

too hard. But God is not fragile and our faith should not be either. God's grace is strong enough to withstand our toughest questions. God's love is broad enough to hold our deepest wonderings. And being curious does not destroy faith; curiosity is very much able to grow it.

Jesus modeled how to ask questions. By going to those spiritual teachers who have experience with the tough questions. Diving deeply into scripture. Or talking with friends who've been studying the scriptures for years as they did at the temple—that's basically what a good Bible study does for us today. To answer our questions, we often read books by people we trust and we talk about them. Or we take opportunities to expand our knowledge, even when we weren't necessarily looking for them.

As we enter a new year, the sense of possibility in front of us looms large. Where could your curiosity lead this year? What might you want to explore about God or your faith, and how could you do so? What question has been niggling you that you have never dared to ask? Where could you ask it? I happily invite you to start with me, if you need a starting point. But don't expect a lot of certain answers. And certainly don't end there. Read some books. Go on a retreat. Do more than Google it; trust me, AI does not have the spiritual answers you are seeking. Ask the person next to you in the pew. Talk about it at the dinner table. You never know what new ideas God may invite you to explore. And you can trust the Holy Spirit to accompany you on the journey.

When Mary heard Jesus reference his father's house, she did not immediately understand what he meant. Our Bibles say then, that she "treasured all these things in her heart." Levine says that's a romantic translation of what Luke wrote down, not an accurate one. The true meaning is that Mary held onto what Jesus said and she pondered it. The same as Luke says Mary did after the shepherds told her what the angels had said about her son. When Mary wasn't sure, she pondered, she wondered, she remained curious about Jesus and all that he was about. As the new year unfolds, may we, too, remain curious about Jesus and ready to explore all that he reveals.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



January 5, 2025
Epiphany Celebration
"Curious Questions"
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Luke 2:41-52

Commentator David Brooks believes we humans today don't know how to talk to each other. And the problem isn't just our poor skills in small talk. The problem is especially a lack of curiosity. He says, all too often "I'll be leaving a party or some gathering and I'll realize: That whole time, nobody asked me a single question. I estimate that only 30 percent of the people in the world are good question askers. The rest are nice people, but they just don't ask. I think it's because they haven't been taught to and so don't display basic curiosity about others."¹

Curiosity is key to a meaningful and whole life. This trait helps form and maintain friendships by leading us to share about our lives. Curiosity draws us out of isolation and connects us to the wider world by connecting us to other people, to history, and to what's happening around us.

Curiosity is also what allows our faith to develop and grow. We wonder, ponder, ask, and think about God and God's story. All those questions lead us to new discoveries. They show us ideas we had never considered before. And the answers may expand our horizons - if we are open to hearing them - even if they don't always change our minds. Without curiosity, our belief system may remain static and under-developed. And then we may find that our childlike faith no longer stands up to the tough questions of life.

Jesus is our model for the curious life of faith. We only get one story in the entire Bible about Jesus between his very earliest years and then his baptism around the age of 30. That's a huge span of time on which the Bible is silent about Jesus' life. All we get is this short account in Luke of the boy Jesus, age twelve, staying behind at the temple. And what was he doing there? He was "sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions." He wanted to know. He was curious.

While Jesus sat in the temple for those three days, he took an interest in things he was only just beginning to learn about. He wanted to know more about the scriptures and the ways the elders had interpreted the faith. He wanted to understand more deeply. He wondered about the world and

1 David Brooks, "The Essential Skills of Being Human," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2023

2 Amy-Jill Levin and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke, New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 2018, 72.

about God. But Luke also tells us that all who heard Jesus were amazed *at his understanding and his answers*. So it seems the discussions Jesus was having were mutual ones. He was both asking and answering. He was querying and sharing. He was wondering and theorizing. And the last verse of the passage says clearly, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, in divine and human favor.” We take seriously that Jesus was a growing kid—a tween, as we say now. No longer a child really, but not yet a teenager. He gave his parents a hard time. He talked back to them and exasperated them. He grew and changed and learned. Which often happens best by asking questions and listening. And learning to have meaningful conversations with the people around you. As theologian Amy-Jill Levine writes, “Jesus is not static. He is not all-wise, since he can increase in wisdom. He is thus, fully human.”²

But some might ask, if Jesus was God and if God is all-knowing, as many doctrines say, then why would Jesus have ever needed to learn anything? It’s a reasonable question. Yet we take seriously this mystery and truth that Jesus was both fully human *and* fully divine. It’s a paradox that is at the core of our faith. Even though later on, Jesus seemed to have almost all the answers in his teaching and preaching, the best teachers always remain curious about the world.

Though we see that human curiosity in Jesus, sitting at the temple, the fully divine part of him was on display, too. Because when he stayed in the city, Jesus didn’t “get lost” by staying with a friend or fooling around in the marketplace, or some other immature behavior. He stayed behind *at the temple*—the place for learning and faith, the place where God’s presence was understood to reside. When Mary and Joseph got back to Jerusalem to search for Jesus, it was significant that they searched for three days. “After three days, they found him.” Those same words will ring true later on, after Jesus was crucified and on his day of resurrection. After three days, he would be discovered again.

When they found him in Jerusalem, Mary chided Jesus saying, “your father and I have been looking for you in great anxiety.” Which was certainly true; the two earthly parents must have been frantic. Jesus responded with that same word for *father*, but with a totally different meaning. “Why were you searching? Didn’t you know I would be in my *Father’s* house?” Jesus implied his relationship with God the Creator. Though he might as well have said, “duh! Obviously I was at the temple!” By his implied tone, that relationship with his heavenly parent was so clear, his parents should have known where he was. Fully God and fully a human tween, indeed!

Like Jesus would often do once he became a rabbi, even in the temple with this mother, Jesus answered her with a question. That question

said a lot in its simplicity. And it opened up lots of other things for Mary, perhaps, and especially for us, to think about. Brooks says, “The quality of your conversations will depend on the quality of your questions.” I think the same is often true for our faith. The depth of our faith may depend on the depth of our questions. Daring to ask often reveals so much more than we could have expected.

Brooks illustrates this well. His friend Niobe was “teaching a class of eighth-grade boys how to conduct interviews. She made herself their first interview subject and told them they could ask her anything. Here’s how it went:

Student: Are you married?

Niobe: No.

Student: Are you divorced?

Niobe: Yes.

Student: Do you still love him?

Niobe: [Deep, stunned gasp of breath]

Student: Does he know that you still love him? Does he know?

Niobe: [Tears in her eyes]

Student: Do your children know?”

Those eighth-grade boys were curious. And their honest questions revealed something amazing and important to Niobe that perhaps she had not allowed herself to acknowledge. Something that she probably needed to wrestle with and explore, challenging as that would be. Deep, probing, important questions create an opening. We get to respond. We can walk through the door and go deeper. Or we can remain outside, or even run away. This is true when questions arise in our relationships and friendships. This is true when big questions open up in our individual lives. Sometimes we dive deeper into the vulnerability, taking the risk to keep exploring. Other times, we stop the train on the tracks. Sometimes because we need to stop. And sometimes because we are a bit afraid where further curiosity might lead.

Being curious about God often sets us on a similar precipice. When we teeter on the edge of our understanding unsure what will come next, which way will we go? Can we trust that God will still be there if we go through the door or take the leap? Can we imagine that our faith will expand to accommodate what we find? If the answer we find is different than something we were once taught, will God still love us on the other side? When it comes to our faith, some of us have been told not to ask too many questions. Some traditions believe you just have to accept the doctrines as they are, as if our faith is a fragile bubble that will pop if we press on it