



Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday of Pentecost, Oct. 1, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Exodus 17:1-7](#) [Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16](#) [Philippians 2:1-13](#) [Matthew 21:23-32](#)

Good morning, and God's blessings on this first day of October. We heard such rich scriptures today. And we began with our prayer for this Sunday that reminds us and centers us on who God truly is and how God interacts with us humans. The work of God, the power of God, is declared most significantly and consistently in all the ways that God showers this world and its people with mercy and pity. God's power is shown most through mercy and pity. And God's mercy and pity begin with God being with us, seeking to understand us in our experiences and our plight and all our limitations, setting judgment aside because the first thing God does is to love.

Today, our scriptures help point us in a direction of how to be with each other and how to come to God, and how to approach others in the world around us. We hear of conflict, of contests for power and control, and of letting go of power and control. And we hear questions.

Let's begin with what we heard of the continuing story of God's people from Exodus. We remember that they have escaped slavery by God's power, and they have faced hunger and been given daily food by God. Here, in today's episode, they face the threat of thirst and dehydration in the desert. There is real deficit and real need. This leads the people to seek a solution and to act up out of their growing concern and to state their needs and make demands. "Give us water to drink!"

I can't help but be amused by the way the conversation unfolds from there: "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" "Well, WHY did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us all with thirst?"

Why, why, why. It may remind you of some conversations with toddlers of a certain age. But we all ask "why" about things in our lives – especially in times of stress and suffering.

Moses asks "Why" because he feels put upon as their leader, because he is being asked for something he has no skill or ability to deliver on his own, because he feels his own powerlessness and sees the people's need and doesn't like not having an answer.

The people are suffering. And they are now feeling desperate. More threatening than a need for food is a need for water – especially in hot desert places. They are not satisfied with Moses' response to their pleading demand. And so, their "Why" comes from a place of desperation, rising anger at their situation, and questioning of whether or not they all made the right decision in following this person.

But how could they so easily forget the saving acts of God, who delivered them from Egypt and brought them through parted walls of water, who fed them every day with bread and meat?

Their current desperation and suffering took over their minds and hearts, making prior events seem distant, no longer meaningful, and perhaps even sinister. This is what humans do – suffering spins our minds so that we no longer see clearly. And so, arising from their desperation and Moses' seeming powerlessness, there comes the nagging question, spoken or unspoken: "Is the Lord among us or not?" "Where is God in all of this?"

So Moses cries to God. And God responds – God calls on Moses to take fellow leaders with him, along with the staff in his hand that has been his trusted and well-known tool – and God says, “I will be standing there in front of you.”

I will be standing there in front of you.

So, the water flowed.

I’m struck by how Moses here leads with questions, not answers.

I’m struck by how questions open space, even if it is uncomfortable space, between people, and with God.

There is a book on my shelf of leadership books, with a great title, *Leading with Questions*. This book builds off of a nationwide study of organizations by the Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina. The study found that “the ultimate key to successful leadership was an executive’s ability to ask questions and create opportunities for others to ask questions.” The author of the book says it is important to help an organization develop a questioning culture, by modeling the use of questions, making space for people to raise questions about the status quo, building questions into every organizational activity, and encouraging and thanking people who ask questions.

Wow. How would our current political climate look different if our leaders started with asking questions – not leading questions or trick questions, but powerful questions aimed to open space for conversation and to invite people to wrestle together for solutions? How different might our last weeks leading up to the final last-minute agreement in our U.S. Legislature last night have gone if people had been willing to ask questions instead of declare demands? Might our current crisis have gone differently? How about with our own City Council in Coeur d’Alene, or the NIC Board? What kind of work might be getting done if people led with questions?

We have heard enough – ENOUGH – of proclamations and accusations. We have seen enough – ENOUGH – of finger-pointing and bad-mouthing and self-aggrandizing posturing. It is time – it is way past time – it is absolutely essential time now – that our leaders open hearts and minds to one another and make space for mutual learning.

Now, some questions are better than others. Some questions are meant to open space. Some questions are really veiled statements and judgments, masquerading as questions. Like what we find temple leaders asking Jesus in today’s Gospel reading.

So, Jesus is teaching in the temple in the days after he turned over tables and drove out the money-changers. As he is teaching, temple leaders and other religious leaders come at him with an accusatory question – a demand masked as a question. “By whose authority are you doing these things?”

How many of you have ever experienced this kind of questioning, this kind of drilling? How many of you have acted on principle, done what you believed needed to be done, stepped forward to make something happen that you were expected to do, only to have some people come at you with accusatory drilling? “Just who do you think you are?” “What gave you the right to do that?” “Who told you to do what you’re doing?” And a favorite, “You and whose army?”

These kinds of questions aren't really questions. They are accusations in disguise. They are ways of saying, "We don't believe you have any right, any power, or any base to stand on. And, if you tell us you do, if you start explaining to us where you get your authority, we'll just tear that down."

