“FINDING GOD IN THE QUESTIONS”

IF YOU GOOGLE “FINDING GOD IN....,” YOU GET SOME INTERESTING RESULTS.

YOU’LL SEE THE PHILIP YANCEY BOOK – FINDING GOD IN UNEXPECTED PLACES.

YOU’LL ALSO GET “FINDING GOD IN THE WAVES” & “FINDING GOD IN THE RUINS,” “...IN THE PARK” & “...IN THE DARK.”

YOU’LL EVEN COME ACROSS “FINDING GOD IN THE SHOWER” & “FINDING GOD IN A GROCERY BAG.”

OUR USE OF THOSE OPENING THREE WORDS IS FROM THE TITLE OF A BOOK THAT SERVES AS OUR FOCUS THIS MORNING.

THIS SUMMER, WE’RE LOOKING AT 4 BOOKS, 4 FILMS & 4 SONGS THAT CARRY A PROFOUND CHRISTIAN MESSAGE WITHOUT NECESSARILY BEING OVERTLY CHRISTIAN.

I RECOGNIZE THE DANGER IN RECOMMENDING A BOOK FOR SOMEONE TO READ.

THAT’S NOT REALLY WHAT I’M DOING WITH THIS SERIES.

I’M NOT NECESSARILY RECOMMENDING THAT YOU SHOULD READ THE FOUR BOOKS WE’RE USING, THOUGH I DOUBT ANYONE WOULD BE DISAPPOINTED IF THEY DID.

IF THERE IS ONE OF THE FOUR, THOUGH, THAT WOULD BE AN EXCEPTION, IT WOULD BE THIS ONE.

I THINK THE BOOK FINDING GOD IN THE QUESTIONS BY DR. TIMOTHY JOHNSON, IS A BOOK THAT I HAVE RECOMMENDED TO OTHERS MORE THAN ANY BOOK I’VE EVER READ.
I’VE PURCHASED MULTIPLE COPIES OF IT BECAUSE I FOUND THAT I WAS GIVING MY OWN COPY AWAY SO OFTEN THAT IT WAS JUST BETTER TO HAVE COPIES OF IT ON HAND.

MANY OF YOU ARE PROBABLY FAMILIAR WITH DR. TIMOTHY JOHNSON.

FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, HE SERVED AS THE MEDICAL EDITOR FOR ABC NEWS.

HE’S THE ONE WHO WOULD EXPLAIN VERY COMPLICATED MEDICAL NEWS STORIES AND HE WOULD ALWAYS DO SO IN A WAY THAT WAS UNDERSTANDABLE.

THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT HIM THAT JUST MADE YOU FEEL AS THOUGH YOU COULD TRUST HIM.

THAT’S WHY I WAS FASCINATED A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO WHEN I FIRST HEARD OF THIS BOOK.

LIKE MOST OF YOU, I IMAGINE, I KNEW NOTHING MORE ABOUT TIMOTHY JOHNSON THAN HIS ROLE AS A MEDICAL JOURNALIST FOR ABC.

AS I DISCOVERED, THERE’S A GREAT DEAL MORE TO BE LEARNED.

HE GREW UP IN A VERY SMALL DENOMINATION – THE EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH.

HE ATTENDED SEMINARY AFTER COLLEGE & BECAME AN ORDAINED MINISTER.

WHILE IN SEMINARY, THOUGH, HE HAD SERVED AS A HOSPITAL CHAPLAIN & BECAME FASCINATED BY MEDICINE.

HE DECIDED TO GO TO MEDICAL SCHOOL AT THE AGE OF 29 AND HIS PLAN WAS TO BECOME A FAMILY DOCTOR & WORK IN A SMALL TOWN FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE.
ONE NIGHT WHILE WATCHING THE NIGHTLY NEWS – THE HUNTLEY-BRINKLEY REPORT FOR THOSE WHO REMEMBER CHET HUNTLEY & DAVID BRINKLEY - HE HEARD A SPOKESMAN FROM THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION GIVE AN ABSOLUTELY HORRIBLE REPORT WHICH JOHNSON FOUND EMBARRASSING FOR THE MEDICAL PROFESSION.

