

The Quest

From the series: Q & Q: The Religious Quest and Question

Text: Micah 4:5; Matthew 2:1-2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Since worship had to be canceled because of the weather last week, this is the first time we gather in worship in 1999, and I wish you a Happy New Year. The calendar is not all that important; we are on the threshold of the turn of the century and of the millennium, but, that really is no big deal, if you really stop to think about it, for the calendar is a rather parochial matter. It's a human product; we've produced it and it's a western Christian calendar. If you were in China, I suppose it would be the year 6000 or something. If you were in Jerusalem, last year you would have celebrated the 3000th anniversary of the city and I think for the Jewish people it's the year 5,600 and something or other. I didn't know where to find all that information, but it's close. The point is, the year 2000 is no big deal. If it really were a big deal, it would have happened four years ago because there is a mistake in the calendar from when it was first put together. Anyway, what I'm saying to you is don't get excited about going into the year 2000. Relax. Have a party. And don't believe any of the rubbish that's around; just don't believe it. There are a few advanced human beings who I understand use computers - they may have a problem for a while. But, outside of that technology, there's going to be no big deal at all.

But the calendar does have this advantage: it reminds us that our life is involved in a movement and there's nothing we can do about it. We can dig in our heels, we can fret, we can try all sorts of things to freeze the moment and hold it back. We can sing the song, "Stop the World and Let Me Off," but it won't do any good, because time marches on and our human story marches on. We are historical people marked by the movement of time. Our days and weeks and months and years go on and the calendar's turning. The calendar on the wall is a sign of the fact that time moves, we move, inevitably. And so, the calendar is an opportunity for us at this time of the year to take stock and to look to the future. In the Church, the 6th of January is the Feast of Epiphany which means the manifestation, the celebration in the Church of its conviction that Light has come into the world, that the child that was born who we believe was the Word made flesh, whose name in the Gospel of Matthew was Emmanuel, a name hardly ever used beyond that, and yet perhaps the finest name of all, that in the flesh of the

child, Emmanuel, God with us, that is the heart of our faith and that's the heart of Christmas. On the Feast of Epiphany we celebrate the fact that in the child, God became human flesh and we have Light in the world, Light in the world for our ongoing journey. For that is the nature of our human existence - we are on a journey. Within us, deep within us there is a quest. We don't pause often enough to acknowledge the quest. We probably don't think about it very often, and then those moments intrude themselves upon us when we ask the ultimate questions, and we ask about the mystery of our existence before the face of the Ultimate Mystery - Who are we? And Why are we here? From whence have we come; whither are we going; and what in the world is God doing?

We are people who have within our depths a question and a quest. It is the very nature of our humanity, and the quest that is endemic to our humanity is the religious quest. The questions are religious questions; they're questions about the Ultimate, about meaning, about purpose, and there is that within our human nature that senses that we are on the way, that we are not where we are going, and that what we have yet experienced lacks completion and fulfillment. When we stop to think about it, we know that that's the very nature of being human, that we are people on the way.

We have a past and today we are able to have a sense of that past as no generations before us, recognizing that whole cosmic story of billions of years that emerged into a story of life, and then life at some point emerging into self-conscious life, some creature in its animality, in a moment becoming aware of itself and of the other, and at that moment, the universe became conscious, and we, humankind, are the consciousness of the cosmos, and it is that which marks us as humans that we ask those ultimate questions, that we are able to go back and to trace that long, long progression, that we become aware of ourselves at this moment and that we contemplate a future into which we are moving, a future uncharted that has surprises that we have not yet dreamed of. That's really the nature of being human. To be human, I believe, is to be on a quest. And to be on a quest is to be asking the religious questions. Something within us, some yearning, some longing for some clue as to what this is all about, who we are, and what in the world God is doing.

A beautiful statement written by C. S. Lewis entitled, "The Signature of the Soul," found in *The Problem of Pain*, says very well what I want to say about that mark of our humanity as having a question embedded in its depths. C. S. Lewis writes,

There are times when I think we do not desire heaven, but more often I find myself wondering whether in our hearts and our heart of hearts we have ever desired anything else...Are not all lifelong friendships born at the moment when at last you meet another human being who has some inkling of that something which you were born desiring and which amid all the flux of other desiring and passion, day and night, year after year, from childhood to old age you have been looking for, watching for, listening for.

You've never had it. All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of it, tantalizing glimpses of it, promises never quite fulfilled. But, if it should ever really become manifest, if ever there came an echo of it that did not fade away but grew louder and swelled into the sound itself, you would know it. Beyond all doubt, you would say, "Here it is. This is that for which I was made." We cannot tell each other about it; it is the secret signature of the soul, the incommunicable, unappeasable want, the thing desired before we made any conscious choices which we shall still desire on our deathbeds. To lose this is to lose all.

The signature of the soul is the quest for meaning, for completion, for fulfillment, for some sense, some clue as to the mystery of our lives before the face of Mystery. That's the nature of our human existence, and maybe the turning of the calendar, if it does nothing more, reminds us that we are a people on the way, living always with that deep question, "What is it all about? Who am I? Whence have I come? Whither am I going? And what in the world is God doing?"

Micah speaks of a vision of another world where they'll turn their weapons into farming implements and the nations will learn war no more, where Israel will walk in the name of its God and the nations will walk in the name of their God, and everyone will be unafraid, sitting under his or her vine and fig tree. That peaceful, serene setting that must be at the depths of the longing within us when we realize that what is cannot be all there is, that there must be something more, some other world, some new age.

