

Today's bumper sticker doesn't come from the Bible. Some people find it comforting; however, I do not. It may be how we hear or say it. Today's bumper sticker is **"Don't put a question where God put a period."** Some people say this when someone or they themselves have experienced a loss that wasn't fair or logical or right. Sometimes this bumper sticker helps people move forward or to stop pushing and to begin accepting, and I don't want to belittle that at all. Some may see questioning God a waste of time, but I don't. Today I want to offer another view pertaining to this phrase. My first question is how can you tell where in the Bible God put a period?! Or in our lives? Of what God says in Scripture, what constitutes a period, which I hear as a conversation stopper and not a question, which is a conversation opener/continuer? Some people would call a period God's will or plan. That is for another sermon. Now questions...questions I know well. My mom and dad have always told stories about how I came out of the womb asking questions. My mom tells stories of how I often embarrassed her by asking questions in front of people that she wished I would've kept to myself or at least waited until we got home before I asked. Truth be told I'm sure some were questions that she didn't want to answer. Now that I have a very inquisitive child, I can see how my mom was uncomfortable not ever knowing what was going to come out of my mouth. I have empathy because it's hard to imagine resisting the urge to ask questions. After all, curiosity is an intrinsic human quality that encourages learning, and it helps us navigate the distance between mystery and understanding. That gap is constant – our gaze will always exceed our grasp – so we will always be driven to discover more about God, ourselves, and the world around us. My

entire life I have found comfort and even welcome or permission to ask God questions about anything, including when bad things happen. Whether in the form of laments or curiosity or doubts, questions, especially in matters of faith, can be most helpful. Now: side note- when curiosity turns into cynicism that is not as healthy. Or when we begin to obsess about fixing things with our questions. Sometimes there are no quick answers. Questions are, I believe, a sign that our faith is still alive and ready to grow. We're not only curious but wrestling with what we believe and what matters most. When I was a child, I was taught that God wasn't scary. I was taught that God- though big and strong- loved me and cared about me and my questions. As the psalmist says God knows what I'm going to say before a word is even on my tongue (139:4).

Theology- the study of God- is relational because God is relational ([link](#)). God is love. While there is an abundance of bad or counterfeit theology out there, genuine theology is coming to know the living God of love through Jesus Christ and by the gift of God's Spirit. Two of the ways we do this are through good conversations, including prayer and questions, and by studying God's Word. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus knew the Torah- the law- well and was more than likely one of the most knowledgeable about religion. Yet, religion isn't the same a faith. And faith isn't about figuring it all out; faith is about living and trusting. In the Gospels, "often when folks think they 'have it' and have 'arrived,' Jesus challenges them further" (workingpreacher.com, Sherri Brown). Let's turn to today's text but before we do that, let us pray. **PRAY. READ John 3:1-10.**

Nicodemus begins the conversation: we've heard about you, Jesus. We've heard your miraculous sign of the water to wine thing at the wedding at Cana. There's SOMETHING about you, Jesus. We can't lay our fingers on it, but we respect it. You act like someone with the presence of God on you. The "we" was more than likely a group of Jewish leaders who were curious about Jesus. But what was Nicodemus up to in the dark of the night with Jesus? Whatever it was, with these words a door is opened and Jesus steps through and speaks of the metaphor of being born of water and spirit and of the wind that we can hear but cannot see and how we cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes. Many scholars believe Jesus was referencing baptism here. Specifically in John's Gospel, Jesus often speaks on a spiritual or metaphorical level while his hearers understand him literally. This is the case here when Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born anew and Nicodemus thinks Jesus is telling Nicodemus to go back into his mother's womb and be born all over again. Nicodemus probably already thinks he knows it all but "Jesus challenges Nicodemus to move from theory to practice, from knowledge to faith, from curiosity to commitment" but that's always easier said than done, isn't it (workingpreacher.com, Judith Jones)? But had the questions not been there, what kind of conversation would this have been? Nicodemus is a complex figure who "may not be reduced to a hypocritical believer or admirer, but may rather be seen as a work in progress, on his way from being intrigued by Jesus to believing in Jesus" (Randall C. Zachman, *FOW*).

