

# ASK: A series for Lent 2023 (Year A)

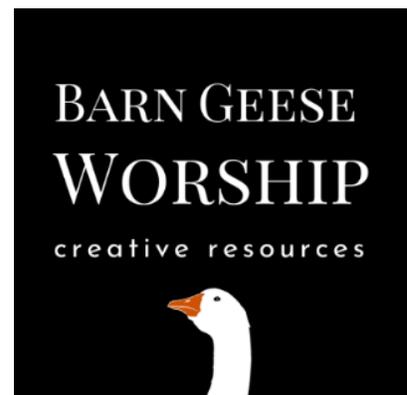
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# FROM “INTRODUCTION AND GUIDES:”

## ASK: A SERIES INTRODUCTION

Lent 2023, Year A

*Justin Kosec*

At some point in every Christian’s life, they discover a question.

You know the kind.

Not *How are you?* or *What kind of toothpaste should I buy?*

But *What really happens when we die?*

Or *Why does this terrible stuff happen to people who do their best to follow God?*

Or *How could God forgive me after what I’ve done?*

Or *How do I know what God wants me to do next?*

You know. *That* kind of question.

In my experience, people often feel isolated when they discover that type of question, as if they are the only ones asking it. For whatever reason, questions like this often feel like obstacles to our faith. They may feel forbidden, out-of-bounds. In the Bible, we read about characters like Job and Nicodemus asking questions that sound like ours, only to hear what sounds like a very touchy response from God.

But what if faith requires us to ask questions?

What if questions are an essential part of our personal faith?

What if we need questions to survive and grow as a community of faith?

You want to go there, don’t you? You want to believe that dialogue with God, *relationship* with God, requires questions.

Well, guess what? You’re in good company.

When we read scripture carefully, we discover questions everywhere. Hundreds of questions. Questions are created in the Garden of Eden. In the Gospel of John, the first thing Jesus says to someone after his resurrection is a question.

Like people, these questions come in every type. Some are pesky. Some prefer to hide in the shadows and never be noticed. Some shout loudly, repeatedly, and beg attention. Some walk with us to the grave. Similarly, like people, once you start engaging questions, you quickly discover how hard they are to understand. Questions are hard to pigeonhole. They defy stereotyping. And no matter how hard we like to *think* they can stand alone, they almost *always* require some kind of relationship.

Once you start noticing questions, once you start looking for them in the lectionary, you see them everywhere. Everyone has one, even if they keep it in their back pocket or tightly trapped behind their teeth. Biblical people have plenty of questions, too.

So what can we do with *that*?

Here's our answer: this series called *Ask*. In this Lenten season, you'll find something for every person who's ever had a question about their faith. Here is material you can use to let these questions guide your community's life together in worship and prayer:

- **Preachers' Notes** for every week, including Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, each focused on the questions that drive the readings (and the relationships between the people in those readings)
- **Sunday Morning Liturgy** featuring questions of every kind
- **Midweek Worship** for furthering your dialogue through the week
- **A Daily Devotional Guide** where readers will encounter questions designed to help them learn, meditate, and pray
- **A guide for Ashes to Go**, which provides considerations for starting your own version of this meaningful Ash Wednesday ministry

In this document, we've stitched together several other resources to deepen your personal study and your congregation's conversations:

- **A guide to the season's readings** to help your congregation immerse itself in the wonderful biblical narratives of Lent Year A, which are filled with questions
- **A full index** of every question in the readings

- **An article** that works toward our definition of questions; details how they work; suggests where these question types appear; and gives you useful language for your own leadership, Bible studies, and more

Through all this I hope you'll discover, as we have, that questions are far from obstacles to our faith. Questions are the fuel that provide spark, energy, and momentum for our relationship with God and with each other.

SAMPLE

# 'QUESTIONS, TRANSLATED' EXCERPT

## Approaching Biblical Questions in Lent 2023, Year A

*Victoria Larson*

This section started with one innocent question. We wondered, Is it possible to put together a taxonomy of questions for this Lent series?

Imagine a vacuum-sealed bag of packing peanuts, all squished and tidy and compact. Now imagine opening that bag.

That is what our question did. We asked one little question, and a whole bunch more spilled out. The Barn Geese Worship writers had metaphorical packing peanuts *everywhere*, littering our brains with questions about linguistics and rhetoric and translation and what questions even *do*, anyway.

This mess helped sharpen the purpose of this section: we provide a tiny taxonomy of questions in this series. But we have two additional purposes. First, we'd like to release you, dear reader, from the sense that you must be an expert on questions as a linguistic and rhetorical category in order to engage with this series. Second, we'd nevertheless like to hand you a few linguistic and rhetorical considerations, useful for when you encounter the questions of Lent in the biblical wild. When you exegete your preaching texts this Lent or when you approach Lenten questions with small groups, we want you to be ready in case the packing peanuts explode on you too.