SEVERAL YEARS LATER, THROUGH A VERY STRANGE SERIES OF CIRCUMSTANCES RELATED TO THAT REPORT, HE ENDED UP IN THE JOB FOR WHICH ALL OF US KNOW HIM.

JOHNSON’S ROLE AS A MINISTER, THOUGH, AS WELL AS A PHYSICIAN, ALWAYS INTRIGUED PEOPLE & HE SAID HE WOULD REGULARLY BE ASKED, “SO WHAT DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE?”

HE WROTE THE BOOK PARTIALLY AS AN ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION.

ANOTHER REASON, THOUGH, WAS BECAUSE HE REALLY WANTED TO ANSWER THE QUESTION – NOT JUST FOR OTHER PEOPLE – BUT FOR HIMSELF AS WELL.

HE WANTED TO REALLY GRAPPLING WITH THE BIG QUESTIONS OF LIFE & THEN DECIDE HOW HE WANTED THE REST OF HIS LIFE TO BE LIVED, BASED ON HIS ANSWERS.

JOHNSON INTENTIONALLY ADDRESSES – AS HE SAYS - BOTH THE MACRO QUESTIONS & THE MICRO QUESTIONS.

HE LOOKS AT THE REALLY BIG PICTURE OF THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE & HE LOOKS AT THE TINY PICTURE OF A SINGLE LIFE.

WHERE IS GOD IN THE UNIVERSE & WHERE IS GOD IN MY OWN LIFE?

THAT’S WHY WE USED THE TWO PASSAGES THIS MORNING FROM THE BOOK OF JOB & PAUL’S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS.
THERE IS PERHAPS NO BETTER PIECE OF THEOLOGICAL WRITING ABOUT CREATION THAN WHAT WE FIND IN THE STORY OF JOB.

AND THERE IS NOTHING BETTER THAN PAUL’S GREAT HYMN IN PHILIPPIANS TO CAPTURE THE FULLY MEANING OF JESUS CHRIST & HIS SIGNIFICANCE IN OUR LIVES.

WE ALL HAVE QUESTIONS, DON’T WE?
WE ALL WONDER ABOUT THE BIG QUESTIONS – THE MACRO QUESTIONS.

WE WONDER ABOUT THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE – WHEN, WHERE, HOW & WHY?

AND WE WONDER ABOUT THE PERSONAL QUESTIONS – THE MICRO QUESTIONS.

WHAT IS MY PURPOSE IN LIFE?
WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO?

TIMOTHY JOHNSON SUGGESTS THAT WE’RE BETTER OFF ASKING THE QUESTIONS & SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS THAN JUST AVOIDING THE QUESTIONS BECAUSE OF OUR FEAR OF WHAT THE ANSWERS MIGHT BE.

CONSIDER THE ACTUAL QUESTIONS HE ADDRESSES –

“IS THE UNIVERSE AN ACCIDENT?”
“HOW DID WE GET HERE?”
“WHY BOTHER WITH RELIGION & THE BIBLE?”
“WHAT DID JESUS TEACH?”
“WHO WAS JESUS?”
“HOW SHOULD FAITH SHAPE OUR LIVES?”
“IS GOD IN CONTROL?”
WHAT’S ABSOLUTELY FASCINATING TO ME IS THE WAY JOHNSON CAN ADDRESS THE VAST SCOPE OF ALL THESE QUESTIONS IN A MERE 200 PAGES!

ONE OF HIS STATEMENTS THAT CAPTIVATED ME FROM THE OUTSET IS SOMETHING HE SAYS ON THE VERY FIRST PAGE OF THE VERY FIRST CHAPTER.

THE SECOND PARAGRAPH OF THE ENTIRE BOOK READS LIKE THIS:

“For many people religion provides answers (or at least a sense of security) to the big questions of life. For others, the absolute claims of religion raise more questions than they answer.

I have lived on both sides – and in some senses, I still do.

My path of faith has wandered through both doubt & belief, often at the same time.

And here’s the part that really got me:

“Doubt doesn’t have to tear down belief, however; it can purify it.

When it does, the beliefs on the other side become more certain.

This is why I would like to affirm that it is possible to find God even while you are asking the big questions.”

