



JEFFREY F. KEUSS

LIVE
THE
QUESTIONS

HOW SEARCHING SHAPES
OUR CONVICTIONS
AND COMMITMENTS

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WHERE ARE YOU?

The Big Question

*Wanna walk to, walk off
The edge of my own life.*

SLEATER-KINNEY

"NO CITIES TO LOVE"

*And I am afraid. I feel the fear most acutely
whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long
before you, and in this I was unoriginal.*

TA-NEHISI COATES

BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, 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?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

GENESIS 3:8-12

It's possible, in fact, to read the entire Christian story as a question, one that begins in Genesis, and humanity has been trying to respond to throughout history. It's the primal question found in the heart of Eden, *the* question that God has and continues to have for us—and it's found in Genesis 3.

WHERE ARE YOU?

A bit of background: in the garden, Adam and Eve are part of a grand creation that the Lord God has put into play. As God is creating the stars, the heavens, the earth, the waters, the beasts of the field, the growing grass, and everything else that comes about in God's creation spree, one idea keeps resounding: in Hebrew, it's the word *tov*, which means "good." The creation is *tov*. The water: *tov*, good. Heavens: *tov*, good. Human beings: yeah, we're *tov* too, good. Goodness permeates God's action in all of creation—pours into it and out of it, pumps through it. As human beings and part of that creation, you and I are thoroughly *tov*-ed, repositories of goodness that God has simply peppered creation with from the very beginning.

Then the man and the woman enter the picture in this garden and come to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Though they are aware of God's presence, they start to desire a thing that they are told is not for them: the fruit of that tree. Then, rather than consulting with the living God who is fully present with them, they turn to themselves, choosing to listen to the craftiness of the serpent instead, who twists God's words of reality, bending them beyond recognition, to such a degree that Adam and Eve make a decision that causes them to trip, to fall, to cascade into a place where they do not want to be. It's at this point that Adam and Eve realize they've broken relationship

with God, as we hear in Genesis 3:10 with the fateful words, “I was afraid.” They are exposed, naked. They want to clothe themselves, to cover up their newfound shame. And at this exact moment, God speaks a question to them, the first audible question to humanity in the entire Scripture: “Where are you?” (v. 9). And in many respects, I would say that this is *the* question for humanity, all of us across the generations. Every question we have fits into that grand one: “Where are you?”

The Hebrew word *ayekah* requires three words in English, “Where are you?” It’s like a supernova of light that God is giving them, a dense and compact burst of meaning, in order to show them something bigger than they could have comprehended at that moment because of their fall. Grace and the call to reconciled relationship are bigger than shame and loss. But doesn’t God know where they are? So much ink has been spilled over the centuries by theologians and laypeople alike trying to grapple with why God asks this question. Does God have to play hide-and-seek? Really? The all-knowing, all-powerful God of the universe can’t find two people in a garden that he made? Doesn’t it seem kind of strange for God Almighty to say in essence, “Come out, come out, wherever you are”?

But the passage isn’t set up because God is somehow ignorant and has no idea where they are. It’s a rhetorical question, one that God is asking in order to create a space for Adam and Eve to admit that they have run away. It’s like a parent who sees that a child has stolen a cookie from the jar. Fifteen seconds ago there was a single cookie left in the jar, but now there’s none—just a child standing beside an empty cookie jar wearing a chocolatey chin and an angelic expression, trying to hide crumb-covered fingers. When the parent asks, “Did you take the

cookie?” it’s not because nobody knows what happened. Instead, the question is intended to give a space for forgiveness and repentance, to allow the child to be reconciled with the parent with dignity and agency. The same is true in the garden: “Where are you?” isn’t a blame game. It’s a loving opportunity for forgiveness, a bridge that God is building with this question to make a way to come back to a right, fully human state.

WHERE: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

As we look further, we can see that the bridge God is building with this simple Hebrew word *ayekah* has several parts. Let’s look at this first part: *Where?*

Where is the place from which we will ask questions that matter. *Where* helps us understand the place in which we find ourselves by probing it for information and insight. Real estate agents will tell you that the first three rules of buying or selling a house are “location, location, and location.” A property’s surroundings are key when buying land, and location is also crucial when we talk about spiritual relationships. Where you are—your context, your station in life, and yes, your physical community—will affect how you understand who you are in God’s eyes and in the eyes of your community. What we *say* about where we are also matters, and so do the choices we make toward where we are going.

