**Culmore United Methodist Church**

**July 7 2019**

**Pastors:** *Rev.* *Nelson Neil, Rev. Beth Neil*

**Music:***Dr. Wonhee Kang, All Nations Choir Emily & Ann Johnson*

# **Prelude** *Here I Am to Worship* **W&S 3177**

**Welcome and Announcements**

**Thank you, Emily and Ann.** Wonhee is away this weekend.

**Happy birthday!** Are there any birthdays this week? If so, let us know so we can wish you many happy returns.

**Wedding Announcement:** We are pleased to announce that Wilfredo Morales and Sarah Fong will be married on Saturday, August 10 in Alexandria. Culmore congregation extends our best wishes to the couple!

**Bible Study** is Wednesday, July 10 at 10:00, as we continue our study of Hebrews.

Today we are continuing with our series on *Transforming attitudes*

*—*those attitudes we CHOOSE to cultivate

 that help us grow our faith.

These include, as we’ve been discussing the past few weeks:

**We look for joy,**

looking up rather than down.

This opens us up to seeing more blessings around us.

Because we DO tend to find what we’re looking for.

Another *transforming attitude*

can come out of **troubled times** in our lives.

Being in troubled times wakes us up to realizing

 that God is there with us

—that God has bigger and stronger shoulders than ours,

and we can lean on him.

God is always there.

Third *transforming attitude:*

of ***trusting in God*****to shape us**…

accepting his molding of us.

**The question for today:** Is it okay to argue with God?

Does questioning God grow our faith,

 and if so, how does that work?

What good could come out of challenging God?

Sometimes we deliberately hold ourselves back

 from genuine dialogue with God

—because we’re afraid to question God.

Will he get angry if we question his ways?

If we don’t agree with everything in the Bible?

Does God mind if we challenge him?

In case you can’t guess the answer to this question,

 just check the cover of the bulletin.

 *God loves those who argue.*

That’s what we’re going to explore together today.

**Passing of the Peace**

**Lessons for the Young and Young at Heart**

*Because I said so!*

When you were growing up, did you ever question your parents?

Want to argue with one of their decisions?

Okay, maybe I did once or twice. My favorite question: **WHY?**

*But WHY can’t I have the car?*

 *But WHY can’t I have another dessert?*

*But WHY can’t I play in the traffic?*

My dad’s go-to response?

***Because I said so.***

End of conversation. Boy, that shut me down.

Did any of you get told that when you were a kid?

I promised myself

I would **Never** say that tomy kids.

Guess what.

When they would ask me

*But* WHY can’t I have the car?

*But WHY can’t I play in the traffic?*

What did I find myself saying?

*Because I said so!*

Luckily, God doesn’t parent us like that.

My brothers and sisters,

I have come to realize

that God welcomes an honest debater.

By that I mean when we have real questions,

 real doubts, real frustrations,

God gladly listens.

I hold fast to **Isaiah 18:1:**

**Come now, let us reason together,"** says the LORD.

The Hebrew word we translate here as *reason*

also means *"to argue."*

So, God invites:

**Come now, let us argue together.**

Yes, I believe with my whole heart

that God welcomes the honest question,

the genuine doubt.

When we’re young,

we take at face value

everything our parents and elders teach us, unquestioningly.

Then there comes a time

when we go back to what we were taught

 and we question

*Wait! Is is really true? Do I really believe that?*

That’s when we start exploring and questioning for ourselves

what we’ve been taught.

In this way,

we seek to discover truth for ourselves.

If we never dig into things,

then the Truths we were taught just stay skin-deep.

 We have to try them on for size.

**When I understand the reasoning behind**

**something I’ve been told,**

 **it’s much easier for me to obey.**

**Air conditioners**: ***call up Nelson, Noel and Juan Carlos.***

**Thank you** for your work to get these ACs installed.

We are cooled today because of you.

I see these signs:

 *Don’t touch the ACs*

in three different languages*.*

Why did you put the signs up?

What would happen if I turned on the ACS?

 (trip the circuit—they would all turn off.)

