

Pleading With God
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*Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, October 23, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

“Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!”

What is the basic difference between Obi Wan Kanobi and Han Solo? Han Solo needs to see it to believe it; he doesn't place his trust in cheap tricks, slight of hand, and channery. He can see his blaster, he knows what it can do, and he places his hope in that blaster. Have you ever meet that person who needs to know everything? That person needs certainty, proof, and assurance. This is the person who boldly cries, “I'll believe it when I see it.” What we can see with our own two eyes we can really believe.

Maybe some people rest on empirical knowledge more than others, but there is something basic about this human yearning, isn't there? We don't like to walk blindly; we want to know why and how. We need to know. I think it is a basic human response to uncertainty and unknowing that drives our anxieties and our questions. Like the four-year-old child who has accepted the mantra “why” we want and need to know again and again.

Such an approach to life is not necessarily bad, wrong, or dangerous. In many parts of the secular world we embrace the hard and poignant questions. But in the religious realm, we are a bit more cautious. Our questions have permeated into our faith as well, hasn't it?

We need to know about God. We want to know that God exists, that God is real and all our efforts are not in vein. Philosophers and theologians have come up with a number of theories, proofs, and ideas demonstrating that God does or does not exist. From the cosmological proof to the ontological proof to everything in between we have tried to explain and understand God. Scientists have again and again reached a point where they have found themselves saying, “We don't know” and theologians step in to try to fill in the gap. We have combed through the Bible, through the Holy Land, through extra-Biblical documents, and through every shred of evidence like a CSI agent trying to demonstrate and prove that God does indeed exist, that the Bible is indeed true, and that Christ did indeed live. We need to know, and when we don't I think we often try to create theories and ideas that will give us something to hold onto. Two examples – the *DaVinci Code* and the *Left Behind* series. Both are dealing with something that is unknown, the person of Christ, and the final days; things we would like to know more about, but have little information. Both have offered a way to understand these unknowns, based on little fact and a lot of fiction, and many have accepted these ideas wholeheartedly. No matter how amazing, no matter how outrageous or absurd, we need to know something, so we'll grab onto anything. Is there a God; is there something out there? We need to know.

Yet there are some things that we can never know. There are some things that may just always be beyond our knowledge and beyond our reach. There are those times when we are reminded of our lack of knowing and our limited abilities to understand. It is frustrating to be left at the brink of knowledge, and then reminded how much we still have to learn. There was a time when I thought I was getting proficient at the bassoon, and felt maybe I could handle my own. But then I went to Oberlin, and heard some amazing players, and realized how much I didn't know, how broad was the gap of my knowledge. We again and again reach a point where we feel we have gained a level of expertise, and then find we have much further to go. Again and again we are brought to the brink of our knowledge and shown the chasm of what we still don't know.

And this is most true of God. In the church, we look to God as that which we will never fully understand, comprehend or know. The poetry of the psalm speaks to the vast and unknowable nature of God. “Before the mountains were brought forth, ... from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” We are brought to the edge of the chasm of our knowledge whenever we try to understand, or try to “know” God. This is the very

one who created everything, who is beyond everything, and above everything. It is more than we can understand. God is our dwelling place, but we cannot see God. God is the creator, but we cannot prove it. As the theologian Anselm stated, God is greater than anything else we can imagine. Try to imagine what is before time, and you will find yourself lost. Try to imagine the creation of the earth, the planning and the detail and you are lost (Don't confuse these statements with an argument for Intelligent Design – I think that is flawed theology). In Douglass Adam's book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* the answer to everything is given – I think it was 42. The problem was no one knew the question; it is that complicated. Or, perhaps more seriously, Thomas Aquinas, one of our greatest theologians and philosophers had a Beatific Vision near death. Now remember, Aquinas wrote over 30 volumes of theology, volumes, which are still pored over in hope to gain some understanding today. But when Aquinas saw his vision, he wanted to throw away all his work, calling it straw and worth nothing. God is beyond what we can ever know, and the beginning of the psalm affirms that. This is Augustine warned, when he said we will never understand what we are talking about when we are talking about God.

So can we walk with such audacity and presume to “know” God? Can we really have the arrogance to ask the leading the dangerous questions that drive at knowing God? Should we just rest in the ambiguity? Should we suspend our questions, our yearning and rest in acceptance or denial? Remember two weeks ago when I talked about Pascal's *Divine Wager*? Maybe we should just say, “Yes” and follow that “yes” without question. Remember last week when we weren't allowed to see God's face? Maybe we should take the hint and back away with our questions, our yearning to know, and our drive to understand. It is presumptuous, and it is arrogant to assume that we can come to know God. For God, the very one who is before and after, who calls us to dust and brings us into being is beyond our knowing.

Should we then suspend all of our yearning to know? For we are inquisitive creatures by nature – it is a character trait that drives most horror movies (looking into that odd noise). There are many in religious traditions that feel that the questions can be dangerous, risky, and lead to a weakened faith. Maybe it would be safer to throw our arms in the air and accept God without any critical thinking. Maybe it would be safer to fall into the practices, the doctrines and the dogmas of the church without wondering, questioning or searching. We may be suppressing ourselves, we may be silencing a part of ourselves, but we also may be taking the safer, the more respectful route. We could become a church of robots, blindly accepting the nature, the character of God without question. Questions are silly, questions are distracting, and questions show a weakness in faith.