I had a friend in college who had a reputation for being very truthful in the way he responded to invitations. Akin to Sheldon Cooper on *The Big Bang Theory* or the Candor faction in the Divergent book series, there are those personality types who prioritize an idealized form of truthfulness above all else. If someone invited him to a party or to someone’s house, his

response would almost uniformly be, “I’ll be there as long as something better doesn’t come along.” He meant it as kind of a joke, but in truth he actually lived that way. He was always willing to say, “Well, I can’t really make it because . . .” When an invitation to a better party would come along, that’s where he’d end up going. *Okay*, I used to think, *he gets points for honesty. Maybe not so much for commitment, but honesty—yeah, okay.* My buddy’s approach to commitment taught me about the kinds of questions he was asking with his life: seeking always to have an exit strategy and never having to commit fully to anything, as though he were always dangling his feet in the ocean from a pier but never swimming out into the surf.

When we tell people where we’re going to be, or where we imagine ourselves being, it comes with the crucial dimension of whether we actually end up in that place or not, or whether we even intended to go in the first place. I got an email late one night a few years ago from a student who said she couldn’t be in class the next day because she was sick. These things happen, so I emailed back and said I really hoped she felt better and that I understood that she had to miss a session.

Now, here’s the thing about having a professor who also happens to be on social media—later the next day, this same student started posting pictures from a nearby ski area with her snowboard, having a great day out on the slopes with friends. The next time we were in class together, I just happened to have my laptop, and it was as simple as saying, “Hey, I want to show you something” and turning my laptop around toward her. “Looks like you had a great day on the slopes, didn’t you?” I asked. We had a good relationship and had a good laugh together. I told her, “Next time the snow is that good, be sure to

invite the whole class!” But I also reminded her that while I am pro-fun and pro-fellowship with friends, I’m also pro-truth. It was a moment of clearing away falsehood from the relationship between us, asking, “Where are you?” (or really, “Where *were* you?”), and hopefully giving my student a chance to reposition the physical and spiritual GPS locator to be more in keeping with God’s intent for her and for our relationship. Similarly, “Where are you?” is God’s way of inviting us to be restored to the fullness that God intends for our lives, just as Adam and Eve were experiencing in the garden.

RELATIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP

In God’s economy, the move from falsehood to truth is key to understanding that while our physical location does matter, we also need to align our spiritual locator as well. It is vitally important to know that God understands location not so much as *place* as *personhood*. It’s relationship, relationship, and relationship—what we might call the *where* of God. Where we are in relation to God is the location of everything. Where are you in your relationship with God?

Two crucial Hebrew words dealing with *where* show up in the Old Testament: *poh* and *hineni*. *Poh* refers to a physical sense of here—as in, we are here, in this particular place, weeping and waiting for justice. But what God wants to do is to take God’s people to a different understanding of where they are—not to dismiss the location of suffering or the cries for justice, but to focus as well on the relationship of God with the people present in such a place. And so the word *hineni* shows up, meaning, “here I am.” Where “I am here” is a statement of geographic location, “here I am” is a statement

of availability for intimacy and relationship. In essence, God is saying, over and over, even in a place of sorrow and torment, “Do you understand that I’m still with you? I’m still located in that spot.”

Here’s how that idea might show up in our lives: perhaps God is saying, “You may be in a job right now that you absolutely hate, but do you know that I’m still there, *hineni*, here I am?” Or maybe you’re in a relationship that’s a real place of struggle and you don’t want to be in a place like that anymore, but really, “*hineni*—here I am—I’m in that place too, right alongside you.” The grand question of God is that location is where God is in relation to us at all times. In this way we are reminded that presence with God is a full commitment to the question of God’s *where*. Are we located relationally with God in what we do and what we say? Do we ask our questions of God from a distance or from a place of closeness and vulnerability? Are you willing to get close and intimate when you ask these questions and to let God respond in the same way?

THE TETHERED SELF

The idea of getting close to God, or really to anyone at all, might be a dying art in the Western world. A thought experiment I’ve adapted from MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle’s article “Always-On/Always-On-You: The Tethered Self” will help to illustrate this. Imagine that you step onto a crowded city bus only to find yourself wedged in a seat between two people you’ve never seen before. Bodily, you may be in very close proximity to them, giving an initial sense of closeness. But as you pull your smartphone out to start texting and surfing, and as the strangers next to you do the same, a distance emerges between you and the

people on either side. From this moment, you've come to be thousands of miles away from either one of them psychologically and spiritually, just as they've become from you. Your elbow might be pressed against his ribs, and the scent of her shampoo might be wafting into your nostrils, but online, you're texting a friend across town while one of your seatmates is doing a status update for his Instagram story, and the other is lobbing political grenades on a polarizing social media comment stream with an obscure relative in Denver.

