

Ask Pastor Dave a Question! 8/29/21

People have lots of questions about the Bible, Christian faith, and the church. It's nothing new. In fact, many biblical characters, even heroes and heroines of the faith had questions. And here at GPC, we're not afraid of those questions! So, each year, I set aside a Sunday or two to answer your questions. I'll start with a couple questions you submitted in advance, that I've had an opportunity to prepare an answer for. Then we'll deal with a few of your other questions. You can still submit them on a 3x5 card and give them to Libby, or text her at the number on the screen or in your bulletin.

1. Every Sunday we pray, "Thy kingdom come." Do you have any insight as to when Christ's 2nd coming will occur?

No. But I don't feel too bad about that, and I'll explain why in a minute! I do believe that Jesus will return, as he promised, and bring in the Kingdom or reign of God over the earth. But exactly how and when that will happen is a mystery to us. Listen to Jesus' own words from Luke 17. ²⁰*Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."* (Luke 17:20-21)

Jesus taught extensively about the Kingdom of God- more than about any other topic! He taught that God's kingdom began when he came into the world. So, in that sense, he could tell the Pharisees that the kingdom was among them or in their midst. Today, through Jesus' followers, the values and priorities of God's Kingdom are still being demonstrated and taught in the world. God's kingdom is already here!

But that's not all that Jesus had to say about the Kingdom of God. He also said that there is a future dimension to the Kingdom of God that will only take place when Jesus returns and rules over the earth. That's what we look forward to, and that's what gives us hope that our meager efforts will one day really amount to something! There are some hints in the New Testament about when that will be, but they are ambiguous and partial at best.

Through the centuries, ordinary Christians and biblical scholars have tried to pinpoint the timing of Jesus' return, coming up with scores of dates spanning thousands of years. And do you know what all of them have in common? They were all wrong! Maybe that's because the Bible doesn't really have a secret code or timetable for Jesus' return! Listen to these words from Mark 13 as Jesus speaks about his return. ³²*"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Mk. 13:32)*

If Jesus says that no one knows when he's coming back and that he doesn't even know himself, maybe we should put our energy into other pursuits! After all, whenever Jesus spoke about his return, he challenged his followers to be doing God's work, so that they'll be ready when he comes! I like the way the old spiritual puts it when it says, "I don't know when he's coming, but I know he'll be on time!"

2. **What does it mean to "fear God?"** There are many times in the Old Testament when we're told to fear God. What does that mean? We're also told to love God. It's hard for me to love someone that I fear.

Good question! The short answer is that generally when the Bible (Old and New Testament) tells us to fear God, it means to have respect for God or to have reverence for God. Occasionally, terror is included, when people come face-to-face with the reality that the same God that made them can unmake them, but usually it means reverence. Proverbs 1 tells us that ⁷*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.* (Prov. 1:7) There is no sense of being afraid here, just an acknowledgement of God's primary role in the world. Similarly, Ps. 115 says, ¹¹*You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield.* (Ps. 115:11) Fearing the Lord here is linked to a

sense of security and protection, not a sense of terror. It's a sense of reverence and awe.

3. Why would God allow a virus that would become a pandemic with the possibility to kill and leave long-term health issues on persons throughout his Creation?

That's a great question, to which we could add similar questions about cancer and heart disease, wars and famines, floods and earthquakes, etc. My answer on this one is pretty simple: I don't know!

The Bible itself doesn't give an answer, but it gives us a couple guardrails to keep us from going too far off course. First, some of the suffering we experience is caused by our choices. For example, we have created weapons with awesome, destructive power and have put them into the hands of all kinds of people. People inevitably have conflict and when that conflict escalates, it is inevitable that these weapons will be used, causing tremendous suffering because of our choices.

Or, on a personal level, if I choose to not properly nourish myself and to live a sedentary life, or to smoke or use illicit drugs, or to avoid getting vaccinated, I may well suffer physical consequences from those choices at some point. Human choices lead to some of our suffering.

But not all of it. That's the main point of the book of Job- that there isn't always a link between human suffering and our choices. And God's final answer to the question of human suffering in Job is this: "I'm God and you're not!" Not a very satisfying answer, but it's the best one we've got.

By the way, I think there's actually a deeper question behind the question about human suffering, which is, "Is God really good?" In the light of all the suffering in the world, how can we say that God is good? That's a fair question, and Jesus' answer is that God is with us in our suffering so that we are not alone. And, that one day, in God's time, God will put an end to it. As Sherry Farkas has said to me more than once, "Life is hard, but God is good." And that's what I believe.

- 4. Is it true you were a hippie in college?** No, but I did have longer hair, and even a beard at one point!

Now, let's go to the hat for some more of your questions!