I think that’s the beauty of those two chapters in the Book of Job.

God stands in the whirlwind and presents Job with the magnificence of creation & forces him to look at
EVERYTHING AROUND HIM & REALIZE THAT ALL OF THIS DIDN’T JUST COME ABOUT BY CHANCE.

YOU CAN BRING YOUR DOUBTS TO THE SURFACE.


THAT’S THE BEAUTY OF OUR DOUBTS.

OUR DOUBTS DON’T TAKE US AWAY FROM FAITH – THEY PLUNGE US MORE DEEPLY INTO IT.

WHAT TIMOTHY JOHNSON DISCOVERED IN HIS OWN INQUIRY IS THAT BY STARTING WITH THE BIG QUESTIONS, HE COULDN’T AVOID THE LITTLE ONES.

“WHAT ABOUT ME?”

“WHY AM I HERE?”

“What am I supposed to do?”

AND THAT LEADS, INEVITABLY, TO THE ONE WHO GIVES US THE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS LIKE THAT.

WE DO HAVE SOMEONE WHO HAS SHOWN US THE WAY – SOMEONE WHO HAS SHOWN US HOW TO LIVE – SOMEONE WHO HAS SHOWN US WHAT OUR PURPOSE IS – SOMEONE WHO HAS SHOWN US HOW TO TREAT THE PEOPLE AROUND US.

THAT’S WHAT PAUL IS TELLING US IN THIS PASSAGE IN PHILIPPIANS.

JESUS WAS WILLING TO EMPTY HIMSELF OF HIS DIVINITY & BE BORN IN HUMAN LIKENESS SO THAT WE MIGHT SEE WHAT IT
Takes to reach our full potential as a person called by God.

In Christ’s parable of the final judgment, where the sheep & goats are separated, it’s interesting to note what Jesus doesn’t say.

There’s no mention of correct thinking.

There’s no mention of correct positions on social or political issues.

There’s no mention of power or fame or wealth.

There’s no mention of time spent in traditional religious practices.

He offers nothing other than that resounding word of affirmation – “When you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me”

I shared Timothy Johnson’s opening paragraph.

Let me share his final one as well – the paragraph that comes at the end of all the questions – both big & small.

He says:

“So I invite you to begin where the early followers of Jesus began – by following his example, by trying to live the way he did, by putting his teachings into action as best as you can.

As you do, I believe you will be following a path to the heart of God.

It is a way of knowing by doing.
ULTIMATELY YOU MAY DISCOVER THAT WHAT TRULY MATTERS IN LIFE HAS LESS TO DO WITH GETTING EXACTLY THE RIGHT ANSWERS THAN WITH ASKING THE TRULY IMPORTANT QUESTIONS.”

I LOVE THAT STATEMENT – “IT IS A WAY OF KNOWING BY DOING.”

I THINK WE SOMETIMES GET IT BACKWARDS.
WE THINK FAITH MUST COME BEFORE ACTION.
I THINK THE REVERSE IS BETTER.
FAITH WILL FOLLOW OUR ACTIONS.
LIVE LIKE CHRIST & FAITH IN HIM INEVITABLY WILL FOLLOW.

SO, TOO, WITH COMMUNION.
I THINK OUR INVITATION TO THE SACRAMENT IS BETTER AS AN OPEN INVITATION – A COMPLETELY OPEN INVITATION.
I DON’T THINK WE SHOULD CONFINE IT TO THE OFFICIAL CHURCH WORDS OF “WE INVITE THOSE WHO PUT THEIR TRUST IN JESUS CHRIST TO JOIN US IN SHARING HOLY COMMUNION.”
I THINK JESUS HIMSELF WOULD HAVE US SAY - “WE INVITE EVERYONE (REGARDLESS OF TRUST IN JESUS CHRIST) TO JOIN US IN SHARING HOLY COMMUNION.”

EXPERIENCE HOLY COMMUNION – SHARE A MEAL WITH JESUS CHRIST & WITH THOSE WHO HAVE COMMITTED THEIR LIVES TO HIM & A LIFE OF FAITH & A LIFE OF ACTION IN HIS NAME WILL SURELY FOLLOW. AMEN.

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