The phenomenon of close-but-far is what Turkle calls the "tethered self," as though our *real* self is tethered to the social media stratosphere and we are pulled away and distanced from those who are in close physical proximity to us at a given moment. Tethering goes beyond distraction; it's as though we're living in multiple locations at the same time and fully present in none of them, living fractured, fragmented lives in different places and pockets all at once. I'm a fan of social media, and I find it connects people in wonderful ways we couldn't have fathomed even a generation ago. But when we become distant and removed from one another, when we can't actually be in the same space with another human and ask a deep and abiding question, then our true location is lost, and all that's left is a tethered fraction of the whole human person.¹

ARE: TRUE IDENTITY IS A VERB THAT NEEDS FEEDING

This leads us to the second part of God's question: "Where *are* you?" *Are* is a verb of being. Anything that is action requires fuel, and so this part of God's question itself raises additional questions around who and what it is that feeds our ultimate questions. *What are you feeding on right now?* What are you drawing

your strength from to ask the questions that frame you into the person that God would have you to be? What sources are you drawing from in order to see God more fully? What situations in life are acting as catalysts to help you to understand your *are* and God's *are* more clearly than before?

In the Genesis narrative the word *human* (Hebrew *adam*, sometimes translated as the name *Adam*) is related to the word for dusty, of the dirt, or of the ground (*adamah*). In other words, human beings are created by God scooping the created matter and blowing divine breath into us and animating us in the image and likeness of God. It's a moment of agitation, of crisis—God interrupting the status quo of lifeless dirt and making it move in ways it hadn't before. Similarly, it's often the crises of life that help us to refine our understanding of our *are* and God's *are*. In Adam's case, God's causing a crisis by scooping the dirt meant that Adam was still bound to creation as a dusty person—and so are we.

As people who are created out of the dirt, we are “grounded,” bound to the soil and the created world around us. Just like many trees and plants, we draw nutrients from being grounded in the places and spaces where we're located and with other grounded creatures (such as relationships with other humans) that surround us, and we need those nutrients to grow. Moments of crisis show us where those nutrients are coming from and whether they're sufficient for our need. A marriage falls apart, you lose your job, you don't get into graduate school, you get a diagnosis that blows your world apart, a friend you trusted for many years betrays you, a new financial debt comes over your head and begins crushing you under its weight—moments of crisis like these stop us in our tracks. Sometimes we cease to be

able even to function. In all cases, we have to ask what sources of energy and joy are going to sustain us through whatever is going wrong. What holds us up? Who is there for us? What were we feeding on beforehand to sustain us?

Years ago, when I was in college, I was going through an incredibly difficult time. My family was being torn apart by a number of things—financial troubles, marriages in shambles—and I found that the things I was drawing my strength and supply from were not sufficient for the crises I was facing in my family life. I was feeling empty inside. It was really confusing for me because I had been doing all the “right” things: I was active in Christian leadership, I was doing my devotions, I was attending a Christian university and hanging out with other believers. But in truth, even though I was nominally plugged in, it wasn’t actually very deep, not very grounded.

I had convinced myself that a paint-by-numbers approach was enough, that I could just do the basics as other people did and everything would be fine. It was a life of shallow roots, and it wasn’t sufficient for the storm that hit me. I believed intellectually in the truth of God’s providence, but it hadn’t sunk its roots into my heart, and it certainly wasn’t showing forth in how I was living. So when my family crises started hitting, I found myself falling apart. I felt frantic, lost, angry, and disappointed, and I didn’t know where all the emotions were coming from. It was as if there was a riot inside me, and I didn’t know why it was happening or how to quell it.

One day during my season of tumult, I was walking across campus feeling completely at my wits’ end, as if I was on the verge of being crushed under the weight of it all, holding myself together by sheer force like Nietzsche’s “will to power”—when

suddenly I saw one of my mentors coming toward me along the sidewalk. Steve was one of those grounded, good people, the kind of person who can ask “How are you?” and you know that he truly means it, that he’s actually asking, “How are you *really* doing?” When I saw him, I knew that he would want to know what was going on inside me, and I wanted to avoid being truly seen and known in that moment, with everything I was dealing with—so I started veering to try to avoid passing him. But Steve must have known that something was up, because he corrected course, coming toward me in the direction I was now headed. Eventually, I knew that the game was up, so we met, and Steve said, “How are you?”

