

## A Good Question Will Lead Us

### HOLD THE SERMON TITLE SLIDE

There is a story of Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor ElieWeisel from his childhood. It is said that every day when he would return from school and his mother greeted him, she would also ask him the same question. According to the story she did not ask things like “How was your lunch today?” or “What did you learn today?” Rather she would ask, “Did you have a good question today?” The prompt of Weisel’s mother led him to reflect and wonder while he attended school. The prompt led him to think critically, to weigh information rather than simply learn rules of arithmetic or grammar. It was a good question.

### SLIDE – Good Questions

Good questions are ones that are open ended. Good questions open up possibilities.

The questions on the slide:

Which options will allow me to evolve and flourish?

What would I try now if I knew I could not fail?

(Why do I believe what I believe?)

(What does this new info mean to me?)

(How might I make this situation better?)

What’s the evidence behind this claim?

What Big Beautiful Question do I want to pursue?

The Old Testament book of Malachi had some good questions for his day. The book of Malachi was written after the exile of the Hebrew people had ended. They were faced with difficult decisions about how to rebuild after generations had passed. With the passage of time they had become a different people, too, a mixed population. Their mix included those who returned from the exile in Babylon, those who never left the land of Judah, and those who since had moved there and intermarried. The mixed population made for competing voices each claiming they had the “right” direction for the post-exilic community. The post-exilic community could not simply return to life as it was prior to being taken to Babylon. Too much had changed. How would they form a new community of life and faith for their present time?

### SLIDE – Malachi quote with cross image

When our text for today begins, there is a sliver of hope. “See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. The LORD whom you seek will suddenly come into his temple.” But then we hear that the messenger is like a refiner’s fire and fuller’s soap. The positive future comes about according to the prophet along with a time of refining, discipline, cleansing and discerning. One OT professor, Millard Lind, was known to say, “You can’t have exodus without Sinai.” In other words, you cannot fully know what it is to be liberated, to be saved, without understanding the depths of God’s love and care.

Malachi and other prophets of the time saw the difficulties surrounding the people. Navigating competing voices was not the only issue. The economy was also in a downturn, laborers were oppressed with low wages, corruption among governing authorities made life inequitable for widows, orphans and aliens, all those God had long taught God’s people to protect. The negative returns seeped into the worship life with offerings of left-overs rather than first fruits. Their hearts were not in their voice nor was their will in their actions. When Malachi begins we hear the of the people’s bitterness. They are a people disillusioned of their hopes, in despair of God’s faithfulness. The LORD declares “I have loved you’ but the people can only reply, “How has God loved us?”

Sometimes when one thing goes wrong it leads to other missteps. Social challenges, economic woes, political power struggles and corrupt worship were all in play in the sight of Malachi. The perceptions of reality of the community of faith became jaded. The prophet warned, “You have wearied the LORD with your words” but the people responded, “How have we wearied him?” The answer comes back, when you ask “Where is the God of justice?” Malachi then announces that a messenger will set things right by purifying the people. God will bring about the change in hearts and minds. God will re-create the people to once again turn to him.

Finally the people open up to God. “Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when the LORD appears?” Finally the promise takes hold. The people are to return to the covenant God first established with them. They are to see themselves, not just as they have become in this moment of time, but as they were created to be and as they were called to be when God claimed them as God’s people. They finally ask in chapter three, “How shall we return to God?”

God refuses to let go of the vision that God had intended. The blessing hidden in the intensity of the times is that God's call includes the grace of God's agency.

The purpose of the question and answer format in Malachi was to lead God's people to become partners in critical reflection on who God was and what God was about. It would also lead to critical self-reflection by the people on how they were not living out their faith.

This business of critical thinking and reflecting on God's word is no light matter. The questions posed in the prophet's writing will lead to a letting go false certainties and open a pathway for renewal in faith. "Who can endure the day of the Lord's coming?"

"Who will be pure and blameless in the 'day of Christ?'"

"Who will prepare the way by repentance and forgiveness?"

These are all good questions for the season of Advent. In a season where we pray that we are "waiting for the coming of the Lord," Advent questions make us wonder about our worthiness, readiness, and willingness for Christ's coming.

Advent questions remind us that matters of salvation are life and death.

There is an edge to God's coming. There is a bit of uncomfortableness about the ways of God. It is not simply an intellectual exercise.

An excerpt from the story, *The Lion, The witch and the wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis gets at this. Sometimes God gets in our faces, insists that we change our ways, and calls us to take brave action. Similarly, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by C.S. Lewis, when the children are told they will meet Aslan they are wisely concerned. Malachi advises us to await God with the same caution.

"Is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man?" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood, and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion, *the* Lion, the great Lion.

"Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he - - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

“That you will dearie, and make no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then, he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But, he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

The life of faith is about seeing our need of God, of Christ. The work of the prophet Malachi is to redirect the people from all that they see and think is not happening to the reality of what God is doing in their midst. It is an old story. God is the source of life and liberation. God proclaims us worthy and valuable because God’s claims us as God’s people. We baptize infants because we believe this truth, there is nothing we can do nor is there anything you need to do to be loved and accepted by God.

#### SLIDE - Names God gives us

Instead we hear from God that God loves us, and God will never stop loving us. God may call out our lack of faith but only so that God may redeem us and save us. Our lives are bracketed by the big drama of God’s purposes. Whenever we get caught up by the questions we do well to return to God for stories of mercy and righteousness. Imagine God’s large purposes surrounding your life. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil 1:6).

The scriptures remind us we are a work in process. It was true of the Israelites who first were brought out of Egypt, out of the bonds of slavery and delivered by God to be God’s blessed people. In an uninhabitable place, God taught the people about a way of living, in trust, in faith, with thanks and appreciation for God’s daily provisions. But the lessons would not hold. The people would be attracted by some other lesser promise, they would fall away from God, and need to be forgiven and brought back again. They would need to hear and meditate and study God’s word again and again. God’s people are always in need of renewal and restoration, because we live in a world that is already but not yet.

SLIDE – All flesh shall see that salvation

People of faith in every time and place have struggled with this. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, who was a priest who regularly went into the Holy of Holies in the great temple in Jerusalem offering sacrifices to God and being a faithful Jew. Yet when the messenger of God suddenly came to him to the new thing God was doing, making his wife pregnant in her old age with a son who will become a prophet, Zechariah could not believe his ears. So the angel made Zechariah mute, unable to speak until the birth of his son John.

I loved the quote from Anne Lamont in this year's Advent devotions: I do not at all understand the mystery of grace; only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.

Zechariah had about nine months to contemplate what God was up to before his tongue would be freed and he could again speak. His inability to speak is one of these mysteries of grace which does not stand to reason, but in the end it changed him forever.

In our time and place we have our struggles. Everyone knows the world is at an edge. Everybody knows there is too much violence, oppressive ways, and power games. Everybody knows the planet is sick to death. In the midst of this time God is doing something new. That is the good news of Advent. We celebrate Advent, a time which has the sense of being at the edge of newness. We are the only ones who believe that. The Ancient Greeks did not believe it. Modern day cynics do not believe it. And we might for a moment be affected by those who cannot see.

But God's message will break through to our hearts with God's insistence. We are at the break of God's future.

*(Luther – To prepare the way of the Lord means to prepare ourselves for the Lord's activity in us, so that God may help us and our life may be the life of Christ.)*