Let's start with the obvious.

**What Is a Question? [Not included in sample]**

**What Do Questions Do? [Not included in sample]**

**Question Types [Not included in sample]**

**Toward a Simple Taxonomy**

Once you start asking these kinds of questions about your questions, you'll find that you don't have to become an expert question scientist to start to see some general categories of questions—it will suffice to be a curious question detective. We outline a few of those categories below in a format that you could deploy for a small-group study, enlisting your participants as fellow detectives to identify questions in the Lenten texts and to ask what they do.

The taxonomy below is one we designed especially for this series. It isn't intended for the broad field of erotetics. To build it, we drew our question examples directly from the scripture texts of the Revised Common Lectionary for Lent in Year A. We wanted a lectionary-based taxonomy useful for people in ministry contexts.

As we put together the taxonomy below, we sometimes used erotetic terms to identify our question types. More often, though, we chose names we thought would help you intuit the type's function. We also included examples of each question type from the Lenten lectionary texts. We could have used some examples in more than one category (though we didn't!). And you may disagree with the way that we typed some of these questions. That's perfectly okay with us. This table is not all-inclusive or authoritative. Questions can slip between categories, and there are plenty more question categories than what we identify here. What other categories will you and your congregation create in order to hold Lent's questions, and the questions about questions, that they inspire?

### **Question Type: Open Question**

#### **Definition:**

The asker poses a question and they really want to know the answer, whatever it might be. These questions often begin with a *wb-* or with *how...* but not all *wb-* questions are open. In this series, we also call these Curious Questions, or Learning Questions.

#### **Examples:**

Nicodemus' question to Jesus: "How can these things be?" (John 3:9, Lent 2A)

The woman's question to Jesus: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:9, Lent 3A)

The woman's question to Jesus: "Where do you get that living water?" (John 4:11, Lent 3A)

#### **Considerations:**

Is the asker asking this question for their own benefit (they want to learn!) or to better understand their neighbor (they are curious!)? How does their motivation—understanding vs. learning—affect how they respond to the answers they receive?

### **Question Type: Multiple-choice Question**

#### **Definition:**

The asker poses a question that has a fixed set of replies that the responder has to choose between. These are sometimes called closed questions, because the number of possible answers is limited. Yes-no questions are this type of question.

#### **Examples:**

The disciples to Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2, Lent 4A)

Jesus to Pilate: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" (John 18:34, Good Friday A)

Pilate to the crowd: "Whom do you want me to release for you? Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" (Matthew 27:17, Passion Sunday A)

Pilate to Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Matthew 27:11, Passion Sunday A)

**Considerations:**

What impact does it have to limit the answers available to the person who responds? Does the responder resist these limits? If so, what effect does that have on the scene?

**Question Type: Deceptive Question****Definition:**

The asker poses a question that's meant to mislead.

**Examples:**

The serpent's question to Eve: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1, Lent 1A)

Judas to Jesus: "Surely not I, Rabbi?" (Matthew 26:25, Passion Sunday A)

**Considerations:**

What doubts is this question trying to introduce? Does it work? How does the answerer resist or fall into the deception?

**Question Type: Staging Question****Definition:**

The asker poses a question so that they can then answer it themselves.

This is also called an anthypophoric question.

**Examples:**

"I lift my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2, Lent 2A)

"For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'" (Romans 4:3, Lent 2A)

**Considerations:**

Why does the asker formulate these as questions rather than statements? What would happen if there was a pause between the question and the answer? How might the audience fill in the gap?

[The rest of this section is abridged]

Questions in Translation [Not included in sample]

Why So Many Questions in the Bible? [Not included in sample]

# 'INDEX OF QUESTIONS' EXCERPT

## Revised Common Lectionary, Lent and Easter, Year A

*Justin Kosec*

As we note in the Questions, Translated section, there are hundreds of questions in the Bible. That section gives you some handholds for understanding the types of questions you'll find in this season's biblical selections from the lectionary. But even a good taxonomy of questions (if there is such a thing!) is different from a catalog that can show the full range of questions. That's what this is: an index of every question that appears in the selected Revised Common Lectionary readings for Lent Year A.

### ***The Scope***

Barn Geese Worship's Preachers' Notes draw most heavily on one selected longer reading from the season. With the exception of the first Sunday in Lent and the Palm/Passion readings from Matthew, we center our focus on the longer stories in the Gospel of John. Here, though, we've cataloged every question—not just from the gospels, but also from the Hebrew Bible and the epistle readings, too.

### ***How the Questions Are Organized***

Within each Sunday, we've arranged questions by the person asking them and provided some brief notes so you can understand the context. In our Questions, Translated section we explain that it's often important to understand whom a question addresses, so we've identified that person, too.

