which is also a common message in a lot of Christian spaces (just look at that next slide of slogans and books). Whether you’re struggling with life, or addiction, or your marriage, or kids, or unemployment, or suffering in the world, Jesus has the answers. Just open up the Bible, the great answer book, and find what you need to solve your problem.

If you actually do that though; if you actually open your Bible and read the four gospels devoted to telling Jesus’ story, you don’t find a man who provided a lot of answers. Throughout the gospels, Jesus is asked a total of 183 questions, by a variety of people, and do you know how many he responds to with a direct answer? Somewhere between 3 and 8, depending on how you define “direct.” Jesus was way more likely to respond to a question with a story, or an action, or especially with another question, than he was to respond with a clear answer. Jesus himself asked a total of 307 different questions in the gospels, and he was 40 times more likely to ask a question than give a direct answer.

Jesus’ very first words in Luke and John are questions, and his very last words before his death in Mark and Matthew are also a question – in fact, 10% of Jesus’ recorded activity was question asking. And if Jesus had such a strong preference for questions rather than direct answers 2000 years ago, he probably still does today. Following Jesus is much more likely to lead you into new and deeper questions than to give you answers to everything.

The Gospel writers use several words to try to describe who Jesus is, but “answer” is never one of them – that’s our own invention. In the prologue to the gospel of John, which we read this morning, Jesus is introduced to us not

as the answer, but as the *Logos*, the Word: “In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made.” (John 1:1, 2). *Logos* is a Greek term that is not easily defined – it means “word, saying, statement, or message,” but goes far beyond that. If you were a Greek scholar 2000 years ago who was familiar with Stoicism, you’d hear the word *logos* and think of it as the intelligent, rational structure that orders the cosmos, the divine reason that governs all reality.

If you were Jewish, though, you’d hear John’s prologue and immediately think of the first verses in Genesis, where “in the beginning,” God’s powerful spoken word brought the heavens and the earth into existence and made light shine into the darkness (Genesis 1:1-4). You’d hear John’s words about God’s glory and the *Logos* dwelling, or tabernacling, among us, and you’d think about how God’s glory descended to fill the tabernacle in the wilderness during the time of Moses, and how this was the sign that God was dwelling and traveling with God’s people (Exodus 40:34-38). You’d hear John’s account of how the *Logos* was with God in the beginning, and how all things were made through him, and you’d remember how the book of Proverbs personified Wisdom, or *Sophia*, as one who was with God in the beginning, rejoicing as God created (Proverbs 8:22-31).

And then you’d hear something unbelievable – that this *Logos* of God – God’s animating power, reason, creativity, glory, wisdom, will, and divine being – became flesh and dwelt among us so that we might see clearly who God is and become children of God. The incredibly complex and indefinable divine *Logos* became a flesh-and-blood human being in order to be with us and make God known to us. Jesus didn’t come to us as a divine Answer Man to solve all our questions and problems; he came to dwell among us as a vulnerable human being, full of grace and truth, who entered into our complex problems and pain and struggles and questions *with us*, consistently revealing God’s heart and mind and will in his responses. Jesus didn’t become the incarnate *Logos* to give us a logical answer to why a good God allows suffering and injustice to exist; instead, he entered fully into that suffering and bore the full brunt of the world’s injustice, in order that he might draw us out. Everything Jesus said and did on earth is a perfect glimpse into who God is and what truth is. And one thing that Jesus showed us pretty clearly is that God doesn’t value definitive answers the same way that we value and crave them. God prefers questions.

Why do you think that is? If Jesus was full of grace and truth, as John wrote, why did he ask so many questions and give so few direct answers?

Four centuries before Jesus was born, Socrates upended Greek thought with his persistent questions. He didn't proclaim his views in long speeches or the written word; instead, he asked question after question, in what is now known as Socratic dialogue, forcing his listeners to examine their own views and assumptions and making them uncomfortable. Socrates considered himself a gadfly, or a small, biting insect that doesn't let you rest. Like a gadfly's bites goad a sluggish horse into action, Socrates wanted to arouse the city of Athens from its apathy, and his biting questions did just that – they challenged the status quo and threatened people in power, leading to Socrates' trial and condemnation. Socrates showed that the right questions can be both effective and dangerous – they expose hypocrisy and bring to light things that people would rather keep hidden. It's easier to ignore an answer than a question that demands your participation.

Some of Jesus' questions were like gadflies – they challenged, exposed, and enraged people in authority, threatening their monopoly on knowledge and power. Questions like, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?" (Luke 5:22) or "Do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44) made people notice what, or who, they might otherwise overlook. They threatened complacency and interfered with people's lives.

But Jesus' questions were more than just gadflies. A good question can also be like a midwife – it can help bring something hidden deep inside in us to birth, encouraging us in labor that is hard, and often painful, but incredibly productive. Answers tend to bring closure and certainty – which can be important. But answers alone have no power if we don't care about the question they're responding to. It's the questions that open things up and expand possibilities, that require us to wrestle and listen and change.