Once when I was in college I went to a gathering of Christians, and I had some questions. I was struggling with the Bible, with the divine love of God and the divine nature of Christ. I was trying to know and make sense of my faith. So in the meeting, I asked some questions. I wondered out loud why some parts of the Bible are so different than others. I wondered how we could worship one God, and still have three. I wondered why the church would focus so much time on appearance and so little on the poor. I wondered why Christ had to die. I voiced all of these questions hoping to find a community that would search wonder and wrestle with me. I was asked to leave.

So many take the safe road and we could act this way. So many read just the first part of the psalm, and go no further, resting in that assurance that God exists and that enough. We could take this safe road, but I don't think that is where we want to go. Einstein once said that “science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind,” and we don't want to walk around blindly. Nietzsche aptly described religion as a herd of sheep blindly following a shepherd. We don't want to be sheep. No we don't want to silence our questions, our wonderings, and our curiosities. We could suspend all of our yearnings to know, but I don't think that is where we want to go.

So how can we voice our questions? How do we articulate our questions in a religious space, in the context of worship? How do we allow our questions to become sacred and holy rather than presumptuous and arrogant? Hear the questions cried out in the psalm, for the psalms are prayers, liturgies, and words of worship. The psalms connect us to our sacred past, and the questions validate our own.

There are two parts to the psalm read for today. One part declares the great unknowable nature of God.

It appropriately places God beyond reach of human knowing. But the second part is a very real cry from people in distress. It asks questions that do not drive at the existence of God, but at the presence and actions of God in a time of anguish. These are questions that come from a people enslaved by the Egyptians. These are yearnings that come from a people wandering in the wilderness. These are laments that come from a people who know suffering, anguish and despair. There is little to no arrogance in this psalm. There is little bravado in these questions, for this pleading, petitioning comes from the experience of the people. These are holy, sacred questions driving straight to one's relationship with God.

Can we offer the same questions in our prayer? Can reach down into our experiences, and plead with God, question God, cry out to God with the same voice? When you experience troubles building up, and you want to cry, "How long." When you are at your loved one's side, and see his suffering and pain and want to cry, "Where are you, Lord?" When you continue to feel the weight of the world crushing down on your shoulders, heaver and heaver, you want to cry, "When is it enough, Lord?" These are the questions, the cries and the concerns of laments. In Central America many Christians began to question the church because they were living in abject poverty, suffering and wondering what is the purpose of the cross and salvation if life now is so difficult. They looked to the cross and asked "why" from their own situation. And scholars like Gutiérrez, and Boff offered what is now called "liberation theology." This is a theology that connects the suffering of the people with the suffering of the cross.

The medieval scholar Bonaventure considers such a way to question and to know God. In his work, *Journey of the Mind to God*, Bonaventure considers a number of ways to know God, through observation, logic, and tradition. Yet in the end, we are called to suspend all of our knowledge, and fall into the darkness of our own fears and wonderings and unanswered questions— there we shall find God. This final step comes out of your experience, your yearning and desire to have that holy, vision, that horrible and beautiful vision of God. This yearning and pleading is holy.

In the African American tradition, songs of lament and questioning and pleading rose from an oppressed people suffering and wondering, "how long," crying "pass me not," and asking if "there is a balm in Gilead?" Even here in our community we mourn the death of our daughter, and we ask why? As Barbara was still alive and falling closer and closer to death, many began to ask, why?

Such questions come out of our life experiences. These are not questions that aim to prove or disprove the existence of God. These are not questions that aim to construct or deconstruct God. No the pleading in the psalm and the pleading in our own life come from our own experience and our own concerns.

When we cry out with the psalm, when our cry comes out of our own sufferings then our questions are made sacred and our relationship with God deepens. This is what comes from our pleading, our asking, and our wondering about God, our relationship with God grows.

And then we rest on our story, and the first part of the psalm. Our questions, our pleading finds rest and hope in the God that has been our dwelling place, the God that creates. We rest in knowing that the God who delivered the Israelites out of Egypt will deliver us as well. We rest in knowing that the God who heard the cries of the people then, hears our cries as well. Our history becomes a present hope and a future assurance for our questions, our pleading will lead to those times God has answered before. "O God our Help in Ages Past" we cry, and know and experience as we continue to plead with God for help in this age today. Gone will be the empty words of praise, and instead we will all recite the deep and authentic prayers that come from our experience. "Turn, O Lord," we will cry. Make good the works of our hands, Lord, we will shout. Complete what we cannot do on our own.

And we will have to rest in the hope and the assurance that God will hear us, God will turn towards us, and God will give us the peace we desire. It will be in God's time, God's way, and God's grace. Don't be afraid to voice your questions. Don't be afraid to articulate your wonderings, but find their source in your own life, your experiences. Then in your pleading, your questioning you are sharing your life with God, and opening your eyes to the ways God is walking with you.

The hope comes from God's invitation. Through Jesus Christ, we have received the invitation to walk

with God. Through Jesus Christ we have been given the assurance that God has heard us, and turns toward us, beckoning us to walk with the Divine. For when we walk with God our tears will be sacred, our suffering will be holy, and our anguish will be transformed to joy. This is the call of the Israelites, and it is our call as well. From our questions to our pleading, ask that you may walk with God through the world, through the chaos, and into the glory land.

AMEN