### ***Why Haven't You Categorized These?***

If this is really an index, why haven't we sorted the questions by type, especially if we went through all that trouble of identifying different question types in our taxonomy?

The answer is pretty simple, if a little cagey. Our categories are not *not* definitive. We're making an interpretive choice, and you may or may not agree with it. As you learn about the different types of questions, you may decide for yourself that a particular question doesn't belong in such-and-such category. Alternatively, you may expect it belongs in one category, look for it there, and discover that we have assigned it a different type without explanation. Or you may just really not even care at all, so why clutter it up?

We're just giving you the questions. You can decide what to do with them from there.

## **How Do I Use This Resource?**

- If you find yourself attracted to a type of question, this can help you expand your research beyond the texts we've chosen for commentary.
- If you're intrigued by a particular question, you can see if anyone else has asked this kind of question elsewhere in the season. (This is how we noticed that Pilate asks Jesus the same question that God asks Eve: "What have you done?" [Genesis 3:13; John 18:35])
- Track how individual characters use questions in the same the reading. How do their questions change as the conversation evolves?
- Compare how different characters use questions throughout the same reading.
- If you're going beyond just the one longer reading we've focused on each week, you can recognize what other kinds of questions your congregation will hear.
- Look at each week's readings for the types of questions you currently hear in your context.

The sky's the limit. In our own practice, we found ourselves referring to this index constantly through our own preparation. What will you find when you dig further into these questions?

## **February 22, Ash Wednesday**

### **Questions posed by the prophet**

"Who knows whether [God] will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind [God], a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord, your God?" (Joel 2:14)

"Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:17)

These questions are posed rhetorically by the prophet, who is trying to get the people to take heart, don't give up, see the day of the Lord as a gift and opportunity. Note the nested question: "Why should it be said among the peoples, *'Where is their God?'*"

### **Questions posed by God through the prophet**

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" (Isaiah 58:3)

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58:6-7)

**---The rest of the index is not included in this sample---**

# 'MAKING USE OF LONGER READINGS IN WORSHIP IN LENT 2023, YEAR A' EXCERPT

Victoria Larson and Justin Kosec

## Introduction

If you haven't yet noticed that the gospel readings in Lent Year A are significantly longer than average, consider this your official notice: you will read entire chapters of the gospel aloud in worship, and sometimes even more (we're looking at you, Palm/Passion Sunday).

When using lectionary readings in worship, sometimes it's wise to narrow focus, especially when those readings are lengthy. For instance, you may already omit challenging readings you will not address in your preaching. But in Lent Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary, this practice requires significant tradeoffs. Tightly focusing on a single reading or a single question might provide some clarity, but it also crops out the larger picture. Dialogue with Jesus often presents a larger picture of both Jesus and the human conversation about God, especially in John.

Reading the whole story is the only way to see the delicate interplay between question and answer, to grasp the subtext, or to understand how stakes change as the conversation evolves.

## Our Challenge to You

Each week we have spotlighted one longer reading from the lectionary. In Lent 1A, this reading comes from Genesis. In all other weeks, we focus on the assigned lectionary reading from the Gospel of John.

We encourage you to use these longer readings in their entirety and even, in a few cases, to expand beyond the assigned readings. Tell the story. Settle in for the reading. The *whole* reading. In the process, recognize that these longer stories may be the longest section of scripture many people have ever heard or read. Just consider this: What do you need to change in your worship practice to accommodate these longer readings?

Perhaps time is no obstacle in your worship service, and your scripture readers are mellifluous masters. In that case, just give them the text and *go*. But if your congregation is like most congregations, you'll need more practical suggestions for including readings as long as these for six straight Sundays in a row.

The simplest suggestion is this: carve out space for these longer readings by eliminating your other scripture readings for the day. Let one story speak for itself. Beyond that, recognize that listening to and understanding longer readings can pose a challenge for worshipers. Variation in your readings and in the styles you use to present scripture will give worshipers an excellent handhold for digesting these longer stories.

This guide provides such variety by offering six different options for presenting the scripture:

1. Two readers

2. Two readers and a presider
3. Change of translation (we provide *The Voice* translation as a suggested alternative)
4. Radio drama or readers' theatre
5. One presider and one reader, with other parts assigned to the worshipping assembly
6. Reading as liturgical framework

We frame these suggestions around the six Sundays in Lent, and we'll tell you why we paired each method with its reading, as described below. This guide isn't meant to dictate the only way to present a reading on its respective Sunday. Rather, our goal is to provide you with a menu of options, with detailed examples. Perhaps one or two methods seem particularly well suited to your context, and you will decide to use them throughout the season. Perhaps you decide to use all six methods, but switch the stories with which you use them. The practical considerations of your context will drive your decision-making as well as your own sense of what methods will best support your community's connection with the biblical texts.

