

The Rev Ian Burch
Trinity Sunday
May 27, 2018
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

I had a block of free time the other morning, and so I ended up going to the grocery store at a time I usually don't. By some unspoken arrangement, every mom with a small child on the East Side as also shopping at the grocery store. I saw lots of carts filled with bananas, applesauce, yogurts, and baby carrots—not to mention chicken, tofu, or fish nuggets. I was a little out of my element.

I watched these moms deftly swing carts through the aisles—lots of ponytails and yoga pants. And I heard a near constant chatter of little kids to their moms. Mom, what is that? Mom, why is the banana dirty? Mom, can we go to Tyler's house? I was shopping for groceries in a sea of questions. I watched one particular mom field question after question deftly and kindly. It was a pleasure to watch her work. She was compassionate and attentive to several questions in a row, all while shopping at speed.

The Isaiah passage for today is one of my favorite scriptures. It's a famous call story where the prophet is given a heavenly vision of a God who is looking for followers. And, in the midst of all the pageantry and supernatural special effects, the prophet Isaiah has the audacity to say, "Here am I. Send me." The way that this story plays out, Isaiah seems like a superhero. The author of the text doesn't let us in on a lot of Isaiah's doubts or his questions for God. Though, perhaps if God appeared to you surrounded by six-winged angels, you wouldn't have any questions either.

The Gospel lesson is a bit more what I would expect of ordinary mortals. Nicodemus, the hero of this story, is a teacher and temple lawyer in Israel. He has heard about this Jesus and is curious. He doesn't come to Jesus in the middle of the temple and say, "Here and I. Send me." Instead, he comes under the cover of darkness with lots of questions. I mean, LOTS of questions. And Jesus deftly takes the time to answer every one of them—not unlike those moms in the grocery store. I imagine Jesus was often perplexed that those to whom he preached didn't get the message right away—that they had questions. But like that God who was made flesh took the time to listen to and address the questions and doubts of Nicodemus.

Which brings us to us. I suspect there might be times when the wonder of God has you saying, "Here am I! Send me!" along with the prophet Isaiah. Those times are gifts, and I do hope you experience that at some time in your life—the surety, the power, and the glory of saying yes to a magnificent God.

For my money, more of life is spent like Nicodemus—intrigued by what this Jesus of Nazareth is saying but still coming with doubts and questions. Maybe even a little embarrassed and wanting to ask your questions under the cover of darkness and out of earshot of the people with a better faith. I'll let you in on a secret: there really aren't people with better faith. There's just people. We aren't made all that different from one another, and it's in our nature to question.

The grace that I see in this story is the care with which Jesus tends to Nicodemus' questions—almost like a mother to a child.

Jesus rounds out his answers by giving one of the most famous lines in all the Bible. We see it all over the place—t-shirt, devotionals, monster truck rallies. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” A lot of ink has been shed trying to figure out what belief might mean and what eternal life might mean. I’m not sure we’re much closer to an answer.

But the first part of the sentence seems more clear—God loved the world. Really loved it. In all its error and cruelty. Even then, God loved it enough to become flesh like us. To feel and taste and talk like us. To teach us how to love one another even when it’s hard.

That kind of love doesn’t come around that often, and when it did, the world was changed. God loves us when we have ironclad faith like Isaiah. And God loves us when we have questions under the cover of night. And, in a way, that becomes the answer to all the questions in our heart—the love of God who was willing to sacrifice himself for the world.

And we confess every week that that same God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a unity as well as a Trinity. We confess that our God is always in motion and always in relationship within Godself. And we confess that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are co-equal in power, in majesty, and in love. And how did we get to these insights? With lots of people, a long time ago, asking questions—asking questions of God, asking questions of scripture, and asking questions of the best and brightest among themselves. And today, Trinity Sunday, we observe the fruits of their labors. The church historically hasn’t always been so good with questionnaires, but I believe that the Biblical witness is clear—our God loves a good question. I think it shows God that we’re paying attention.

So, come to church with your questions. They are welcome here. Or if you have an extra dose of faith today, bring that too. In other words, come as you are. And God will meet you in faith. God will meet you in doubt. And God will love you anyway that you show up. Amen.