

WHAT NOW?

What do you believe about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit? What are your understandings of the world, the church and death?

These are the hard questions that we explore every year in Confirmation. And every year, in the last month or so, each student is asked to write a brief statement of faith, summarizing his or her answers to these questions. Hannah and Chris, you have both done a fine job of dealing with these topics. Chris, your sense of wonder at God's gift of water, is delightful. And Hannah, your Labyrinth story is most touching indeed.

But I hope you both understand, I hope we all understand that their answers, and our own, are provisional at best. I hope we all realize they are subject to change. For as we live and grow, as we experience new things, as we meet new people, our understandings and our answers need to grow as well.

This past Good Friday a colleague gave me a copy of Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*. It is a wonderful story about a boy named Jayber Crow who hails from Kentucky. As a teenager he thinks he is called to be a minister, but later, questions his call, leaves seminary and becomes a barber. The novel then traces the rest of his life story as he, in effect, still serves as a minister as he dispenses haircuts and wisdom in the small river town of Port William.

When Jayber finally decides to leave seminary he meets with his New Testament professor to break the news.

"Well," says Jaber, "I had this feeling maybe I had been called."

"And you may have been right," responds the professor, "But not to what you thought. Not to what you think. You have . . . questions to which you cannot be *given* answers. You have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time."

"And how long is that going to take," asks Jayber.

"I don't know. As long as you live."

"That could be a long time."

"I tell you a further mystery," says the professor, "It may take longer." (54)

You see, the life of faith is a life filled with questions. Questions that can take a lifetime to unravel—questions that sometimes take even longer!

On one level that may seem rather discouraging. We like answers. We like things all figured out and wrapped up. Open ended questions, unsolved mysteries, can be unnerving, unsettling and downright scary.

And that, no doubt, is how those early followers of Jesus must have felt on that first Pentecost. Within the space of two months or so they had seen Jesus greeted as royalty on Palm Sunday, tried, condemned and crucified on Good Friday and raised from the dead on Easter. They had had a few brief weeks with him after that, but it had been so unpredictable—and at times rather confusing. Sometimes he was with them and sometimes not. Was he a ghost? Was his appearing a figment of their imaginations? They were hard pressed to know the answer. And then, to top it all off, he had ascended into heaven.

They must have been full of questions!

But then came Pentecost. Not that their questions were suddenly all answered. God doesn't drop an encyclopedia on their heads. God doesn't send a parchment with all the answers. Rather, God sends the Holy Spirit, the person of the trinity that we speak of as God with us in the here and now. It was God's way of saying, no matter what your questions, know this: I am with you. I'll always be with you. And I will give you the courage and strength you need to explore the questions and live out the answers.

I don't get messages as dramatic as tongues of fire, but like many of my colleagues, I do receive dozens of e-mails every day. Some of them are easily dismissed. Invitations to invest in Nigerian banks, discounts on religious paraphernalia and advertisements for on-line bookstores are all deleted in a flash. Many of the messages are details about upcoming board meetings. They usually take a bit more time. But the e-mails that take the longest to answer are the requests for prayer from parishioners or the occasional questions about theology or ethics.

Once in a long while I'll get an e-mail from one or another of the children in our congregation. I suspect that a parent has been frustrated in his or her attempts to answer some theological question and has suggested that their son or daughter ask Pastor John. I love those e-mails!

Just after Easter this year I got one of them. It was from a little girl we'll call Lucy. She's only five or six. Apparently the Holy Week timeline had gotten her thinking.

“Dear Pastor Danner,” it read, “If Jesus was both a person and God who was in charge when they both died on Good Friday before Easter happened?”

I was rather surprised, and relieved that I had a few more years to get ready before *she* was in Confirmation Class! What a really good question. What a hard question. I wrote back to Lucy and told her that even though I don't really know how it all works, the answer, tied up as it is in mystery, is really very simple. God was in charge. God is in charge. God will always be in charge.

That's what I told her in my e-mailed response. But if she'd been a little older, like one of our confirmands, I might have told her more. I might have written something like this.

“Dear Lucy,

I believe God was in charge. But what that means, how that works, I can't really say. I'm not comfortable with the idea that every detail of our lives is controlled by God, and we just have to wait and see how it turns out in the end. Rather, I'm sure we have real choices to make, and they really make a difference.

But I also believe that in the end, despite our choices (or more accurately in and through our choices) God will bring about the good, the right, the true. I believe, that is I *trust*, that St Paul was right, that “all things do work together for the good for those who love God.” (Romans 8:28) And that is what happened when Jesus was crucified. God worked through that horrible event, the result of many bad choices, to bring about good. And we call that good the Resurrection.

Lucy, I know that doesn't really answer your question. You're really asking me how the Trinity works. You're asking me to explain how someone could be, as the creed says, “fully human and fully divine.” I wish I knew. But I don't. So I live by faith. And I operate out of a sense of hope.

Some call that weak. Some call that a chicken way out. I think that it's actually pretty brave. Lots of things go wrong in our world, but lots of good things happen too. And God is at work—all we need do is pay attention. It is brave to have faith. It is courageous to have hope. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, Lucy

Over a year ago some people in our church had a little baby who died at birth. When the baby died her mother and father and everyone else in the family was so very sad. Of course. And they were angry too.

“How could this happen,” they wanted to know. “Why did God let a little baby just die? Why?”

I didn't know. I still don't. I told them I didn't think God caused it. I didn't think they did something wrong; I didn't think God was punishing them. I was sure the baby was and is safe with God.

But I didn't really answer the questions—because I couldn't. I don't know. And sometimes I get angry about it too.

On Easter this year the baby's Mom and Dad were in church for worship. I preached about death and resurrection and faith and hope. All the things a pastor is supposed to preach about on Easter.

After the service as the baby's mom and dad left the church, Mom looked me in the eye as she shook my hand.

'We have some good news,' she said, 'I'm pregnant.'

Lucy, I started to cry.

You see, coming to church on Easter, that was brave. Having another baby, that's brave.

And it's all about faith. It's all about hope. It's all about trusting that God really is in charge. That God really is with us at all times.

And Lucy, that story really is the best answer I've got: 'We have some good news . . . I'm pregnant.'

Lucy, keep asking questions. That's important, and remember to be brave.

Your friend, Pastor John."

Like little Lucy, the Confirmation Class has been wrestling with tough questions all year. My prayer is that they continue to do so. My prayer is that all young people, and those who aren't so young, always know that Saugatuck Church is a safe place to ask the hard questions.

So Hannah, Chris, keep asking the questions. That's important. And really live into the answers. And remember to be brave.

For while I don't have all the answers—not even most of them—of this one I am sure: God will be with you. Now and always. No matter what.

**Amen
John H. Danner**