## March 19, Fourth Sunday in Lent

*Suggested text: John 9:1-41*

*Suggested form: Radio drama or readers' theatre*

*This edition: Adapted from NRSV by Justin Kosec*

### **The idea:**

This is a longer passage with many different dialogue parts. Because the individual spoken parts are not terribly long, they do not require gifted actors to read. Yet because there are so many of these parts (nine in total!), you might struggle to recruit enough people who can dedicate themselves to providing this reading on Sunday morning, especially if your church provides multiple services on a Sunday morning. Because of that, we suggest recruiting a number of these people ahead of time and prerecording this reading as a readers' theatre or radio drama. If you prerecord this piece, a presider can direct the action in the room. Note the script gives the congregation the opportunity to participate by reading dialogue from a screen; modify to suit your particular context.

Due to the length and complexity of this narrative, listeners can easily lose their place in this reading. To anchor them throughout, we have made this reading participatory. The listeners play the part of the man born blind. To do this in the congregation setting, you will need to provide the words on a screen or in a bulletin/handout so people can fully participate.

### **Invitation to the Reading**

*The pastor reads this to introduce the scripture.*

PASTOR.

Each Sunday in Lent, we dwell in one longer reading from scripture to hear the exchange of dialogue between God and God's people. This Sunday, we read the story of a man born blind but healed by Jesus, and we hear his community struggle with question after question in the wake of this miraculous healing. We invite you to participate in this reading in a different way: We invite you to play the part of the man born blind. Use your imagination today to place yourself into this reading, even if you are not a man, or not an adult, or not blind. If you are sighted, close your eyes, and keep them closed for the first half of the reading. When you open your eyes, you will have a part in the dialogue, and you will find the words on the screen.

Go ahead and close your eyes now.

READER.

We hear God's voice in scripture, preaching, song, and prayer.

PRESIDER.

Imagine yourself leaving behind the body you inhabit now. Many, many years ago, you were born a little boy without sight. You grew up in the same town where you live now: a place with sandy streets and hot summer days. You know every step of your city, all its sounds and smells, the voices of all its people.

Now, you are fully grown, a man. But you are still blind. The town has not changed, but perhaps your parents have. They still live. But they do not take care of you as they did when you were a boy; they expect you to make ends meet on your own. There are no jobs for blind men. So every day, you make your way down to the roadside. And there, you beg for money while you sit on the curb.

READER.

One day, as you sit on the roadside, you hear a small crowd approaching. They stop near you. This is unusual. Nobody ever stops to talk to you. But they haven't stopped to talk *to* you at all.

DISCIPLE.

Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

READER.

This was not the first time people had gossiped about you as though you were not there. Their teacher responded.

JESUS.

Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

READER.

As this person speaks, you hear him draw closer. You recognize his voice. He is the one they call Jesus. His clothing rustles as he kneels beside you. He is very close to you now. He spits; you hear his hands rubbing together; then he leans over you. He touches your face. His hands are gentle. He wipes something into your eyes: mud, warm and wet. You can smell the earth on your face. It dries quickly, stiff and brittle.

JESUS.

Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.

**---The rest of this reading is not included in this sample---**

# FROM 'ASK: PREACHERS' NOTES' FOR LENT YEAR A 2023

MARCH 12, THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Questions for the Curious

*Kathryn Pocalyko*

**Readings:**

Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42; primary focus on John

Get curious.

Asking questions forces you out of your “lizard brain”—out of your flight/fight/freeze irrational amygdala—and into your rational prefrontal cortex. Functioning from there, you can be the least anxious person in the room. You can avoid getting swept away by the tension between these two parts of your brain.

Get curious. Ask questions. It's a technique to cross a divide inside your brain, and it's a technique to cross the divide when you encounter difference. It moves you from your side to the side you don't understand, or don't care to understand.

Get curious. Ask questions. It helps you get to know one another or to know one another anew.

Get curious. Ask questions. It's what Jesus and the woman at the well do on that tired day around noon in Samaria.

Let's start by establishing that Jesus and the Samaritan woman are, indeed, on two sides of a deep divide. The Samaritans and Israelites of their day were enemies, but not the far-away, distant, mythic kind of enemy. They were more the in-your-backyard, try-to-avoid-them-at-all-costs, a-lot-like-you-but-different-in-all-the-wrong-ways kind of enemy. Their religions agreed on all the main points but differed in some of the details. Those details, though, were important and divergent enough to make them hate each other.

Here, at the well, these two people stand on either side of the waters of their religious difference. They're not on the same team. They have no reason to have known or to get to know each other.

Despite their differences, Jesus throws a request right across to the other shore. He says to the woman, “Give me a drink” (John 4:7). Though the NRSV translation of the Bible does not render his words as a question, there is an implicit question behind his request: Will she help me?