If the signs say *Don’t touch the air conditioners,*

but I don’t know why…well, if it’s hot,

I’d just ignore the signs and turn them on anyway.

But now that you’ve answered my question.

 I get it. NOW I’ll obey.

I just needed to understand.

I’m glad I asked,

and I’m glad you told me.

We need to understand—or work towards understanding

—in order to better follow God’s directions.

**Who argued with God?**

* **Moses** burning bush - Moses argues with God….a lot.

 Four times he tries to step away from God’s call

to lead the Israelites to freedom

* **Abraham** –argued with God regarding Sodom and Gomorrah
* **Giddeon**
* **Jonah**
* **Jacob**
* **Jeremiah,** asked that age-old question

Why do bad things happen to good people

and good things to bad people.

“Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Why do all the faithless live at ease? he asked.

* **So did Habakkuk .** He asked God:

 “Why do You tolerate the treacherous?

Why are You silent while the wicked

swallow up the righteous?”

These are the people God chose to be his prophets.

What did they all do?

They questioned God.

When honest doubts arise…and they will,

regardless of our age,

we have to wrestle with them,

 just like Jacob wrestled with that angel of the Lord,

 just like Moses argued with God at the burning bush.

 As Rabbi Sacks wrote, *God loves those who argue.*

**Opening Prayer:**

Dear God Who Listens,

There are times I’m confused and full of questions. There are times I want to tell you just how I feel and what I think, even if it means challenging you.

Let me be brave enough to argue with you, just as Moses and Abraham did. Let me bring it *all* before you, holding nothing back. May I then be open to hearing your Word. *Amen.*

**What questions do you want to ask God, but have been reluctant to ask?**

**Piece of paper:**

Sometimes, for those of us who have been coming to church for a long time,

we may feel foolish asking questions,

 thinking we should know the answers by now.

My beloved brothers and sisters,

learning about God is a lifelong journey.

Sometimes the simplest questions

—at least they sound simple on the surface

—are the most profound and most difficult to answer.

One that comes to mind—

*Why does God let bad things happen to good people?*

For the **next series** Nelson and I are going to do,

we’d like to dig down into some of the faith questions you have,

but maybe were shy about asking them.

Would you take a moment and write down a question or two

you’d like to explore?

Then we’ll preach around at least some of these questions.

As we sing the next hymn,

please put your questions in the collection plate.

**Hymn** *Change My Heart*  **TFWS 2152**

Have you ever thought about the difference between Noah and Abraham,

when they realized people were going to killed?

In Noah’s case, God had told him

 that he was going to destroy all the people,

except for Noah and his family.

I imagine Noah saying:

*Gosh, Lord. It’s just me and my family going on the ark?*

*Well, that’s your will. I’ll load everybody up.*

*Too bad about my neighbors.*

Yes, Noah obeyed,

 but he made no effort to advocate

 for the rest of humanity,

he made no challenge on their behalf.

Contrast this with the story of Abraham,

who was a bit in the same boat

(excuse the pun.)

**Genesis 18: 19-33 (adapted)**

**God:** Should I tell Abraham what I’m planning to do? I’m hearing really bad things about Sodom and Gomorrah. The sin of those cities is immense. I’m going down to see for myself, if it’s as bad as it sounds.

**Abraham** Lord, will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked?  What if there are 50 righteous people in the city? Wouldn’t you spare the city for the sake of those 50 righteous people? Shouldn’t the Judge of all the earth do what is just?

**God** Okay. If I find 50 righteous people in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.

**Abraham** Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.  Suppose there are only 45 instead of 50 righteous people. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of 5?”

**God** Okay. I will not destroy it if I find 45 there.

**Abraham** But what if there are just 40 righteous people?

**God** Okay.For the sake of 40 I will not destroy it.

**Abraham**Oh, do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose just 30 are found there.

**God** Okay. I will not do it, if I find 30 there.

**Abraham** Well…suppose there are just 20 righteous people.

**God** For the sake of 20 I will not destroy it.

**Abraham** Oh, do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose 10 are found there.

**God** For the sake of 10 I will not destroy it.

I think there are two big things that come out of questioning God:

**1.Through questioning, we explore faith for ourselves**

 **and then can own it.**

**SUNDAY SCHOOL LEARNING**:

Ever since I can remember, I went to church.

