

Ask Me Anything

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Scripture Reading:

Mark 9:2–9

Beloved, I think that what happened to Jesus on Mount Tabor is happening in some sense to all of us, not physically, of course, transfigured, but in a spiritual sense. We are, through our faith in Jesus Christ, being changed, being transformed, and in the process of transformation, we find ourselves to have so many questions, so many concerns along the way. So this is an "Ask Me Anything" opportunity. Anybody have a question they would like to ask Pastor Jeff? It will be answered on the spot and if I can't answer it on the spot, I'll put it in my pocket and I'll bring it back up some other time in a service. Does anybody want to go first? Jan, you want to go first? How unlike you, Jan.

Jan: I would like you to make some comparisons to the major religions of the world and what we believe, especially about love and equity.

Okay. I'll mention a few. First of all, I think it's very important to know, well, we all know what we believe in terms of love and equity. I hope. Basically love your neighbor as you love yourself. That's the most important principle of the gospel. The whole of the law is contained within that we understand, and Jesus of course, was Jewish. He was commenting on the Jewish tradition. We could say that Jesus is a reformer, but we know for a fact that love your neighbor as yourself is not something that Jesus

thought up as an original thinker. He received it from his Jewish tradition. And so Judaism and Christianity really stand shoulder to shoulder in this regard. We love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and Jews have this wonderful idea that we share in Christianity, but they have this word Tikun. And Tikun means to sort of be a repairer of the world—somebody who is a part of God's plan to redeem the world in some sense for us all, maybe in some ways to become people who love and change the world with God in partnership with God, which is an idea that we share very much.

And another tradition I know fairly well is Buddhism. And so I'll just talk a little bit about Buddhism. One of the major tenets of Buddhism is compassion and to have compassion for everybody—every being—and understanding. And I think in compassion we begin to recognize that there is no difference between my neighbor and I and that in fact we're all we really have down here in the world besides God and the spiritual powers. We have one another. And to understand that the life another person is living is only a hair breadths away from my life and it could have been my life just under different circumstances (right?) is something that draws us closer together to those who are our neighbors, to those we might consider to be our enemies to those we think we could never understand how they think or how they live, but we can. And the way through it is compassion, which is a trait that I think also Jesus recommends to us over and over and over again. So those are three religions. I can't do 'em all. Jan, you get three and maybe we'll come back to some other ones, some other time.

Craig: In the gospels we read about a person who asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds, "Obey my commandments." Suppose some 20 years later the same person meets the Apostle Paul and asks the same question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Paul's going to say believe in Jesus Christ, his death, and his resurrection. Totally different from what Jesus said! And Paul's going to point to Abraham, who lived before all this, and in reading Genesis it was said his belief in the Lord was accounted to him as righteousness. So, Pastor Jeff, what must we do to inherit eternal life?

Oh, an easy one. Thank you, Craig! What must we do to inherit eternal life? Well, I think that Paul gives us good guidance, right? Because Paul directs us back to Jesus. And Paul says, Hey, my experience of this whole thing is you have to believe in that Jesus, that real spiritual power who can come down from heaven and nail you between the eyes, knock you down and change your life through the power of what was Paul's direct spiritual experience. Paul didn't live with Jesus. He didn't know Jesus in the flesh. He wasn't a disciple. He didn't walk with him. He never heard him preach one sermon. He never saw him do one single miracle. He was not there. He didn't sit at a table and eat with him, right? He was sort of maybe off on the periphery, persecuting some of the disciples at some point, but he did not know Jesus. His experience of Jesus is that resurrected, real, living spiritual power who will come down from heaven and nail you and take over your life in a way that changes everything. And we should believe the witness of Paul: God can do that to your life. And if you let God do that to your life, if you let God change you, that's one of the definitions of eternal life, of being saved, right?