In response, the woman gets curious: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (John 4:9). Her question acknowledges difference, divide, and conflict right away. Instead of turning Jesus down, the woman grabs the rope Jesus throws across the divide. Do you hear a genuine curiosity behind her question? She might actually want to know more about him!

Jesus does tell her more about himself, offering that she should have asked him about “living water.” Now this living water piques her interest, and she asks, “Where do you get that living water?” (John 4:10). Here, there’s no doubt about her genuine curiosity. She honestly wants to know where to get the goods! Where are they?

Yet immediately after asking about the water, without even waiting for an answer, the woman pivots back to asking about Jesus. She asks, “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” (John 4:12). Her cards show once again; her curiosity indeed seems genuine; she wants to know more about him! Perhaps she wonders if he’s actually blessed and chosen by God like Jacob was. Or maybe she asks the question to get him to “check yourself before you wreck yourself,” to consider the consequences of his answer. Either way, her inquiry invites him to tell her—carefully—more about himself.

At its most basic, this is a story of two people who, in the most simple and simply human way, ask each other questions to get to know one another. Far be it for modern readers to overlook this point. Jesus is not trying to trigger the woman’s sense of difference. By asking her a question, Jesus is trying to establish a connection, allowing her to move beyond the differences she initially identifies between them.

Then, through their getting-to-know-you questions, this connection builds into the woman’s knowing, seeing, and recognizing Jesus. First he offers special water and eternal life. Then he’s a prophet. Finally he says he’s the Messiah. The questions move the woman closer to him.

Does Jesus know where this conversation will go? Or does he too display some of the dynamic openness of coming to know someone in the moment? Perhaps the options are not mutually exclusive. Jesus wants to engage this woman. We learn later in the story that Jesus knows much more about her than she tells him. But Jesus does not necessarily know how the woman will respond. Isn’t that how it is with God and us? God always reaches out and offers; the unanswered question is our response.

Back in her community, the woman’s distance to Jesus remains in flux. She at once both confesses, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” and asks, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (John 4:29). She closes in on Jesus as her Lord and Savior, but perhaps at this moment, her question betrays that the answer is still too close for comfort. She is convinced enough to tell others, while also showing a dynamic openness to know more.

Fortunately, she’ll get her chance, we presume, when Jesus spends two days with the Samaritans after “they asked him to stay with them” (John 4:40). By the end of those two days of conversation, of sharing and hearing Jesus’ word, they *know* that this is truly the Savior of the world. No more questions.

All because someone got curious.

Look carefully, too, at who is not willing to get curious about the difference and its people, who is not willing to ask the get-to-know-you questions: the disciples. Jesus' speaking with a woman astonishes them, but they never move to being curious about it. The gospel writer is keen to note, "No one said 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking to her?'" (John 4:27). Something holds the disciples on their side of the Israelite-Samaritan divide, stuck in their hippocampus lizard brains, their fear. After all, sometimes it takes boldness to express curiosity.

Any bold questions must come from a place of genuine curiosity. The foil to Jesus and the well-goer is Moses and the people in the desert. Here, Moses and the people fling questions at each other with accusatory words ("Why do you quarrel with me?" "Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" [Exodus 17:2-3]). It's not clear that Moses and the people are actually engaging or wanting to engage in dialogue, especially because neither is giving the other space to provide an answer. These are questions to upbraid, shame, or accuse. A little genuine curiosity could change the conflict's whole tone. But rather than get curious, the religious leader instead does something we know, love, *and* hate: he triangulates. Moses turns to God about the people. Fortunately, God is healthy enough (and, more importantly, almighty enough) to just solve the problem between the two sides with some water from a rock. God puts the people and Moses back together (for now).

These two stories present two options for our encounter with difference and conflict in a church system. We can respond to difference openly, with curiosity and conversation, or we can silence one another with forgone conclusions, nasty triangles, and questions too dangerous to answer. The line between the two often comes down to the presence—or absence—of our curiosity.

### ***Questions for Our Spiritual Life Together***

- What's your conflict? Where do you encounter difference, or the assumption of difference, in your congregation?
- What in your congregation needs your curiosity rather than your shame? Genuine interest rather than judgment? Inquiry rather than resentment?
- Every conflict is an opportunity. What questions might help you through your conflict? If you know these questions already, are you asking them?
- If you can't, or won't, or forgot to ask, how can you ask Jesus, the one who is endlessly inquisitive about you? What rope does Jesus throw you to invite and provoke your curiosity, and what would it cost you to take it?

# FROM ‘ASK: SUNDAY LITURGY’

## FOR LENT YEAR A 2023

### Introduction

Liturgy does not frequently pose questions.