Imagine, if Jesus had actually directly answered these accusatory questions. What if he had said, "I do this by God's authority directly." What would the religious leaders have said? But if he said, "I do this by my authority – I am here to lead," what would the religious leaders have said?

Jesus is incredibly wise. He doesn't even entertain the bait that religious leaders have set for him. In this case, the best answer is no answer, but to continue doing what one is doing. Even better, the best response is not an answer (which can sound defensive), but a question. And Jesus' question takes up all the masked gimmicky method behind the religious leaders' accusatory question. He asks a matter-of-fact question: "Was John's baptism from heaven or a human invention?"

The religious leaders get caught up in their own worries about winning, their own obsessions about who is in control and is going to have the power. They take Jesus' question and end up in a tailspin in their own internal conversation. They cannot simply answer Jesus' question from their own hearts, because they are too busy thinking about and trying to control what they anticipate will be other people's response to their answer. They cannot choose the truth, because they are only thinking about losing power and authority.

So, they respond, "We do not know." And Jesus then says, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." Without saying so directly, Jesus tells them that the way they are caught in their own obsessions about power and control and winning is a barrier to real conversation and to any openness to new perspectives and insights – and so, there is no point in continuing.

Yesterday, leaders and active members from the Episcopal churches in this region of our diocese gathered here at St. Luke's for some learning. I am so grateful for the team of folks that hosted our gathering and provided food. We were good hosts. Our diocesan leaders guided all of us through some time practicing some skills and learning new insights with each other. One skill we practiced was listening. We split up into pairs, and each of us took five minutes to share a story of God touching us in our lives, a time when we sensed God's presence and movement. After one of us shared a story, the other, who listened intently for five straight minutes, then responded for two minutes – and only responded by offering a summary of what we heard, as thoroughly as possible, without inserting our own ideas or advice, and without drifting into our own stories. Our response was to honor the story we received by reflecting it back and making sure that we heard it accurately.

This kind of listening is harder than it seems. We often want to join in to another person's story with our own, saying "me too – that reminds me of what happened to me..." or "oh, I know just what you mean, let me tell you about an event in my life that I think is just like that," or "when something like that happened in my life, here's what I did," or even "I would have felt the same way." When we respond this way, we think we are joining with someone. But sometimes, these kinds of responses take the story away from the person and we make the moment about ourselves instead of the person we are listening to.

Instead, we were asked to listen as fully and attentively as possible, receiving the other person's story as a gift to be held and treasured and pondered deeply with our whole selves. We were asked to lay

ourselves aside and be there with the other person as completely as possible, letting the other person's experience fill the room. And then, when we spoke, we spoke only of what we heard, honoring the other person by showing that we heard and received fully, without judgment or too much of our own interpretation but with full respect for their own experience. If anything, we might ask some questions at the end, which could open space for more to be shared.

This kind of listening is one important way that we learn to empty ourselves in order to make space for others. Just like asking questions. Indeed, when we listen this way, we stay patiently curious, internally asking questions like, "I wonder what happened next? I wonder what is most important to this person in this experience I'm being told?"

What would it be like if we asked more questions in our conversations with each other? How might curiosity begin to lead us, instead of certainty? How might we begin to take in more than we give out? What might it be like to let others fill the space as we invite them to fill it, rather than filling the space with our own voice and experience and ideas? What if we recognized and chose not to take the bait of loaded or accusatory questions, and responded with open-hearted questions of our own – and then listened with hearts and minds ready to receive and curious to know?

The passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of the great treasures of the Bible and a guide for living in a manner of emptying ourselves for each other, just as Christ Jesus emptied himself for us all and for the whole world. Paul is concerned about a rise of an arrogant spirit that could infect the faithful community of those early Christians in Philippi. He appeals to their experiences of encouragement, loving consolation, sharing, and compassion, as a foundation to build from. And what he wants them to build together is a community of continuous self-giving for the sake of each other, so that they begin to move and live as a singular, deeply united organism bigger than themselves, united in the movement of the Holy Spirit among them. He asks them to get out of the way of themselves and open space with each other. "In humility, regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." This movement is a movement of self-emptying, as a way of making space for each other.

So, I want to close today with some time of meditation on Paul's great hymn-like words about Jesus. This is one of the core scriptures on which we have meditated in this past year from "Who Is This Jesus?", the scriptures pointing us away from the falsehoods of Christian nationalism to the true core of who Jesus is.

Listen deeply again to what Paul says about Jesus and what that is calling us to imitate and follow. And then, we will close our time on reflection on God's word in meditation on this text and on the questions that follow, for each one of us.

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*

*And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Take a few minutes to let this text sink into your heart and mind.

As you meditate on Christ, consider these questions:

What kind of love and humility do you see in Christ Jesus? What does this show you about the very heart and soul of Jesus?

How does Jesus empty himself, and how does God fill that empty space? What is it like for you to empty yourself completely for others? What barriers get in the way of giving yourself away? How do you hear and respond to this call to follow the way of Jesus?