

Ask Me Anything

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I know you have been thinking up real conundrums for me, head scratchers. So this is how it's going to work. If you have a question you'd like to ask, just raise your hand and I will point to you. I'd say you could just pull your mask down so everybody can hear you say your name please so that we all can hear your name and then ask your question. It's ask me anything. Any question is acceptable. There are no boring questions, only boring answers. So hopefully we'll see how I do. And I'm looking at the time because I have to pay attention. Yes, You don't have to stand, say your name.

Thank you, Catherine. So where are some places to turn for comfort in scripture in times of global strife and war? So there are two places that I consistently, this is for me, turn for comfort. And it's totally illogical one of them, because one of the places that I turn for comfort is I turn again and again to the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures. And that is not a place we usually think of as turning for comfort. That's usually the place you think of to turn. When you want somebody to cut you down to size and give you a challenge and say, "Whoa! You are going in the wrong direction. You have to get back on course." But I find incredible comfort in knowing that our God is a God who does not just offer a little bit of peace while the bombs are blowing up all around you.

Our God is a God who sees the whole world and calls all people to justice, to correction, and to holding themselves accountable. And that for me is a source of comfort. Yes, God does offer us comfort when times are hard. And when there's strife, God is that shepherd who lays us down in the valley. And strokes the hair on your head and reminds you that you are a child of God. And there are many places to turn for that in scripture. But I turn to those prophets who say, God is a God who holds the whole world accountable to justice, to mercy, to peace. That for me is where the comfort is. The second place I turn, I turn again and again to the gospels and to Jesus' message, especially the message that is so encapsulated in the Sermon on the Mount, blessed it are the peacemakers, blessed it are the meek.

Again, it doesn't seem to make sense. Why are they blessed? Why are the poor blessed? Why are the meek blessed? And it is because Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God is a total reversal of the world that we live in. It's

a world of justice and it's a world where the last shall be first. And knowing that is Jesus' vision, and that is God's vision for us, brings me comfort to know that we can work towards that vision and that what we pass through along the way is momentary. And there is suffering and it is hard, but God has a vision for something better. And I find great comfort in that. Thank you, Catherine. Yes. Your name please?

Oh, okay. Five names. Do you know what the five names are? Did you write them down? No. Okay. So Audrey says that and I think I know the question here. She says there are, she has, and going through reading some of our readings, she has found five different names for the large freshwater lake in Israel. And so you're wanting to know why are there so many names or which is the proper name or something like that?

Yeah. So there are a lot of different names. So one of the things we've heard it called is the Sea of Galilee, which is confusing because we think of a sea as a salt water body, but it's actually a fresh water body, but in the ancient world, a sea was any large body of water. So it's called a sea because it is such a large body of water, even though it is a fresh botany water. So we call that a lake.

It's also known as Sea of Galilee, Lake of Gennesaret. Today, it is actually called, I don't even remember what it's called today. It's called something completely different. And the issue was just different people in different places, referred to it in different ways. The interesting thing about Israel is that it is a place all throughout its history where different conquering empires were passing through it. It's an extraordinarily strategic piece of land, right on the Mediterranean, a gateway into the whole middle east. And so from the north, from the south, from the east and from the west, Israel was always being fought over and there were always conquering armies at the border or coming through. And as different people were naming things and carving things up, they called things by different names. And that is why there are so many different names. And there were so many different languages and in every different language people had a different name for it. So that's why that is sometimes recorded in the Greek. And even in the Greek, you read that people are calling it by different names. Yes. Your name please?

Okay. Great question, Jan. So Jan's question is there's all of these different Christian religions and she wants to know specifically about the Eastern Orthodox religion. Where do the Eastern Orthodox churches come in? Where do they fit in? And I think she's especially thinking about the church in Ukraine, as we've been hearing about Ukraine a lot. We're learning that there are some Protestants of some Catholics there, but there's also this Ukrainian church. And what is that? So a long time ago, 1051, oh, somebody will Google me, who's watching online at home. There was something there was used to be just one church, one universal church that spread over the whole world. And in 1051, there was a split called the Great Schism. And the Eastern church broke away from the Western church. Now we live in the west.

So we typically think there are Catholics and there are Protestants. And we forget entirely about everybody from Constantinople east, who did not become Catholic. They broke away from the Roman church and the Roman church broke away from the church of Constantinople. And those churches are known as the Orthodox churches, the Eastern Orthodox churches. And there is an Eastern Orthodox church in Greece, in Russia, in

Ukraine, in Egypt, in Ethiopia, in India, all over Eastern Europe, the middle east, the far east and north Africa, you will find the Eastern Orthodox churches. And the Great Schism, it was a power dynamic when Rome fell that sort of created, there was a cultural difference between the two churches and there was a power difference, but there were also some differences in theology.