You can certainly find some question marks in an odd liturgy here or there. Many denominations include rites for commissioning or baptism that use questions—the kind where the respondent is supposed to say, “I will, and I ask God to help and guide me.” Perhaps you’ve even invited people to respond to your sermons with questions of their own.

But as we’ve noted in our Questions, Translated section, there are *loads* of question types. Questions do something that declaratives simply do not. They invite dialogue, transformation, and disruption. They are unruly, feisty, slippery. They establish relationships and break relationships alike, for they open an uncertain distance between the asker and the hearer.

Maybe that’s why most of our liturgies ride on declaratives. There’s much more certainty when we

- *profess* what we believe, rather than mention what makes us doubt;
- *confess* or *admit* our sins, rather than wonder about those we have not counted;
- *sing* our praise, rather than question our—or God’s—faithfulness.

To that end, even our hymns rarely use questions—or if they do, they tend toward those that are rhetorical. Occasionally we might ask, “How can I keep from singing?” But we already know the answer: We can’t!

Our prayers are, perhaps, the most natural occasion for open questions in the traditional worship environment. Yet even these tend to sound like our extended corporate monologue of requests. Because of all this, liturgy often suggests that little questioning is welcome or that questions are best confined to those types easily answered in the moment.

We know that no healthy relationship can exist without questions. Why do we worship God as though this were not the case?

In this liturgy, we’ve tried to layer questions of every kind. Some are drawn directly from the scripture, just as Christians have often based liturgy on declaratives in scripture. But you’ll also find the following:

- A small set of suggestions for how you can build responses and questions into your **sermons**,

- Opportunities for open questions for the worshiper to consider in the **Confession and Forgiveness**,
- A framework for the affirmation of faith that invites people to answer questions about their faith using the traditional words of the **Apostles' Creed**,
- Some of the back-and-forth dialogue made possible by questions in a **Thanksgiving for Baptism** patterned after Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well in John 4,
- An acknowledgment that we hold some consistent questions—like what God does with our gifts—in our **Prayer after the Offering**,
- A **Eucharistic Prayer** that recaptures the types of questions Jesus' friends used to set the table at the Last Supper, and
- A **Sending** that features a different open question for the congregation to carry into each week.

You'll find other ways to bring questions into worship throughout other Lenten resources, including our Midweek Worship and Daily Devotional Guide.

As we've written elsewhere, this is not an exhaustive catalog of questions that are useful for worship, nor does it index every type of question found in the scripture readings for Lent this year. But we hope you find it useful without feeling exhausting. We hope it opens new avenues for dialogue between your people and God.

As always, use what you want! Cut out the rest! And, permit us to ask you, What did you love? What could we have done better? And how did *you* use it best? Tell us at [contact@barngeseworship.com](mailto:contact@barngeseworship.com).

## CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

When God made us,  
God knew what we needed to thrive.  
God made the earth creative and abundant.  
And God gave us partners  
for the planting,  
for the harvest,  
for the meal.

But when God gives us an orchard,  
we hunger for more.

Please join me  
as we confess our sins together.

First, consider:  
Where have you gone wrong this week?

How have you harmed  
your relationship with God,  
with your neighbor,  
and with yourself?

*[Silence for reflection.]*

Now we confess our sins together.

**We know we have harmed each other  
and damaged our relationship with you.  
But we fear  
that admitting our sin  
will only drive us  
deeper into isolation.**

**So we sneak a bite  
from the fruit  
that is not ours to take.  
Then we throw away the evidence  
of our disloyal decisions.**

**We create distractions  
to hide what we have done.  
We point our fingers at  
the faults of others.  
We interrogate those  
who have no reason to lie.**

**And we avoid you.**

**God, you are perfect and holy.  
But we are imperfect and lonely.  
And you know  
we have broken trust,  
abandoned faith,  
invested in lies.  
You always discover  
the wreckage  
that bears our fingerprints.  
And our shame feels more intimate  
than your love.**

**What have we done?**

**Is it too late  
to receive your forgiveness?**

Friends, even when we sin,  
God does not accuse.  
God only asks  
what we have done  
so we can set down our guilt.

And God only asks where we have gone  
because God wants to bring us back.

+ Jesus died to reveal the limitless depth  
of God's love.

You can doubt this love.  
But you can never change the truth of it.

God knows all and forgives all.

The only question that remains  
is whether we can accept  
love so freely given.

**We do.**

**We embrace your mercy,  
and we thank you, God.**

SAMPLE

# FROM ‘ASK: A DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE’ FOR LENT YEAR A 2023

## INTRODUCTION

This Lent’s scripture gives us stories full of back-and-forth conversation with God. These conversations are filled with questions. People use questions to interrogate or to express their confusion or doubt. Questions express the longings of the heart and the puzzles of the mind. A question shows the distance between me and you. A question can also bring us closer. At times, people swallow their wonderings and fail to ask their question at all. God often asks questions to draw more near.