Jesus was master of these kinds of midwife-like-questions: for example, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:36, 51), "Why are you afraid?" (Mark 4:40), or "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6). These are questions can bring forth not just answers, but also buried knowledge, or insight, or desire, or deeper questions, or even something ugly which needs to be put in the light so it can be healed. And often it's both the process of honest wrestling, as well as the new thing we bring to birth, that form us. If we don't have a good question, it's going to be hard to find a good answer.

Questions also form us because they build intimacy and relationship. Have any of you ever been with someone who just talks the whole time and never asks you any questions? My guess is that you don't feel deeply known when you're with that person, and you probably don't seek out time with them. Questions connect us with others, and they can break down defenses and disarm us when we'd otherwise protect our vulnerabilities. One of my favorite disarming questions is when Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well with every reason to distrust him. Instead of approaching her with wise words or exhortation or the answer to her problems, he led with a question that put him in a position of need and vulnerability and gave her the upper hand: "Will you give me a drink?" (John 4:7) Her surprise at his question led to a deep conversation that transformed her and her whole village.

Jesus, the divine *Logos*, came to transform us and transform the world so that we can live into the joy and goodness and *shalom* that God created us for. And questions are essential tools in that lifelong *quest*. They help us know what we're looking for and keep us on track. As we face the complexities and mysteries and suffering of our lives, Jesus doesn't promise us all the answers, but he does commit to being the way and the truth and the life, *with us*, as we courageously wrestle with the questions that transform us.

As we enter this Fall sermon series about Jesus' words and questions, I want to challenge us to do a few things.

First, I want us to think about the questions we ask and wrestle with and pay attention to, because those questions form us, and not every question is created equal.

There are some questions that are just not very useful. I've learned that asking my kids, "What were you thinking?" after one of their actions resulted in disaster is almost always futile, because there usually wasn't a lot of careful thought involved. "What *should* you have been thinking?" tends to be more fruitful.

There are also questions that are not truly open-ended, like "Does this outfit make me look ugly?" There's just one good answer to that question, and if you're the one being questioned, it behooves you to get it right!

It is also very possible to ask disingenuous questions: questions whose purpose is to accuse or justify or manipulate, like “How could you be so stupid?” or “Did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?” (Genesis 3:1) That’s the first question in the Bible, and it was formative in a pretty negative way. In a court trial, lawyers make objections to these types of questions, and a judge will often throw them out.

There are whole sections of the gospels documenting how Jesus’ opponents tried to trap him with disingenuous questions, as well as his thoughtful comebacks and the revealing questions he asked in return. One of the verses that amuses me is Matthew 22:46, at the end of one of these trick question sessions, where Jesus finally asked his own question and “no one dared say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.” Jesus’ opponents didn’t want to honestly wrestle with questions – they just wanted to use them to bring Jesus down. And they missed the transformation he invited them into.

My challenge to us is to ask questions that are thoughtful, honest, and formative, questions that we’re willing to wrestle with ourselves – and to truly do that takes courage and vulnerability.

I’m sure you’re all aware of the horrific assassination of Charlie Kirk that took place while he was debating college students in Utah on Wednesday. In the wake of his murder, one of the main questions I’ve heard, again and again, is a version of “Who is to blame?” – and most people immediately point their finger at someone or something they already disagree with. I admit that I’ve also looked for the answer to the question of blame; however, I don’t think it’s the best question for forming us into a nation of justice and peace. As we reflect on what happened last Wednesday, what other questions could we ask? What are the thoughtful, honest, and formative questions that we need to be wrestling with? I would love to hear what you think.

Of course, the heart of this sermon series is the questions that Jesus asked, and our biggest challenge is to explore Jesus’ own questions; not just in their original cultural context of 2000 years ago, but in our own context, here, today. I want to invite you to hear Jesus’ questions addressed to you, and to sit with them, wrestle with them, and listen to what they stir in you. Don’t rush to find an answer – instead, pray the questions back to Jesus, and be patient with ambiguity and mystery. Let the questions themselves form you – maybe they’ll bring something new to birth in you.

When I preached on the fruit of patience back in July, I quoted Austrian author Rainer Maria Rilke, from his *Letters to a Young Poet*, and I want to quote him again: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves...do not now seek answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them...Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without knowing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”¹

There are ten questions of Jesus we’ll explore over the next ten weeks, but I’m going to start us off with a bonus question to begin living with right away. It comes just a few verses after the prologue we read, and it’s the very first thing Jesus says in the gospel of John. Two disciples of John the Baptist have just left him to follow Jesus, and Jesus turns around and greets them with this question: “What are you looking for?” (John 1:37)

“What are you looking for?” That’s our first question – not just for the next week, but for the rest of our lives. Because the answer to that question will determine not just what we eventually find, but also the path we take as we look for it, and what we notice and find along the way. It will help reveal our deepest values and desires and longings, so exploring it honestly will demand that we be vulnerable.

“What are you looking for?” I pray that question will challenge and form you as you pursue and live it, and that you’ll invite Jesus, the *Logos* who chose to dwell with us, to walk with you on your quest. May you find joy and peace and transformation on the journey. Amen.

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by M.D. Herter (Norton, 1954), p.46-47.