And we should be grateful that we have the gospels and we have the tradition of the disciples and the churches who also bring down to us Jesus's teachings. And so we should always listen to Jesus' commandments because what Jesus had to say is extremely important to our understanding of how it is that we ought to live as people who have been seized and transformed by the power of Christ. Not all of us are as lucky as Paul, okay? We don't necessarily have that supernatural experience of God reaching down, blinding us and just taking over our life. I mean, the Holy Spirit just took Paul over. It wasn't his intelligence, it wasn't his will, it wasn't his idea. He didn't say, you know what? I think I'll let the Holy Spirit take me over. That would be a wonderful thing (maybe!) to experience. But not all of us are so lucky. And so when we feel the movement of God in our life and it's not a total takeover, how are we going to live? Paul was lucky. He was completely taken over and he lived like a wild man on the edges of the world and he did his penance for the life he had lived before. But for the rest of us, how are we going to live? We're going to follow the commandments of Jesus. We're going to follow Jesus' commands.

And then I would also say this idea of a righteousness being something that saves us. I also think that that's an important piece of the puzzle. The reason we are transformed by God is to increase our capacity for doing good in the world, right? That's why God transforms us. And there are all kinds of ways that this happens. Maybe God reaches down out of heaven and slaps you around and you are in that moment seized by the spirit and saved. That's an incredible experience. Or maybe you get taken out by a terrible illness and suffering and loss in your life and then you come through it, you work through it with God. And on the other side of that terrible suffering, which was no fair, you discover that your capacity for goodness and love and justice in this world is 10 times greater than it ever had been before. So it's important to pay attention to that idea of faith and righteousness because that increases our capacity to understand where it is that we are going, who it is that we are going to be. You can follow Jesus' commandments and they point you in the right direction. But there's also, in the idea of righteousness and faith, an expanded spiritual consciousness about what is my purpose in my role in a world that is suffering and needs me. So my answer is all three, and probably a little bit of other things as well.

Miles: Something I think about in context of faith, which is a little bit new to me in my life is the concept of a chosen people, which is something that comes up in different religions. I'm curious how you think about that.

Wonderful. So let's talk about the concept of the chosen people in our Christian context. We acknowledge through our history and through the Hebrew scriptures, which are a part of our Christian tradition as well, we adopted them in, incorporated them in through Jesus, that the Jewish people were God's chosen people that God had—this is our theological tradition—God had a special love for the chosen people, the Hebrew people who became the people of Israel. And God had a special plan for those people to be God's special people in some sense, maybe even God's priests on the earth. And then God said, oh, I have an even better idea now here comes Jesus, and Jesus is going to come through this tradition and he's going to come through this bloodline, these people and be a messiah,

not just for those people, but for the whole world.

So it's important to recognize that we affirm the Jewish people's claim, and I think we still do theologically, that they are a chosen people.

At the same time, there are a lot of traditions that feel like they're the chosen people. And I think it's important when we think of ourselves as chosen people (And this idea has come even into our American culture quite a bit. The idea that the people coming into the new world were God's chosen people who were chosen for this land to take it over, which is maybe an unfortunate theological echo of what happened with the promised land—of taking it over from the people who were already here and turning it into God's productive land. We had this idea in our heads that we were the chosen people escaping from Europe and coming to this country). So it's important when we think of ourselves as chosen people to recognize that it has a shadow side.

Being the chosen people is a wonderful thing! Man! To be chosen! It's incredible to feel God's finger on you, to feel God's eye, to feel that incredible expectation and to know that there is some great future for you and your bloodline and your people. Wow, amazing. Great. But there's a shadow to it. When that idea gets inflated in your mind, you inflate yourself to believe, well, I'm the only person that God cares about. I'm the chosen one. What I think matters most. What I feel matters most—my life and my land and my rights are what matter the most. And that is something that can happen when we feel like we are the chosen people.

And I believe we are the chosen people, and I believe everybody else is the chosen people too, it just all happens in their own different way, from their own different perspective. What's important is that we remember we're all God's children, we're all God's children. And all of us were chosen to be God's children. So in the idea of being chosen, which is wonderful, incredible, amazing, live in it, feel it, know it, but don't go crazy with it. Remember that you're just a mortal. You're just a human being. You're imperfect. And God has chosen everyone around you too, and their perspectives are just as chosen and just important as yours.