All through Scripture God is questioned by believers and unbelievers, alike. Jesus, too, loved to ask questions. Everywhere I have served as a pastor, there has to be a culture of a safe place to ask questions about Christianity, especially as it relates to our lives and the world. I love that Triune is such a safe space as a community of faith where questions are encouraged, not disparaged, and where anyone is truly welcome to be a part of this loving community. Seekers of truth not possessors of truth- seekers build communities of love. Hear the difference? I believe God can handle our questions because God is far bigger than our questions. That's why I don't fully understand why Nicodemus often gets a bad rap. He isn't much different than other disciples or believers. He wasn't the first to ask Jesus or God questions. Look at Moses. When the Israelites are complaining against Moses about their increased workload given by Pharaoh after Moses asked for their release, Moses asked God, "O Lord, why have you brought harm to this people? Why did you ever send me" (Ex. 5:22, 23, 32-34; Num. 21)? Look at Job or read the entire book of Lamentations. We can see that it is acceptable to ask God questions, even difficult ones. Look at Jesus- God in the flesh. He asks the most striking question of all: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mk. 15:34)? Can you imagine someone saying to Jesus, "Now Jesus, don't put a question mark where God put a period."

Faith and theology are about relationships and conversations. Can't you see how much we would miss out on in our relationship with Jesus if we left out our questions and just accepted the period as the end of conversation?! Jesus isn't trying to set up faith's sufficient proofs and arrive at a clear

conclusion with Nicodemus; but rather he is trying to help Nicodemus recognize that in accepting that God so loves him he belongs to God's kingdom, to eternal life, and to God's salvation. Nicodemus is having a hard time believing this good news. Don't we all sometimes?

I continue to ask a lot of questions especially now, as I grow more and more comfortable in my relationship with Christ. Yet, some still perceive such questions to be a threat, especially from a preacher. But I believe that the better we come to know God, the more we come to love God and the less threatened we are by honest questions. We can ask questions of God and still believe that God is sovereign. We can ask questions of God and still thank God for being Lord and Savior of our lives. Asking and sitting with honest questions has been *one of the keys* to my faith and to knowing God more. However, perhaps you have been taught or heard someone teach that we should be careful not to ask too many questions when it comes to God or what we put upon God and tag it as God's. It is common in some circles to downgrade the importance of asking questions and seeking a deeper knowledge of God. "It doesn't matter what we know," some say. The trends of culture in recent times seem to undergird this. Pastor Amanda said this week, "Faith without questions is indoctrination," and she is right. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, "Rarely do we find [people] who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think" (*Strength To Love*). "Believing that all things worth knowing are already known, fundamentalist preachers

create an atmosphere of cultivated ignorance which guarantees that mediocrity will be a virtue” (*Credo*, William Sloane Coffin).

It is not the content of a question that makes it good or bad; it’s the motivation behind it that matters. “Do you ask because you do not want to believe? Is your question itself a thinly veiled attack? Do you intend your question to be a defense mechanism? A question wielded as a weapon is always a bad question. On the other hand, good questions are motivated by the sincere quest for answers. Are you asking because you genuinely desire to know while recognizing that the answer may extend beyond your grasp? Jesus often entertained and even elicited these kinds of good questions from honest seekers, drawing them to ask the right questions that would lead them to the most important answers. Two of these examples are seen back to back with Nicodemus in John 3 and with the woman at the well in John 4. In seeking answers, we must remember how little we know, indeed that we do not even know how much we do not know” ([Ministry Matters](#)).

**Rebirth into God’s kindom, which is present now as a gift from God, comes not by knowledge or doctrine but by faith.** “I believe; help my unbelief.” This is the faith of Nicodemus and probably the faith of many of us here. God works on us; God works within us just as in Nicodemus, making us free for God in a way we may never have imagined. God through Jesus saves us despite what we think we know and despite our disbelief or best logical arguments. “Out of the darkness of night, the domain of ignorance and misunderstanding, we bring our questions, and those questions are addressed by the Word made flesh, bringing light through

words of new life and fresh perspective” (Judith M. McDaniel, *FOW*). We worship a dynamic and unfolding God who offers grace and newness of life to even those who try to say no but are still drawn in. After all, who else can bring the dead to life? Who else can call into existence that which doesn't yet exist and make all things, everywhere, new? Who else gave their only son to save the world, not to condemn it? Who else welcomes our questions even when the world says we shouldn't waste our breath. Thanks be to God for God's saving love in Christ Jesus our Lord! Amen.