The reality, of course, was that I was awful—and it was at that very moment, when Steve asked me how I was, that the dam broke. All of the plaster I had put in place around my sense of emptiness, all of the concrete I was trying to build up to hold everything together wouldn’t hold anymore, and I started to weep right there in front of him, in the middle of campus in broad daylight, and it was all because Steve had asked the question, the *real* question that I needed to be asked. His question, his simple “How are you?” cut right to the heart of the issue, which was that the nutrients I was trying to draw from weren’t going to sustain my life. And I just wept. We stood there, and he was present with me and not distracted. At that moment I discovered that I needed to rebuild some things.

Steve helped me to understand that I needed new friendships. I needed to take my spiritual life seriously, not just as a hobby. I needed people around me who were willing to ask me really good questions and not let me get away by just saying, “Oh yeah, I’m fine.” I needed real authenticity in my life, to be seen for

who I was and what I was really dealing with—to be known by my true *are*. Through the journey that began with Steve’s loving, authentic question, I started to understand what I think God was trying to get me to learn: that God was inviting me to grow deeper into the soil of his love. I think he sent Steve my way to help me admit the truth that I needed better nutrients to feed the life I was called to live.

YOU: BUILDING A LIFE RATHER THAN A SELF

The *you* in God’s question deals with who you say you are, who others say you are, and what you want to become. Genesis 1:26-27 tells us that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God, what we call the *imago Dei*. God’s likeness is the core of our identity and cannot be destroyed. Every human being on earth is made in God’s image—everyone, including heavenly minded saints and wholesale sinners. (By the way, if you do a Venn diagram of human beings, the overlap of “saint” and “sinner” is found in all of us. Welcome to the human race, and as we learned from the High School Musical movies, “We’re all in this together!”) As repugnant as we may find some people, as harmful as the crimes or morals of some might be, they are created in the image of God just like everyone else. We are all also made into that same likeness, and we hone and are shaped by the Holy Spirit into alignment with God through our spiritual disciplines, through our practices of discipleship, through worship. Over time, as we embrace Jesus’ call to follow him in daily life, we gradually become more like God.

But there is a tension in our lives because even while our discipleship makes us more like God over time, we’re often out of sync with who God actually is. Paul struggled with this, as

we see in his letters. “I do not do the good I want,” he wrote, “but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom 7:19). It is tension like this—the difference between who we *want* to be in God, and who we *actually* are at any given moment—that causes us so much pain and agony. Why do human beings keep hurting one another, in spite of what we know is right and wrong? Why do we keep doing awful things in the world? Why can’t we do what we want to do? What’s going on?

**“WHAT IS YOUR NAME?” JESUS’ TAKE
ON “WHERE ARE YOU?”**

But God wants to restore us to a balance between our image and God’s likeness, as we see in an important moment in Mark’s Gospel. In chapter 5, Jesus has just landed on the shores of the Gerasenes, which in Greek means *others*, referring to people who are far away from Israel. As Jesus comes ashore, he meets a man who has been chained, ankle and wrist, to the rocky tombs. The man is insane, possessed by demons, and people don’t want to be around him. He’s different from them, so they put him out into a place of death, the tombs, and leave him there. But when Jesus comes ashore, the man breaks his chains and rushes toward him. “When he saw Jesus from a distance,” we’re told, “he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.’ For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’” (Mk 5:6-8). It’s at this point that Jesus asks him a version of the question from the Garden of Eden: “What is your name?” (Mk 5:9).

The question essentially means, “What are you known by in this world?” Up to this point, the man has only been known by the demons that possess him—shame, brokenness, deceit, anger, rage, vengeance, will to power. Those things crowded out any sense of the image of God in him so that he was calcified by the demonic names that were clinging to him. But in Jesus’ encounter with him, and through the rest of the chapter, the Savior begins to peel the falsehoods away, as if to say, “*This part is not you, this part is not you, this is not you, that’s not you. . . . Oh! There you are!*” The man starts to be freed from these falsehoods, these false names. They rush away from him as pigs rush off a cliff when Jesus gives the command.

From that moment onward, the man sits in his right mind, cleansed and whole, as the beautiful creation he was always meant to be. He is given identity and a pathway to life, to his true name, the name he always had, the name he was always meant to hold as a child of God. And this is what God wants for us. The grand question in the light of the new creation is “Where are you?” It is the big question, the one that calls to us over and over again, hoping against hope that we’ll hear it and respond.