I got really good at parroting back

the answers my Sunday school teachers gave us,

 like we all could.

**When I was in high school** though,

I started reflected on everything

I had absorbed from Sunday school and church

…and I wasn’t sure I believed it all.

Then I thought it was cool to flaunt my doubt.

It made me feel so mature.

For several years I really struggled

to make sense of what I had been taught and believed,

without really thinking about it.

Slowly, but surely, with many, many questions

and study and sharing with other believers,

 **I began to believe from the inside out**,

rather than learning imposed from outside.

It’s part of the learning process to question.

How do we teach our children?

We know they learn by asking questions.

How would we think it would be otherwise

 with our faith?

I think God is like this with us.

We have to explore, asking the hard questions…and then find our way forward.

**Let’s look again at Abraham.**

What was going on with all that questioning of God

about how many good people it would take

for God not to destroy the two cities?

If you were God, wouldn’t you have gotten tired

of hearing Abraham keep on begging for lower numbers?

But not God.

He lets Abraham continue to challenge him. Why?

Here’s the second reason questioning is good for us:

**God doesn’t want us to accept**

 **the evils and injustices of the world**

**as the will of God.**

God wants us to hear the cry of the oppressed, the suffering, the lonely

…and do something about it.

He wants US to respond—not just him alone.

**He wants us NOT to accept the world that is,**

**because it is not the world that ought to be.**

So God gives Abraham this opening

to challenge the situation facing Sodom and Gomorrah.

I believe God wants us to take a look at the world around us,

flawed as it is.

Should things be the way they are?

Why?

By asking the questions,

we focus on what is happening,

and then consider how WE should respond.

Remember: when we point up to God,

three fingers are pointing back at us.

What are WE to do with the brokenness around us?

Where is OUR heart for the suffering, the oppressed, the lonely?

Faith in God is no passive force—faith calls us to action.

God is calling us to a faith

 that does NOT accept the worldly status quo as God’s will.

PLEASE don’t think that the inequalities

 in our world are the will of God.

On the contrary, God invites us to partner with him

to redeem the world,

caring for all our brothers and sisters

…one person at a time.

So when we feel overwhelmed, or confused,

or angry, or whatever,

think about the words from our responsive reading:

God will hear it all.

*Come., let us reason with him.*

**Responsive Reading:** Psalm 22 : 1,2,11; Job: 42: 2; Psalm 42: 1

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  Why are you so far from saving me?

**My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  by night, but I find no rest.**

Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

**You are my strength; come quickly to help me.**

I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

**As a deer longs for flowing streams,  so my soul longs for you, O God.**

God wants us to ask questions

that flow from deep emotions

 of confusion, anger, fear, and hurt.

These emotions are not to be ignored, buried or deflected.

These questions are asked with honesty and courage,

 and are directed at the God

who hears, cares, and understands.

In this way, we are brought face-to-face

with our misconceptions of God,

his purposes, and our circumstances.

Time and again, these questions and disputes

lead to a discovery of **who God truly is**,

and his loving purposes for us all.

*Amen and Amen.*

* **Hymn** *As the Deer*  **TFWS 2025**

**Community Prayer**

*Loving and Gracious Father, we come to You in awe.*

 *How grateful we are, that we can talk to You about anything and everything about which we are concerned.*

 *We see in the scriptures some examples of where You listened to those who disagreed with You, who wanted to see things done differently, looking for changes.*

 *Help as we encounter both the times when things do change, and those where, in Your love and grace, they don’t. Our lives are always in Your hands! AMEN.*

**Anthem**  *Above All*

**Doxology**  **UMH 95**

**Communion**

 **W &Song 3172** a, b, c

(*see insert)*

* **Hymn** *Forever* **W&S 3023**

**Benediction**