

LENT 2023



THE QUESTIONS *that matter*



UNIVERSITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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WRITE YOUR QUESTIONS BELOW

I wonder...

Why.....

What...

When.....

Where...



ADOPT A
POSTURE OF INQUIRY
TOWARDS GOD.

As children of God we are invited into an intimate relationship where we are welcomed and even encouraged to present our inquiries before the Lord as a child would approach a loving and trustworthy parent.

What is one question that you would like to ask God?

TIPS TO ENGAGE CHILDREN

We open a door of possibility for kids by inviting them to come to the feet of God with honest questions, trusting that God meets them with open arms. One way to introduce this practice is to encourage them to frame their questions into "I wonder" statements...

Invite them to finish this sentence:

"I wonder....."



READ GENESIS 2:15-17, 3:1-17

After reading this week's passage take some time to consider anything that arises in response to this exchange between humankind and the serpent. If you could ask God anything about this, what would it be?

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26TH

In a lecture given on the creation story, Dr. Elaine Heath, Elder in the UMC & former Dean of Duke Divinity School, asked this question:

*Why was the serpent in the garden in the first place?
Why did God allow evil to approach humankind
in such a slick and cunning way?
Was this a story of original sin? Or of original evil?*

What is your reaction and/or response to Heath's question?

Author and philosopher Dallas Willard once defined sin in this way,

*"Sin is when we inwardly say 'yes' to a temptation,
when we would do the deed if the conditions were right,
even if we do not actually do it."*

So, to be free from sin, according to Willard, is not to be free from temptation, but to have disengaged the will from the path that would allow room for that temptation to become action.

What is your response to this definition of sin?

PRACTICE OF THE WEEK:

fasting

*"Fasting is a way to turn your body into an ally in your fight
with the flesh rather than an adversary."*

-John Mark Comer

For hundreds of years the church mirrored Jesus' own temptation in the wilderness by fasting from sun up until sun down for the forty days of Lent. Based on your own unique health needs, consider fasting for a period of time that is safe for you. You might choose to fast from a certain meal, a particular type of food or drink, or engage in a Wesleyan Fast which is traditionally observed from sundown on Thursday to sundown on Friday.

Hold the questions that you asked of God on the first page of this book before you as a focal point during this time of prayer.

*"Logic cannot
comprehend
love;
so much the
worse for logic."*

-N.T. WRIGHT,
SURPRISED
BY HOPE



READ JOHN 3:1-17

Nicodemus was likely a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling council of the Jews. This council was comprised of an elite class of religious experts who assessed what was right and true based on evidence and reason. Jesus challenges the lens through which Nicodemus has been taught to see the world by stating, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" What was the cause of the breach between Nicodemus' head knowledge and his lack of understanding?

SUNDAY MARCH 5TH

This passage affirms that life in Christ is contingent on faith. What are some of the biggest road blocks to faith in both your life and the world today?

Nicodemus comes to Jesus "by night," why do you think this is? And how do you think we may be tempted to do the same?

PRACTICE OF THE WEEK:

memorization

Prior to his famous "Aldersgate experience," Peter Böhler urged a then-struggling John Wesley saying, "preach faith till you have it, and then you will preach faith." We can begin this work simply by preaching faith to ourselves. This is particularly important during wilderness times or seasons of desolation when we may feel tempted to turn from the provision of our invisible God and reach for the support of things that we can see.

One tool for doing this is memorization, where we get absorb the words of Scripture, hymns, creeds, and prayers into the bones of our being so that they can support us like a scaffolding from within.

Take some time this week to memorize the words of the hymn, *Blessed Assurance* (or some other creed, prayer, passage or hymn that you believe will preach faith to you.) Sing along, recite the words, listen attentively, or write it in a journal.



*"The wilderness is sanctification.
It is grace-faced scaffolding for our souls."*

- J.R. BRIGGS, FAIL

READ EXODUS 17:1-7

This week's passage took place in a location that was later referred to as Massah and Meribah, Massah is Hebrew for "testing," while Meribah means "quarreling." Can you locate a time in your life when you have tested and/or quarreled with God?

What questions do you have for God in response to this event or season?

WEEK OF MARCH 12TH

Looking back, can you notice any ways that God met your quarreling or questions with some sort of response? Write about that below.

Is there any act of grace evident to you in this experience?

PRACTICE OF THE WEEK:

a movie

Watch (or read) C.S. Lewis' story *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Invite some friends or family to join you both in watching and in discussion afterwards.

You can access this on Prime Video, Netflix, Disney Plus, or Youtube.

