

“Who Is This Jesus?”
Romans 11:33-36 & Matthew 16:13-20
August 27, 2017

Out of all the basic questions in the world – who, what, where, when, why, and how – the most difficult one to answer is the “why” question. If you tell someone there are more than 100 million stars in the galaxy, that person will probably believe you; but if you tell that same person that the wall over here has wet paint on it, what will he/she do? They will touch the wall. Why? Why is it called a hamburger when it’s made out of beef? Why doesn’t glue stick to the inside of the bottle? If people evolved from monkeys and apes, then why do we still have monkeys and apes? When two airplanes almost collide, why do they call it a “near miss?” To me it sounds like a “near hit,” but they don’t call it a “near hit.” Why? Why do we drive on a parkway and park in a driveway? If the black box flight recorder is never damaged during a plane crash, then why isn’t the whole airplane made out of those materials?

Now we can laugh at those questions, but somewhere along the line in our life we run into a serious “why” question that just doesn’t have an answer or at least not one that comes easily. And those are hard for us to accept, because as adults we often think we have to answer all questions. We’re not comfortable with the unsatisfying “I don’t know” answer. So if we don’t know the answer, certainly someone should. Ask the professor, ask the doctor, ask the counselor, ask the government official, ask the pastor. That’s what the professional is there for, right? To answer the questions we can’t answer. Why am I still having pain in my leg? Why is road construction taking so long?

Sometimes there are clear, straightforward answers. We saw this in our Gospel lesson for today when Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Other times our answers are only guesses. And sometimes the best response we can give is, “I don’t know. Most likely no one knows, but I’ll try to help you through it.” But there is still something deep within us that often feels unsettled when the question goes unanswered. “If God is love, then why is there so much hate and fighting in the world? If God is all-powerful, then why didn’t He stop that hurricane from hitting the east coast of Texas?” Unanswered questions are part of our lives and part of our faith. Perhaps that’s why it’s called “faith.” If Christianity were all answers and no questions, if it just contained things you could control or manage or understand, we wouldn’t need faith. But Christianity involves faith, it is a journey of faith, and it is a good journey, because the answers that Christianity provides really are solid and satisfying.

But as Christians we don’t claim that we have all the answers to every question. When innocent people were killed in Charlottesville and many asked, “Why?” it’s hard when we don’t know what to say, especially when the Bible tells us that God is intimately involved in all of the details of the world. For example, Matthew 10:29-30 says, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” This means when the hurricane blew through the east coast of Texas this weekend, God knew exactly which birds were blown to the ground. And when you got up this morning and looked at yourself in the mirror, God knew exactly which hairs fell out of your head last night. Now you might not care that hairs 7533 through 7887 fell out last night, but God knows because He has them all numbered. So detailed is God’s knowledge of us.

But just because He knows everything that happens does not mean that God causes everything to happen. God knows how many hairs fell out of your head last night, but that doesn’t mean God pulled them out. He knows which sparrows were killed in the Texas storm last night, but that doesn’t mean that God knocked them down. So does God just know everything that happens or does He also cause things to happen?

These were the struggles that Paul was having in the book of Romans. Paul knew that nothing could separate us from the love of God, so what happened to his fellow Jews? Why did they turn their backs on God? They were God’s chosen people and God raised up a Messiah from among them, so why did they reject Jesus, one of their own, as their Savior? Was this part of God’s plan? Did God cause them to reject Jesus or did they do this on their own? How can God be in control of the world, but not have His chosen people under His control? How does the rule of God over this world and the free will of human beings fit together?

You and I may not have asked these specific questions that Paul was wrestling with, but we have probably all at one time or another asked the same basic question: “If God is in charge, then why _____?” In the midst of those questions, Paul actually gives us some comfort in the words of our second lesson from Romans

11:33 saying, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” After wrestling with so many hard questions as to why his fellow Jews had fallen away from God and His love, Paul realizes that God’s plan for the world is indeed a mystery in that His wisdom and knowledge are so great that it is impossible for us to understand His decisions and His methods. It is certainly acceptable to ask questions about God and to try to solve some of the mysteries of God, but we will never be able to understand it all and that’s ok. Real peace comes when we simply rest in the arms of our God who wrote the mystery.

Try this little exercise sometime: Picture 100 years, in either direction. Go back to the year 1917 or look ahead to 2117. Next picture 1000 years – the year 1017 or the year 3017, that’s a little harder. Then try to picture eternity – eternity past and eternity future. Can you do that? Or try to comprehend the universe. Many of us looked up at the sky this past week and saw the eclipse. Now think how that sky doesn’t stop. Picture the farthest point you can think of and then what’s beyond that. I don’t know about you, but I just can’t do that. So if we cannot wrap our brain around some of these common things, how can we ever expect to grasp the ways of our eternal, infinite God – who made this world out of nothing? A pastor once told me, “God gave human beings a mind and it’s our duty to use our mind to the very limit of human thought. But it is also true that there are times when that limit is reached and all that is left is to accept and adore our loving God.” Or, again, as Paul said today, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”

Accepting that not only leads to peace, but it also leads to humility. Our Gospel lesson for today reminds us that it is good for us to know what we believe about Jesus and to be able to defend it. Jesus asked His disciples what the people were saying about Him and they reported several different opinions people had about Jesus. Some said He was John the Baptist, even though John had already been beheaded by King Herod. But Jesus’ message was so similar to John’s that many people thought that Jesus was John the Baptist brought back from the dead. Others thought Jesus was Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets from the Old Testament brought back to life. While the opinion of the people indicated that they had a high regard for Jesus, unfortunately they did not see Him as the Messiah, because He did not meet their expectations of who they thought the Messiah should be.

Many people today have a positive opinion of Jesus, but their opinions also miss the mark. Ask any Muslim about Jesus and they will say, “A prophet – yes, but God – no.” Ask a Jewish person about Jesus and they will say, “A teacher – yes, but the Messiah – no.” Ask people who live around you about Jesus and they may tell you, “A good moral man – yes; but the only way to heaven – no.” That’s why we encourage everyone to be involved not only in worship, but also in Bible classes that will begin in a few weeks on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings, or in some kind of small group Bible study that meets on another day of the week so that you will know more about Jesus, can defend your faith, will feel comfortable saying, “I don’t know” when it comes to questions about God and His ways, and confident to invite others to come to worship and Bible study with you saying, “Let’s learn together about our Savior, Jesus, whose wisdom and knowledge are beyond our comprehension, but who loves us, promises never to leave us, and will give us His peace when things don’t make sense. I don’t know everything about Jesus, but one thing I do know without question is: He is my God and in Him alone there is hope and life.”