

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, July 10, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Questions about religion or religious questions?

I want to begin by reading to you some of the first questions in the Bible.

Genesis 3:1 Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'"

Genesis 3:8-9 And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

Genesis 4:8-9 Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

The point I want to make today is that there is a difference between a religious question and a question about religion.

People often ask questions such as: Did the miracles in the Bible really happen? Why do we have candles on the altar? Why do some people cross themselves in church and others don't? What do Buddhists believe? Why are we Episcopalians?

Some folk think that these are religious questions. I want to suggest to you today that these are not religious questions, but rather are questions about religion.

A religious question is very different.

For example. The verses from Genesis that I just read to you—those are religious questions—and in fact, the very first question in the Bible is asked by God. God brought all the newly created animals to Adam and asked Adam what he was going to name them—in other words, what meaning do they have. That was an important religious question.

The Second question in the Bible is the one the serpent asked Eve. "Did God say that you couldn't eat anything that grows on trees in this garden?" The serpent, as the story says, was subtle and he was trying to suggest that God wouldn't let Adam and Eve do anything. Actually the serpent's question was a deep one. It meant: What limitations have you discovered in life?

In the Third question in the Bible, God asks Adam, "Where are you, Adam?" And when God said, Where are you, he didn't just mean: Come out from behind that Bush; I want to talk with you. God was really asking Adam Where do you stand? Why are you hiding?

And one more...in the story about Cain and Abel, God asks Cain, "Where is your brother?" And Cain, who had killed his brother then asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

These questions in Genesis are all religious questions.

What name, what meaning are you going to give to the things in this world? What limits have you discovered in your life? Where do you stand? Why are you hiding? Where is your brother? Am I my brother's keeper?

My point is, there is a difference between these questions and the one's I asked earlier such as: Why are there candles on the altar?

Religious questions are personal and soul-searching. They are like the question in the spiritual we often sing on Good Friday. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?...Sometimes it causes me to tremble...Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

That is the kind of question that makes people tremble. It shakes us up a bit inside. Religious questions are questions that come up in your own mind about yourself and how you feel about other people and God.

When you ask yourself: What can you be? Who should you care about? What choices do you have to make?...then you are asking religious questions.

Another way of looking at this is to see that questions about religion usually have to do with something that happened to somebody else, a long time ago, and far away. Religious questions have to do with something that is happening—to us—right now.

Well, why am I making this point today? At some point—soon, I hope—St Marks is going to have to look into Christian education classes for all ages. Are those classes supposed to deal with questions about religion or religious questions? The reality is that sometimes classes will try to answer questions about religion, but if that is all we do; our education program would get dull in a hurry. It is the religious questions we have to answer or wrestle with - and thinking about them is exciting - regardless of one's age. It means that we are alive and are aware of our being alive.

Where do we stand? Where is our sister or brother? What are we doing about suffering? Why are we hiding from God?

These are exciting questions. These are religious questions. These are questions God is asking us.

Ask yourself – which are the questions that are really important to you? Which are the questions that really matter to you? – questions about religion or religious questions?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was inspired by a book (I do not remember its name) written years ago by a Priest named Reid Isaac. – JFN