What reactions or responses do you have to Aslan's undraggong of Eustace?

How does this reframe the painful work of suffering our way towards resurrection?



"An infinite question is often destroyed by finite answers."

- Madeleine L'Engle

READ JOHN 9:1-41

This week's passage begins with Jesus' disciples asking a question that seeks a definitive explanation to a man's blindness. What are some issues with this mode of thinking (and seeing)?

What do you see at the root of the desire to answer all of life's questions?

WEEK OF MARCH 19TH

What is one way that grace might be extended to us in the mystery of unanswered, open-ended questions?

In her book, *Everything Happens For a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, Kate Bowler writes,

“In a spiritual world in which healing is a divine right, illness is a symptom of unconfessed sin—a symptom of a lack of forgiveness, unfaithfulness, unexamined attitudes, or careless words. A suffering believer is a puzzle to be solved.”

What happens relationally when we see others as puzzles to be solved?

How does this also affect our relationship with God?

PRACTICE OF THE WEEK:

silence

“Silence is one of the deepest disciplines of the Spirit simply because it puts the stopper on all self-justification. One of the fruits of silence is the freedom to let God be our justifier. We don't need to straighten others out.”

-Richard Foster, *Spiritual Classics*

Foster continues by explaining that silence is not something we create, but rather something that exists within us. The work then of silence is in learning how to enter into it and become that silence, allowing ourselves to be silent enough that the interior silence which is the language of the Spirit can emerge.

Carve out some extended time for silence during the week. Turn off notifications on your devices, aiming to silence the noise of the soul so that you might be more attentive to God within.



"If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."

-C.S. LEWIS, MERE CHRISTIANITY

READ EZEKIEL 37:1-14

In today's passage, God posts a question to the prophet, "Can these bones live?" And as the passage continues we find that God does not just swoop in to restore life to the dead, but instead invites Ezekiel into a complex participatory role in the redemption that unfolds. How does this challenge or affirm your present beliefs about the way that God brings the dead back to life?

WEEK OF MARCH 26TH

In today's passage, God is the one asking the question to the prophet, rather than the other way around. What is your response to this illumination of our conversational God?

Why do you think God approached the prophet with a question?

Notice Ezekiel's posture towards God throughout this passage, and his willingness to obey God's commands. What are some things that might hinder a person's ability to do the same?

PRACTICE OF THE WEEK:

music meditation

Find some time to listen meditatively to the song, *I Can Only Imagine*, by Mercy Me.

Can you name the valleys of dry bones before you today? As you listen to the song, lean into the tension between logic and reason and the hope of your imagination, can you imagine life returning here again?

Why? Or why not?



"From Him, therefore, he cheerfully receives all, saying, 'Good is the will of the Lord' and whether He giveth or taketh away, equally blessing the Name of the Lord. Whether in ease or pain, whether in sickness or health, whether in life or death, he giveth thanks from the ground of the heart to Him Who orders it for good; into Whose hands he hath wholly committed his body and soul, 'as into the hands of a faithful Creator'. He is therefore anxiously 'careful for nothing' as having 'cast all his care upon Him that careth for him'; and 'in all things' resting on Him, after 'making his request known to Him with thanksgiving'.

-John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*

(Scripture References: Job 1:21, 1 Peter 4:19, Philippians 4:6, 1 Peter 5:7, Philippians 4:6)

WEEK OF APRIL 2ND

READ MATTHEW 21:1-11

In this week's passage, Matthew points back to the words of the prophets who had declared that the source of Israel's redemption would come humbly, and mounted on the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9 & Isaiah 62:11.) The people of God knew this, yet Jesus still caught many unaware. They were looking for someone different. In what ways might we be prone to missing Jesus in much the same way?

Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem is celebrated as a triumphant moment in the Church, yet He knew that this was His final turn towards the cross. How do we hold the tension between Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane and His steadfast and obedient approach to death?

PRACTICE OF THE WEEK:

visio divina

Reflect on the image of *Christus auf Palmesel* (*Christ on a Donkey*) from the Augustiner Museum in Freiburg. You can find it here:

<https://onlinesammlung.freiburg.de>

In *Show Me the Way*, Henri Nouwen explains that this sculpture was originally made to be pulled by a cart through the Palm Sunday procession, noting:

“But this intimate experience in which every bit of life is touched by a bit of death can point us beyond the limits of our existence. It can do so by making us look forward in expectation to the day when our hearts will be filled with perfect joy, a joy that no one shall take away from us.”

What do you see in this artist's portrayal of Jesus?