But, it was not only the Hebrew prophets who had such a longing, who had a sense of quest, for it is the symbol of Epiphany that a star aroused Magi, those mysterious astrologers from the East, to seek out the birth of one whom they felt signaled in the stars was destined for royalty, and they made their way to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem and knelt before the child. The Church has, somewhat triumphalistically said, "You see, it was the beginning of the coming of all nations to the true God, to the true Light." Well, I would say rather, it is an indication of the universality of the longing of the quest for God, for truth, for reality. The journey of the Magi is simply symbolic in the way we tell the Christmas story of our conviction that we are on a quest for the living God, and the celebration of the fact that that God has caused the Light to dawn upon us, not to end our quest, but to whet our appetite, to dig more deeply into that quest, following the star, seeking to fill that hole in the soul that marks us as the restless ones who are ever on the move.

On this first worshiping Sunday of the New Year, I'm really excited to announce the establishment of a new ministry at Christ Community. It is an adjunct ministry of The Center for Religion and Life. I have in my hands a brochure which you'll all have in your hands before long. The Center for Religion and Life, which announces the coming in February and the first weekend of Lent, February

19-21, the presence of John Dominic Crossan, who is, I think I can say without refutation, the world's preeminent scholar in the research for the historical Jesus. John Dominic Crossan will inaugurate a lecture series in 1999 under the auspices of The Center for Religion and Life. He'll be followed by Marcus Borg, the most popular writer and author in this whole historical Jesus quest. In the fall, we'll have Amy-Jill Levine who is a Jewish scholar teaching New Testament at Vanderbilt University, and then perhaps the most controversial churchman in America today, Bishop John Shelby Spong coming to us, as the brochure says, to help us re-imagine Christian faith for the third millennium.

This Center for Religion and Life has a logo, which is Q & Q, selected very deliberately, because today popularly you will see, "Q & A." What's the question? This is the answer. And I think throughout the long history of the Church, Q & A would fit appropriately. What's the question? We have the answer. Christ Community is going to inaugurate a Center for Religion and Life that will be marked not by Q & A, but by Q & Q, by Quest and Question, for we come to acknowledge, as I said a moment ago, that it is the very nature of our human existence that we are in movement, on a journey, and that within our depths there is a quest for meaning which is, I believe, the quest for God. We will honor that quest, seeking to help people clarify the questions, for to be human, to be honest is to live without absolute answers. Life is a mystery. Too often, for too long in the Church, we have promised too much. We have made premature closure on those Ultimate questions that drive our restlessness, and so we felt that it was time for a congregation to establish a Center where the quest can be honored and the questions sought to be clarified, the quest of our human existence, the questions that impinge upon our human existence, a Center where, as an adjunct to this total ministry, we can create a space, a forum, if you will, where those questions can be honestly pursued.

Why? Because the Christian faith needs desperately to be translated in light of the explosion of modern knowledge. I am not being critical; I am stating a fact quite simply: The Church at large has never come to terms with the knowledge, the explosion of knowledge in the modern world. Why do it? Because our story comes out of an ancient world and an ancient framework which is not in any way to denigrate the truth that came to expression, simply to recognize that the structures within which the story was told are structures that have long since been put to rest while a whole new world has exploded, a world that needs to have the interpretation and the critique of the faith, but which also must critique the faith drawing from it new answers and new understandings and insights in order that faith and life may illumine each other.

Why do it? Because the Gospel is good news, and it does need to be presented in such a fashion that it can connect with people of contemporary experience so that the Church doesn't become a museum piece, lauding yesterday's answers to today's questions, but allowing the Gospel fresh expression through hard work,

theological reflection, biblical study in order that we may find a way to speak good news into the future.

Why Christ Community? Well, because we've been doing it for a long time here. You have been a wonderful congregation that has encouraged me to continue to think the faith, and Christ Community is a rather rare situation. Not many people with my passion and my interest go into the ministry or stay in the ministry. Not in the pastoral ministry. There are all kinds of places to go where one can think unfettered by the pastoral setting, but it has been who I am, but you have allowed me in this setting to continue to think and to think out loud on this stool, and we've always had a freedom here to think the faith, reflect on the faith, probe the edges. Why Christ Community? Because this is a most rare place where over a quarter of a century of theological reflection has been translated into preaching that has developed a community that is the laboratory by which the theology can be tested. You are the fruit of the theological reflection which has found expression in preaching, and there aren't a lot of situations like this.

But there's another reason why Christ Community and that is that we have not only that tradition of free inquiry combining evangelical passion with intellectual integrity, but we also have a new burst of freedom and freshness. We, in our independent status, have no ecclesiastical pressures or obligations. We are free to think the faith as never before. I've had an interesting experience in the last year and I've mentioned it to you, I'm sure, in conversation, if we've talked about it. I've always felt I had a free pulpit here and you've been a wonderful congregation to allow me to indulge my habit, but I have today a freedom that I didn't know I didn't have, and that's a fascinating experience. I have a freedom today I didn't know I didn't have. And so, while this is nothing new, really, we're going to do it with a new intentionality and a new deliberateness and a new publicness. We're going to do our best to create here an oasis where every question is honored, where there is no subject that is off limits, where in conversation, in community, we can think together in the presence of the mystery that is God.

Why do it? It needs desperately to be done, and there aren't many, either in academy or congregation, that are doing it.

Why do it here? Because of the position of freedom that allows that kind of honest inquiry.

Why do it now? I'm getting old. I don't have long to go anymore. I have to get on it. If we're ever going to do it, we've got to do it. I mean, if you want to do it with me, and I'd like to do it with you, so let's do it together. Honoring the quest, clarifying the questions; breaking new ground, unafraid, because we really believe in the Good News, in the grace of God that has appeared in the Word made flesh who is the Light of the world, who beckons wise ones.