In this guide, you’ll find many ways to engage questions—questions from scripture and questions of your own. Each entry guides you through a few steps:

- **Read:** Each day zooms in on one question—just a couple of verses—from scripture. Often you will explore a single passage and its many questions over the course of the week.
- **Reflect:** An additional question or two is provided for your own reflection. There’s no wrong way to use these questions. Let them prompt journaling throughout the season. Talk about them with your family or roommates at the kitchen counter. Read a question in the morning, and ponder it in a quiet moment later that day.
- **Pray:** A brief prayer is provided in the form of a question from you to God. Find a way to pray these questions that feels genuine. At times that may mean rephrasing the questions or asking something different that’s on your heart. Leave room for answers. So often, our prayers to God are one-sided. Leave silence in your prayers this season. How might God speak to you—or not—in the silence?
- **Practice:** Although our Read, Reflect, and Pray sections are best suited for those in their teenage years on up through adulthood, each day also includes a practice that can be done with all ages. You may engage these as an individual, a family, or a community of friends. Most of these are something that fits in the natural course of a day, so you might read our Daily Devotional Guide in the morning to give yourself the opportunity to engage your practice throughout the day. If you read it in the evening, you might save the practice for the following day.
- **Question jar:** We encourage you to create and keep a question jar (or bowl, or bucket, whatever is handy!) throughout the season. Begin on Ash Wednesday by writing down at least two or three questions per household member on individual slips of paper, folding them, and putting them in the jar. These questions may be faith related—something you’ve

always wondered about God, or the Bible, or what your church believes—but they don't need to be. They could be questions about black holes, jazz, basketball, or slugs.

Though we are confident that deep questions will emerge over the course of the season, the questions you write don't all have to be existential. Children do not live with the same separation between the holy and the ordinary, the sacred and the secular, that most adults do. To them, all topics are worthy of divine attention (this is why it seems like kids bring up the most unusual topics during the children's message portion of a service). Channel that playfulness and lack of distinction into your question jar. Though you may get to ponder some deep mysteries, the point is more to cultivate your curiosity, to wonder, to ask questions, to ponder them with others, and to seek answers when it's appropriate. Questions help us grow in faith and in life and often lead us into deeper relationship. Your question jar questions can and should be provided by household members of all ages!

Throughout the week, keep the jar in a prominent place so you can add questions as they occur to you. On Sunday, rather than your usual devotion, spend some time with your question jar. Draw one question out of the jar. Is this a question you can answer on your own? If not, consider watching a documentary, going to the library, or getting lost in Wikipedia! Is it a question you need someone's expertise on? Call your pastor, ask your doctor, reach out to a local educator. Is it a question that would be well pondered with others? Bring it to your Bible study group, discuss it with others in your household, make a coffee date with a friend to talk more. Each Sunday, refresh your jar with some new questions.

Give yourself some grace as you progress through the season. We have entries for every day, but if you miss one, don't give up. Perhaps you want to sit down and read several entries at once. Maybe your family needs to read the entries separately and can only reflect on the week together each Sunday night. Do what works for you and your people.

Let these questions—those others ask of God, and those you have carried yourself—draw you closer into conversation with God and with others this Lenten season.

## WEEK ONE

February 22 - February 25

### Wednesday, February 22, 2023

#### *Ash Wednesday*

**Read:** “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” (Isaiah 58:3, the people to God)

**Reflect:** The scripture we read in church on Ash Wednesday, including Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6:1, cautions us against “practicing our piety before others.” What kinds of faith practices strike you as particularly showy? What do you think you have done in the past to try to get God’s attention? Has it ever worked? On the other hand, when have you been too shy to exercise your faith in public?

**Pray:** God, do you hear me today? Do you see me? How will I know?

**Practice:** If you attend Ash Wednesday services today, you will likely need to wash a smudge off your face at some point. When the time comes, or when you wash your face as usual, take a moment to draw the cross on your head again with a little water. Remember your baptism as a time when God drew near to you and as a sign that God continues to do so each day.

### Thursday, February 23, 2023

**Read:** “Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?”

(Isaiah 58:5, God to the people)

**Reflect:** Often in Lent, people try some kind of discipline to focus their spirituality. However, in Isaiah God warns that our ideas of spiritual discipline may not match what God actually wants for our lives. Was there a time when a spiritual discipline did *not* encourage your faith?

**Pray:** Holy Jesus, what can I do for you today?

**Practice:** Find one thing you can do for someone outside your household in the coming week. Can you volunteer with a soup kitchen or food pantry at your church or a nearby church? Can you drop off some school supplies for students or treats for teachers to a local school? Can you be an extra set of hands in Sunday School or with a family in worship on Sunday morning?