The Eastern church had different theologies than the Western church. The Western church was all focused on the Pope in Rome and they were sort of wanted to be independent. Today, the Eastern churches are very interesting for us to learn about as Western Christians, because the Eastern vision of Christianity and theology is so different than ours. Now, as a sort of liberal leaning, even if sort of Protestant denomination, sort of theologically liberal, it's very interesting to encounter the Eastern Orthodox tradition because we encounter a tradition that in some ways is more traditional and conservative than our tradition. And in other ways is more liberal in the sense that they have not followed all the traditions of the west and they have their own traditions. For instance, one of the great Eastern Orthodox theologians of our time has written a wonderful book called that all may be saved, which is all about a sort of a Christian vision of universalism that hell is not eternal.

And that in their vision of Christianity, all Christians, all people will eventually be saved. And so there's ways in which the Eastern traditions can really inform us as Western Christians show us a totally different side of Christianity. But sometimes we see these things and we think, well, that's not the way it is. That's not traditional. That's not Orthodox. In fact, these are traditions that date way back that predate us and that predate is some of the ways that we think, and they're beautiful to engage. And I will say this about the Eastern Orthodox churches. They have one of the differences between the Western church and the Eastern church is in the Eastern church, they venerate icons. And so you've probably seen these Eastern Orthodox icons. It is one of the most beautiful art forms in the world, the iconography, and one of the most beautiful spiritual practices in the world for the Orthodox churches these icons are more than art. They're sort of art. Plus it is a direct encounter with God or with a Saint to commune with the image in an icon.

And when you go to an Eastern Orthodox church, you'll see these icons everywhere. And it is an incredibly different way. When you look at this would look like very spare, if you were in an Orthodox church, you walk in and it is a completely different way of engaging with the spirit of God in a visual way. I want to give a chance to see if there is anything since I've hit the 12 minute mark, I believe. And I want to see if there is anything online. If anybody has a question, let's see.

Marsha W. wants us to know that there is an Eastern Orthodox church in Armenia. That's true. I'm not seeing any questions online. Does anybody else have a closer, a real kicker? A stumper? Oh, I know this man will have one. Will you tell us your name, sir?

So wonderful question. John is saying we've got four gospels in our Bible. I have heard according to a rumor of a book on my bedside table, there's a whole bunch of other gospels out there that didn't make it into the Bible. Can you tell me what those are about? And he understands, those are frequently called Gnostic Gospels.

So the first thing to understand is that there are a whole bunch of other gospels that didn't make it into the Bible. When Christianity was young, there was not yet a canon. There wasn't a set of books of the Bible that everybody agreed on and read. And you remember, I just told you about the Eastern Orthodox churches. There were churches all over the place and the world was a lot bigger then. It took a lot more time to get from Alexandria to Rome, to Constantinople, right?

And so different Christian communities in different places had different books that they were reading. So Matthew was a gospel over here, and John was a gospel over here and Thomas was being used over here. So there were these different gospels. Now, at a certain point in the time of the Roman empire, when Rome became Christian and the emperor became Christian, and there was this sort of desire to create order because there was a lot of division and disagreement. They decided that they were going to determine which gospels were in and which were out. But before that time, there were lots of different books. And then not just gospels, there were hymns, there are Psalms all kinds of writing that were early Christian writing that didn't make it in. Now, the term Gnostic is actually a modern scholarly term. So there wasn't some movement at the time called Gnosticism.

And what happened is that some of the books that didn't make it in, modern scholars wanted to dismiss those books as not sort of worthy of study and modern Christians wanted to dismiss them as not worthy of spiritual engagement and the way they did that was just to put the label Gnostic on all of them and not translate them very well. And just say, these are interesting little tidbits that we don't necessarily need to read. And that's kind of where the term agnostic came from. Some of these gospels have what we would think of as Gnostic tendencies and Gnosticism was this idea in early Christianity. It was one of the ideas in early Christianity that didn't make it into the modern era is not Orthodox that, the God who created the universe was actually a Demi-God and a Fallen God.

And there's actually a higher God. It was a very sort of platonic idea that this world is totally and completely sinful. And there's nothing good about it. This is one of the big Gnostic ideas. And so Jesus himself was not a part of this world. Jesus was not incarnated. He was purely spiritual. And so some of the gospels have this Gnostic tendency. They usually have Gnostic means wisdom. And there's some sort of hidden or secret way in the gospel that you learn the real truth. It's sort of like a conspiracy theory thing, but not all of the gospels are gnostic. And even the ones that do have gnostic tendencies in them, not all Gnosticism is the same. And you could sometimes find little Gnostic hints in the gospels that we read. I think it's incredibly important to read the early gospels that didn't make it into scripture because you learn a lot more about what early Christians were thinking, how diverse they were.

And you learn a lot about how we developed the core theological principles that we hold to as Orthodox Christians. So I have one question for all of you to wrap this up. Did you enjoy hearing me speak off the cuff to your questions? Did I do okay. I did. Okay. Okay, good. So we'll do this every once in a while. It is really nice to have a break from preaching and just to get to directly respond to all of you. So thank you for doing this with me. Amen.