

This Sunday we’re beginning a 6-week series based on questions you have posed in response to an Advent invitation to: “Ask God Anything.” Almost 50 questions have been posed. As you might guess, some of the questions overlap. And, as I’ve reviewed them, some questions are more clearly “Ask the Pastor Anything” rather than “Ask God Anything” questions. That is certainly understandable. It is daunting to approach God with our deepest, most heartfelt, questions!

Where the questions have seemed more directed toward the pastor, I re-cast them as they might be posed to God. I’ve also tried to recast questions that are on similar themes into one question. For example, several questions were about God’s relationship to evil and suffering, which we’ll look at next week.

The full list of questions for the series is printed in the bulletin and, since we have just 6 weeks for the series, I apologize if your question isn’t on the list. Even as I can’t get to all of them, I am profoundly grateful that so many of you have let me glimpse into the questions stirring your hearts. The questions we don’t cover will be on my mind as I prepare other sermons this year!

It goes without saying *that I know* God’s answers to your questions would be more satisfying than my responses. But I also want you to know that my intention is to offer faithful, helpful, and heartfelt responses to these 6 questions. While each question might reasonably require a 3-hour seminar (with time for Q & A), I’ll do my best to ground these sermons first, in the testimony of scripture, second, in prayerful theological reflection, and thirdly, as one who hopes what I share will glorify the God we all long to know better. (And all that in about 20 minutes!)

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The first question, and a great beginning for this series is, “God, how can you put up with me?” I think all of us can relate to this question. “Knowing what I know about myself, how can God tolerate me? I can barely even stand myself!” So, as we explore this question, I’m thinking of another question that was posed via e-mail last week: “God, do you have any regrets?”

It can seem that when we Christians talk about God’s view of human-kind, there’s a strong

emphasis on God’s utter disdain for our distortedness, our sinfulness, our fallen-ness. It’s as if God remains today just as in Genesis 6:6, ‘sorry that he had ever made human-kind.’ According to the flood narrative, God was so disillusioned with us that he sought to blot out humankind; to begin creation all over again with Noah’s family. (Think about that, the Almighty maker of heaven and earth wanted a ‘do-over’!)

Modern science often confirms that the world would be better off without the wretched human component. According to E.O. Wilson, a leading expert on biodiversity, if humans disappeared from the planet, ‘the earth would flourish.’ But if the ant species were to disappear, it ‘would be a catastrophe.’ (Hall. 98) I find observations like that both irritating and humbling...

But one of my favorite theologians points out that even as scripture (and human history) verifies our capacity for very great evil, there remains an unfortunate tendency within our faith tradition to **overstress** human depravity and to **overlook** the scriptural affirmations of what it means to have been made human in the *imago dei*, the image of God. It is certainly true that we alone – sons of Adam and daughters of Eve – possess the potential to live lives fully oriented towards God in a way other creatures cannot!

Before I say anything else, I want to share one of my favorite T-shirts. It says: “I am the wretch the song refers to.” This reflects that knowing myself as well as I do, I confess without hesitation that I am a wretch in need of God’s amazing grace. (And please don’t make the mistake of thinking that as a pastor, I’ve somehow lived a more moral or virtuous life than those I serve...)

But even as I (or we) confess our wretchedness, we need to recognize that there’s another side to the scriptural revelation. And it’s the resounding biblical affirmation of human grandeur and the promise of human life.

There’s a wonderful story about a vivacious 4-year-old girl. One night, during a fierce thunderstorm, the girl’s father went upstairs to his daughter’s bedroom to reassure her that she did not need to be afraid of the storm. When he got to her room and opened the door, he saw his

daughter in her nightgown standing on the window sill, spread-eagle and pressed against the window pane. “What are you doing?” he asked. The girl turned her head away from the flashing lighting toward her dad and said, “I think God’s trying to take my picture.”

This is so important! Scripture attests that even as God is grieved by our human sin, that God *can stand us* because utter disdain is neither the first, the last, nor the only thing God feels when he gazes upon your face or mine. Again, as Genesis says, we are made in the image and likeness of God, bearing the visage of God’s own glory. Five times in Genesis 1 God looks at the progress of creation and “saw that it was good.” But on the sixth day, after creating humankind, God looked at everything in creation (including humankind) and “found it *very* good”. So we’re talking about scripture here, not about a 19th or 20th century modernist myth of human mastery!

But for some reason, Christian theology about humankind seems to have started with Genesis 3, with what we call the Fall, ignoring that in Genesis 1 and 2, there is an ‘original goodness’ or ‘original blessedness’ to humanity. In spite of Genesis 3 and Genesis 6 and all the other stories of human failing, scripture is also clear that ‘our identity comes with our manufacturing!’ As the apostle Paul puts it in Eph. 1:4, “We were chosen in Christ before the world began.”

I think it’s worth mentioning that Jewish theologians never went as far as Christian theologians when talking about ‘original sin’ or ‘the Fall’. What they did say is that created in God’s image and likeness, humankind was declared ‘very good’ (as opposed to just good) because we alone possess the ability to improve, mature, develop, and grow.

This is why we read in Psalm 8:4-5, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet, you have made them a little lower than God, and *crowned them with glory and honor.*” The God’s Word Translation renders the words of Psalm 139:14 – a favorite passage of mine – this way: “I will give thanks to you [O God] because I have been so

amazingly and miraculously made. Your works are miraculous and my soul is fully aware of this.”

Along with these OT scriptures, the NT witness affirms how valuable we are to God in the story of the Cross, because the Cross is unnecessary *unless* there’s something in the human creature that is worth saving.

“Whatever else Christianity may have to say about the human being, its *foundational* presupposition concerning humankind is irrefutably affirmative.” Both in our own right and because we are indispensable to all creaturely well-being, God goes to the Cross to reclaim us for the purposes for which we were made. (Hall, 93)

So why, if I believe I’m a wretch in need of God’s saving grace; why am I offering this counter scriptural testimony; saying we need a more balanced view? Well, first because it’s Biblical! And second because even the truest of doctrines can be expressed in ways that lead us *away* from God’s full revelation! In our zeal to stress how far short we fall of God’s glory – accentuating how much God can’t stand us – we can start think there’s nothing we can ever do to please God. And, like an abused child facing a tyrannical parent, if there’s nothing we can do to please God, we quit making any effort... because nothing will ever be good enough.

Let’s me invite you to ponder a question. What if Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about us, because God has always been smitten with us? What if the reason Jesus came was to change our feelings towards God? That God’s grace enfolds me in spite of my wretchedness makes me bow my head in humble gratitude. But when I think that God takes delight in my existence, my knees buckle and within me stirs the strongest desire to live my life to please my Abba (my Father) in heaven.

From vast sweep of scripture, it’s clear that God’s ability to love broken people has never been God’s main problem. God’s biggest problem is that we seem to love our brokenness more than we love God. And that is sinful. Amen.