Oh, Bonnie Mohan. For those who don't know, Bonnie Mohan's, my wife. So, this is going to be real good.

Bonnie: So, as your wife, I happen to know that there's a weirdo inside you that I think this congregation doesn't always get to see. And one of the weirdo elements about you is your interest in the paranormal—we went this weekend to a paranormal museum. So, I'm wondering how you see your interest in the paranormal alongside your beliefs in God.

So Bonnie wants everyone to know that I'm a weirdo who's fascinated by the paranormal. And so she's asked me to comment on that. And let's talk about for a second (to just put it in a little bit of perspective) the Transfiguration, which we read about in our scripture reading this morning. Here's this incredible miraculous moment where Jesus is utterly transformed in front of three of the disciples. He's

up there and he's talking with these two spirits, Moses and Elijah. They're there, they're speaking together, and God's voice comes down from heaven, Jesus becomes blazing white light—a miracle! If you were to go and experience something like this today, you would call it a miracle, you would call it supernatural, you would call it weird. It's incredible thing that's happening up there.

I believe that these kinds of miracles, transfigurations and maybe some of the other weird stuff that happens in our lives (it doesn't have to necessarily be a UFO or a ghost, but those moments where you get stopped in your tracks and you say, wait a minute, something outside of my normal humdrum day-to-day, boring, materialist reality is trying to get my attention here. Maybe it's a coincidence. Maybe it's seeing something out of the corner of your eye, or maybe it's just like you all of a sudden are seized by a kind of spooky feeling in the dark and you feel like something is watching you, something is trying to get your attention—a dream you might have), I believe that these kinds of miracles and maybe some of these supernatural phenomenon, paranormal phenomenon are the inbreaking of God's meaning into our physical world. That's what happened at the Transfiguration, right? God's meaning became so concentrated in Jesus and his relationship to his tradition and to those disciples that the meaning had to come out in the physical world and the physical world couldn't contain it as dead matter any longer. It came alive, spiritually alive. And so that's my answer about why the paranormal, supernatural stories of miracles and saints interest me so much is I see it as one way that meaning God's meaning, God's purposes and intentions and Spirit break into our world in an actual physical way. And if you believe in miracles, you believe that that's something that can happen.

Rita: Do you think physical God as man will walk on Earth again? Or more the miracle of a vision, for example?

Do I think that God in human form will walk upon the world again? Walk in the world again in physical form? Wow. What a wonderful question. My instinct, my intuition here is to answer it like this. I believe that Jesus Christ came into the world in order to show us the reality that that which is human can be so much more than human because Jesus was fully and totally human and at the same time fully and totally God. Now I believe that that was unique, and I don't believe that that's what's happening for you or for me. And yet God was showing us something that we couldn't have possibly believed before. And we even now today, have trouble believing that which is human is a perfectly acceptable, wonderful, beautiful, possible container for everything that is good, holy, sacred, beautiful, and divine. The human can fully contain, be filled up with to overflowing with that which is God. Now we're mortal and we're imperfect and we're never going to be Jesus. And yet there is a way, I believe, through faith in Jesus and through the process of coming to know God more deeply and coming to know our own self more deeply, that God comes alive in us and we walk a little bit more with God's feet and our hands even more become God's hands in this world. Which isn't to say that we are gods, we're not, but we're not "just human." We're more. God made us to be more. And Jesus is that absolute confirmation. You can be more than "just human." You can be more through your faith in Jesus. God comes into the world, not just through Jesus's incarnation, but through the incarnation of each and every one of us in a smaller way. That's what the Church is. It's Jesus's body on Earth now that he's gone, and each and

every one of us is a part of that. So God is on Earth through the Holy Spirit, through our miraculous incarnations, through our associations and relationships with one another as a church reaching out into the world. Great question. Thank you.

Wonderful questions everybody. And we've got to stop, but we'll do this again sometime soon. And if you did have a question you didn't get to ask, email it to me or let me know and maybe I'll turn it into a sermon sometime. Thank you.