## Friday, February 24, 2023

**Read:** “Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
...to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”  
(Isaiah 58:6-7, God to the people)

**Reflect:** The prophets called people to look carefully at their own relationships, to examine their society’s habits, and to adjust their attitudes to match God’s. How do you feel God calling you to lead people to freedom? Or to help the poor? Or to be more available to your family?

Alternatively, perhaps you feel trapped and you want to be freed. Where are you seeking more freedom? What are you hungry for? What do you need from your family?

In either case, what stands in your way?

**Pray:** God, can you show me the hidden ways I am chained by this world? Where can I find the path to freedom?

**Practice:** Do something that reminds you that you are totally and completely free. Turn up the music and dance with wild abandon. Go to a remote place and just yell. Sing at the top of your lungs in the car or the shower.

## Saturday, February 25, 2023

**Question jar:** Take time—as an individual or with others in your household—to draw and explore at least one question from your question jar today. Refresh your jar with some new questions.

# FROM ‘ASK: MIDWEEK WORSHIP’ FOR LENT YEAR A 2023

## INTRODUCTION

If you’re drawing on our suggestions for Sunday morning worship, you’ll have a feast of scripture every week. You’ll find a buffet of questions and a smorgasbord of wondering.

In Midweek Worship, we’re setting the table for a more modest meal. Each week we invite you to zoom in on one question and one snippet of the much longer story your community will hear on Sunday morning. Since most of us enjoy additional flexibility in midweek services, we’ll also make room for additional conversation. Congregants can explore and practice the kind of questions they begin to engage on Sunday mornings. You may enjoy this format if you preach every week, because it allows you to elaborate on a single dimension of the story and it engages the voices of the whole congregation.

The shape of this service is sparse to allow for all the additional dialogue. We begin with conversation as part of the Gathering rite to prepare worshipers for deeper conversation in response to the sermon, your homily, a reflection, or whatever else you prepare for your midweek service.

To assist your preparation and your congregation’s conversation, we’ve built a guide to each week’s discussion. In selecting each week’s scripture, we’ve chosen to spotlight a particular theme from Sunday’s long readings. We give a series of questions about questions to prompt your own homiletical preparation. Then we provide a way for your whole congregation to practice asking or discussing the types of questions identified in the reading.

We hope you can see this technique is easily adaptable to any type of question you find particularly motivating. Maybe you will find yourself digging into a question that we never considered for your Sunday sermon. Use your midweek worship to invite the congregation to further explore that question with you!

We want you to become bold questioners, courageously living into uncertainty, eagerly trusting one another by sharing the questions that make *you* feel vulnerable... because even the questions that seem most frightening can build and strengthen our faith.

## A Note on Holy Week

In our experience, the shape of worship services during Holy Week connects most deeply to the worship tradition in our individual communities. Because of this, we don’t expect you to follow this pattern of worship, and we’re not recommending a particular format for your Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil, or Easter Sunday worship. However, by that point you will know this Midweek Worship pattern well enough to recognize whether you should extend it into those worship services.

# SAMPLE OF WORSHIP

## Prelude Music

### Gathering

Greetings to you  
in the name of  
God,  
the Beginning of Our Wonder,  
Jesus,  
the Answer to Our Imperfection,  
the Holy Spirit,  
the Response to Our Great Longing.

### Opening Dialogue

At each Lenten midweek worship service,  
we're going to relax into conversation.

We want to  
talk to one another.

And we want to dialogue with God.

So turn to the person closest to you.

Welcome each other to worship  
through this question.

- *Week One:* Did anything make you feel like hiding today?
- *Week Two:* What part of your day has left you with unresolved questions?
- *Week Three:* How was your day?
- *Week Four:* What burdens do you carry today?
- *Week Five:* What kept you waiting today?

## Greeting

Why are we here?

**To seek the God who loves us.**

What do we hope to find?

**A welcoming friend,**

**a gentle stranger,**

**a place for our questions,**

**and a home for our hopes.**

God be with you.

**And also with you.**

## Hymn

## Word

*We provide a different scripture focus and way to practice each week. See below for a complete week-by-week guide.*

---End of liturgy sample---

# SAMPLE OF WEEKLY CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR SCRIPTURE AND PREACHING

## Week One: Questions That Divide, Questions That Bind

### Scripture

Genesis 3:1-4, 6-11

### Questions About Questions

Can you remember a time when a question drove you apart from someone? Can you remember a time when a question brought you closer?

### Practice

*Ask a question that will bring you closer to someone you already know*

The invitation: Choose someone you know in the room. You do not have to know them well, but you should know their name. If you do not know your conversation partner, begin by introducing yourself. Now ask them any question that will help you get to know them better.

---End of conversation guide sample---