Where are you right now? As you sit here, as you read these words, many people have given up hope that they might find the true, deep name that is really there, like the demoniac found when he encountered Jesus. Many accept that the way things are now is how they’re going to be forever. *I’m not really going to fall in love*, they think, or *I’m not really going to have meaning in my work*, or *I’m not really going to find a great connection with my spouse*, or *I’m not really going to . . . a million other things. It’s just going to be this way. And I’m going to put forward a stiff*

upper lip, be a pragmatist, and work through this stuff because that's what people do. Amid it all, they feel completely alone.

Church culture often hasn't helped. It's a crying shame that we live in a world where even in churches people believe that the goal of life is to be completely free of dependence on the person next to them in the pew: to be financially secure, to have everything they need, to be completely together emotionally. *I'll give you something if you need it*, they might think to the person beside them, *but I don't need you*. Not needing to rely on anybody else in life seems to be the endgame. And if churches are saying that's the goal, either implicitly or explicitly, heaven help us all, because that is not the goal of our humanity (1 Pet 2:9).

We are tied to one another, bound to one another. As we see in Genesis, the man and the woman are given to each other, and they are also made for God. There are no Lone Rangers in true humanity. Even Han Solo in the *Star Wars* movies had to find a way beyond being the name "Solo" in order to fulfill his destiny, and he was Han Solo! We need each other, we need the stories that each of us brings with our lives, we need our hurts and our pains. Someone needs your broken heartedness to show how a heart can break, and someone needs to see your victory over shame and brokenness to believe that triumph over despair is possible. People will need to see that you have ways of overcoming the problems in your marriage so their marriages can find success. People will need to see your journey of infertility so they can understand what it is to live in a sorrow that is deep and still survive. We need each other in order to become who we are called to be.

As we peel away the falsehoods and the names that have attached themselves to our lives like barnacles, Jesus will confront

us with a call to find our true name, to shed the falsehood and lies, and come to ourselves in wholeness and clarity so we can in turn do that for each other. Because we are the body of Christ, each of us is more than a mere self. We're each a life built for and with others.

To ask the real questions in our hearts, to admit that they're there, is a scary thing. In her memoir *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard tells the story of waking up one December day when she was seven years old and seeing six inches of fresh snow outside her Pittsburgh window. She and her friends decided that if it was snowing, and if there was to be no school that day, they were going to do what kids do best: make snowballs and throw them at cars driving by. In the story, Dillard and her childhood friend Mickey were pelting car after car, until one fateful instant when one of the cars stopped in the middle of the road and a businessman in a suit got out of the car and started chasing the kids through the neighborhood. The adult dressed for business became all-business in his chase, moving quickly with the kids through the hedges and byways of their neighborhood for blocks. Finally, the businessman caught up to the winded and out-of-breath kids and gave them a talking-to. But what Dillard remembers isn't so much getting scolded for throwing snowballs, but that an adult was passionate enough to chase them through their neighborhood and across their backyards on their own turf, and come close enough to actually make contact. Just the fact that someone cared that much about Dillard and Mickey's character development to leap into action and pursue them at all costs held her spellbound.²

When we think about a relationship with God, the ending of Dillard's story probably speaks to many people's greatest fear.

We're afraid that if God ever was to catch us after all of our running, we would merely get a lecture about all the things we've done wrong as our feet grew colder and colder. When it comes to asking the deep, transformational questions, many people are paralyzed by the prospect of God actually hearing and then responding. *What happens if I'm really truthful with myself, when I unpack the real question that's on my heart, with all its brokenness, shame, and hurt? What will God do with my vulnerability, my question, if I let God know it?* But because we don't want to risk God knowing what's inside us, we pack it tight, like a snowball. Maybe it's a little bit toxic because our lives have been broken and we're not used to receiving good responses to the questions we ask, so we throw it. Then, because we don't expect God to show up, we turn our backs and run as far and as fast as we can, like Annie Dillard in the story.

And yet, Mark 5 shows us that the God we proclaim, the God we sing of, the God we encounter in worship is not a drive-by God, too much in a hurry to pay attention. This God gets out of the car, puts on flesh, chases us with love—determined, block after block, to get to us, to embrace us, to let us know that no matter how far we run, no matter how much effort we want to put into making the distance between us, the *where* will be, “Here I am,” the *place* will be the nutrients God can give us to feed our soul, and the *name* that God will call us is one born in love, with a face of joy.

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