

“Twenty-One Questions”

Micah 6:6-8

September 15, 2019

Back in the days when I taught at Vacation Bible School every summer in West Hartland, we were constantly trying to figure out ways to entertain our pupils. One year the theme was Animals of the Bible, and each day we allowed our students to bring in their own pets and creatures, all the while teaching them campfire songs like “All God’s Critters Gotta Place in the Choir.” Besides the usual dogs and cats, all God’s critters included ferrets, snakes ... and even a Pet Rock.

Of course, there were other ways to hold the interest of our students, with some of the more conventional games to play, such as Telephone to see if a Bible verse remained the same at the end of the telephone line as it had been worded at the beginning. But obviously, while there were probably ferrets and snakes in Bible times, there probably were no telephones back in the time of Moses, or even Jesus. After all, this was a Bible school. So maybe Telephone wasn’t the best choice of a game to play.

However, we did learn that they did play tennis in Bible times, or so it would seem. After all, we all know from the Book of Genesis that Joseph served in Pharaoh’s court. Surely that’s a reference to tennis, right? I understand that baseball made it into the Bible as well, though at the moment the scripture reference in question escapes me...

In this morning’s scripture lesson, at first blush it appears that the Prophet Micah may also be playing a game with us. At the beginning of the sixth chapter, Micah asks a series of probing questions, which end with the climax we heard this morning, in verses six through eight, where he ends the quiz by giving us all the right answer, long before he uses up his 21 questions. But for Micah, his questions are more than just a game, since so much depends on getting the correct response.

At the beginning of Twenty-One Questions, most of us ask whether the answer is Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral. That’s a good way to narrow your focus. With Micah, however, it is none of the above. The clue comes when we realize that the answer isn’t

Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral. It is Spiritual. And at that point we might guess that there is much more involved here than just a game. But let's go on with Micah, and see how Micah's questions, and our guesses, work out.

Micah first asks, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" Not exactly the kind of question you'd expect in the early 21st century, so let's change the question around a bit to make a bit more sense for people like us. We'll end up breaking the question into two parts. What Micah is apparently asking is, "Should I try to get close to God (part One), and if so, How? (part Two)" The answers aren't given in the text, but everybody in Micah's time could pretty much agree that the answer to the first half would be "Yes." We should all try to get closer to God.

But not everyone these days would say Yes to that. In fact, a lot of people wouldn't even bother to ask that question in the first place, figuring that the jury was still out on the issue of whether God even exists or not. But for Micah, that answer is already assumed: there IS a God. The real question for Micah is, What are we supposed to do about that? If God exists, should we pester Him, like the nameless woman in Luke's gospel who nags a reluctant judge to grant her justice? We can read about her in chapter 18. Or maybe we should take our cue from Job, who not only pesters God, but becomes almost rebellious in the face of what he sees as Divine injustice; after all, Job has done all the "right" things, and still suffers. What kind of God is that? Or maybe we should just Ignore God, as did the Prophet Jonah when he was told to travel to Nineveh, but instead headed in the opposite direction. Maybe we should get close to God only when it suits our needs. That seems to be the default approach in our own time - that's called Fox Hole religion.

Now, to many of us here, sitting very piously in the pews, the answers to all these questions should be fairly obvious. But when we get outside the doors of this place, what is so plain and clear inside appears a little different "out there" in the light of present-day realities. Because a lot of people do fight with God - by fighting with each other. A lot

of us do ignore God - by following our own agenda. A lot of us do badger God, trying to get Him to see things our way, instead of trying to get ourselves to see things His way.

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But if we decide to think seriously about the question “Should I try to get close to God,” we immediately begin to think about how this could be accomplished. And so does Micah. So his next question, Question #2, is “Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old?” Now nobody does this kind of thing these days, but back in Micah’s time a lot of people did offer burnt flesh on an altar, thinking that somehow in doing so they could get closer to God. This is what people thought they should do. But is it what God thought they should do? Problem is, at this point Micah does not get a reply, or a guess, to his Question #2. So he goes ahead and asks Question #3, which is a lot like it:

“Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?” Again, the Bible language might be a little strange for us, so let’s take a look at Questions #2 and #3 and translate them for our life and times. Remember: people thought offering a year-old calf was what was needed to get closer to God. If that wasn’t good enough, then offering one thousand rams would be a thousand times better, right? And ten thousand rivers of oil would be ten thousand times better! Well! We must really be getting close to God now. So let’s go ahead and translate Questions #2 and #3 in a way that 21st century Americans would understand more readily:

“To get closer to God, should I put one dollar in the offering plate? Or maybe I should contribute \$1,000? Or even go for broke with \$10,000?”

But what if you don’t have \$10,000? Does that mean God will like you less because you put in only \$1,000? And what if you don’t have \$1,000? Does that mean God will like you less because you put in only \$1? And - heavens forfend - what if you don’t even have \$1? Maybe then God doesn’t like you at all.

Could that be the right answer? Or are the questions which Micah is asking completely off track? He's not sure, so Micah goes on to Question #4: "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body, for the sin of my soul?" Again, some strange words, so we need to ask ourselves: What is Micah really asking?

Well, it's a little like Questions #2 and #3. Micah is still trying to get us to figure out what God will accept for payment in trying to get closer to Him. It's like paying more than the price of a ticket so you can get invited backstage to visit with your favorite singer, or political figure, or some other V.I.P. Or maybe you'd like to spend a night in the Lincoln bedroom at the White House. How much will it cost? What will you have to give up? What are you willing to surrender? And, is the donation tax deductible? Now we're really getting serious!

No doubt we noticed that the price is going higher in Question #4. Up to now, Micah has only been offering money, because in his day cattle and oil were used like plastic is now. But at this point, Micah wonders if it takes more than mere cash to make God happy. So Micah offers to turn over his own flesh and blood. Of course, it's not clear that the kids have any say in the matter. Now I know there are a lot of people these days who think the children should be seen and not heard. But in Micah's time it is true that there was such a thing as child sacrifice. Even the great Patriarch Abraham gave it a serious thought, preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. But both Abraham, and presumably Micah, realized that God would not approve.

So, the answers to Questions #2, #3, and #4 are all "No." We should get closer to God - Yes. But God will not take payment of any kind for us to achieve that. We cannot buy Him off. God does not take bribes. God is not for sale.

The problem, even today, is that some people think that God IS for sale: that somehow by just going to church you demonstrate that you really ARE a good person, and presumably that is all God wants. That somehow by just putting money in the offering plate, you show that you really ARE a good person, and God requires nothing

else. That somehow by sending your kids to Sunday School, or by getting people to donate items for a church tag sale, or by inviting someone to come on Sunday just so the pews can be full ... that somehow that is enough.

Now I, for one, like full pews and I love money in the offering plate, and just a couple of weeks ago we announced the proceeds from yet another successful bake sale. But they are not the final answer. They are not going to get Micah the “Yes” that he is reaching for in his Twenty-One Questions. So then Micah reaches his Question #5, which contains its own answer: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” And what does that actually mean?

It means that God’s company is free; that we can get close to God any time that we want; that God is ready and willing to be friends with anyone at all. But how?

By behaving justly, or treating others only the way we wish to be treated. By loving mercy, for God is love, and God is merciful. And, by walking humbly with our God: for as long as we abide in Him, and He with us, we need never fear that we have lost our Way, or have misunderstood God’s Truth, or are in danger of forfeiting the Life that has been promised to us, eternally.

Let us pray: