

Questions of Jesus

5. "Why are you sleeping?"

Text: Zechariah 9: 9; Matthew 26: 36-46

Rev. Dr. C. Geordie Campbell

March 20, 2016

A legendary professor of theology . . . "had just completed his final lecture to a standing ovation. He picked up his notes, hastened them into a folder, and headed out of the lecture hall. One last time he turned around and faced his students. The class fell silent hoping for a parting word. The professor surveyed their faces and said, 'Just remember: Jesus is the question to all of your answers!' And with that, he left!" ¹

Just so, this Lenten Season we have been pausing around some of the questions that Jesus asked two millennia ago – and by mystery of spirit still asks of us today. They are found within the storehouse of the four Gospels, all three hundred and seven of them, though all told we have kept it to a manageable eight!

*Who do you say that I am?
Who touched my robe?
Why do you doubt?
Are you not of more value?
Are you longing to be faithful?*

I hope you have learned as much in the listening as Elliott, Susan and I have in the preaching. Quite honestly, it has been an intriguing, insightful, sometimes playful way of inviting us deeper these weeks that bring us to Easter.

The three questions for this Palm Sunday morning are kind of like a string of pearls, each one holding its own value but also each standing as a part of a larger whole.

The first is one that he asked . . . three times during that last week - to his disciples, to the gathering crowds, and also to his captives. **Who are you looking for?**

At face value it's a simple question of identity. But it also had an underside, a hidden nugget that connected to a larger and far more cosmic question. Remember at another time and place he said, "he who knows me knows the One who sent me." As if to infer that whoever says they are looking for Jesus, consciously or not, is at the self-same time also looking for God. And Jesus was the portal of that deeper knowing, the window to the heart that beats as one with the ground of all life.

One Palm Sunday morning a certain five-year-old boy had to stay home from church because he was sick. His mother stayed with him while his father went to church with his two sisters – one older and the other younger. Toward the noon hour they came back and each was carrying palm branches. The boy asked what they were for. His

older sister explained, "Oh, it was great. You really missed something. We stood and sang and as the choir came down the aisle, and then we waved them over Jesus' head as he walked by." The boy looked both puzzled and disappointed. "Wouldn't you know it? The one Sunday I don't go to church and Jesus shows up!"

Who are you looking for? Palm Sunday begs the cosmic question. Jesus asked it not once, not twice, but thrice during that week. That's Bible-speak telling us that it must have been on his mind. And he has been asking it ever since.

The scene shifts. Now it's late afternoon leaning toward the evening of the Last Supper. Those among us who prefer that our physical space not be crossed, or our antiseptic insistence not be upset, might find it an awkward moment. But for the twelve, it was nothing shy of a living parable of love.

Jesus washed their feet: their tired, dust-covered, dirt-laced, ankles and arches and toes. It was a poignant demonstration of humility, compassion and earthbound care. And then he asked, **Do you know what I have done for you?** Thin and thick, he was setting the template, instructing by example for those who would be his followers.

There is an interfaith-grass-roots-faith-based-community-response that has sprung up around us. It started just down the hall as five clergy friends had lunch together in the Friendship Room. We got to talking about the refugee crisis facing the world. And though we each wanted to do something we knew that none of us could do much alone, and no single faith community could go it alone either.

So we made the conversation larger. We called another meeting, got the word out, and three-dozen people representing more than twelve faith communities showed up. The meeting after that doubled to six dozen! The response was so heartening that we needed to collaborate into smaller clusters, partnering with one another. And now, six months later, five groups representing twenty faith communities are on the cusp of providing a future and hope to five families.

And though we are clearly interfaith and have risen above all the lines of religious distinction, hospitality and loving response to human need is core to what we all believe. All of us. How could we do anything less?"

The context changes once more. Now we are in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is with his inner prayer circle of Peter, James and John. He was weary and grieved. He longed for the assurance of their love, their devotion, their commitment, their will to have his back.

He also knew that everything was about to change in the passing of the hour. And so he asked in three very similar but also distinctive ways: **Will you wait here as I pray? Could you not stay awake even for an hour? Why are you sleeping?**

When I was seven years old our church in Waterbury burned down. It was the church where my dad was an Associate Pastor, and as PK's often feel, it was my church in a very personal way. I never heard the sirens, was unaware of the thick blanket of smoke that filled the Naugatuck Valley, was oblivious to the phone calls and to my father leaving abruptly in the middle of the night. Only in the morning did I learn of the awful nighttime of loss. I recall, even so young, being very troubled that something so completely devastating, so terribly wrong, could have happened while I slept. The building was a smoldering ruin. How could it be? And it all happened as I was sleeping.

Peter, John, James – why are you sleeping? Will you not stay awake for even an hour? It's a spiritual question for them in the moment of crisis. And because crisis comes to every life at some point it's an archetypal question for all of us, meant for the whole human family.

So these are the questions of Jesus this week. Life calls us to stay awake and so does the Gospel! Being followers of Jesus expects us to be present, fully, wholly, totally – to the reality and needs of every day. Saying yes to him calls for commitment, devotion, decision, loyalty, fidelity, dependability.

So please, after the hosannas of this morning; beyond the echoes of our exuberance of this shout-out day; may we be awake as he calls, alert as he asks, and present to his questions: **Who are you looking for? Do you know what I have done for you? Why are you sleeping?**

May our journey this week haunt us, trouble us, challenge us, confront us, unsettle us from the Palms of his triumphal entry to the sunny side of Easter's Dawn.

Hosanna! And amen!

© 2016 Charles Geordie Campbell.

First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹ Martin Copenhaver. The Questions of Jesus. Abingdon Press, 2014, p. xxii.