

Epiphany 3—A
Isaiah 8:19-9:2
Where Can I Find Answers?

Where people go for answers has changed dramatically during my lifetime. When I was young many households owned a set of encyclopedias. (For those of you too young to remember, these were books filled with information about all sorts of things.) If you had a question about something, the encyclopedia was a good place to look for an answer. Then came Google, which allows people to search for an answer to nearly any question in an instant. Now, there is Alexa, a software program in Amazon's Echo device. This is a device you place in your home and talk to. You can ask Alexa anything you wish. She will tell you what the weather is going to be, what the traffic conditions are or what time the game is being played. What time is it in Bangladesh? How do you get a ketchup stain out of the carpet? Ask the internet and see what you can find. On just about any topic there is some information to be found. It is truly remarkable how easy it has become to find answers to our questions.

I. Life is full of "big" questions

Finding an answer to questions about the weather or traffic or how to fix a broken dishwasher is one thing. But, what about finding answers to life's most important questions? How, for example, do you determine whether an action is right or wrong, moral or immoral? Some philosophers say that you are your own guide to what is right and wrong. What is right for you may not be right for someone else. This individualistic morality appeals to modern-day Americans whose culture celebrates individuality above all else. "How dare you tell me what to do," is a common sentiment in our country.

There are other philosophers who claim that morals are determined by society. What the group, as a whole, decides about right and wrong is what matters. Both of these philosophies are predicated on the idea that morals are as flexible as Silly Putty. Sometimes for some people in some situations in some societies some things are right and some things are wrong.

It does not take an ethics professor to realize that there are flaws in both of these philosophies. Morality determined by the individual seems fine... until someone decides that it is not wrong for him to steal my car. Morality determined by society seems fine...until a society decides that sacrificing children in a fire to please the gods is good, or that exterminating less desirable people is a good way to purify the Arian race.

So, if we cannot go to ourselves to determine morality and we cannot rely on society to determine morality, where do we go for answers to questions about right and wrong?

And it is not only questions about morality for which we need answers. We need answers about other important questions. Like, is there a God? If there is, what is he like? If there is, what does he think of me? Does he think of me? Does he know or care that I exist? Is he angry with me for the things I have done that haunt me? If he is angry, what can I do to fix things between him and me?

Or, how about the question of suffering? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why do some people seem to have it so good while others have it so hard? Why am I suffering this particular pain or loss?

Or, what about life after death? Is there an existence beyond this one? If there is, what is it like? Where are my loved ones who have passed? What will happen the moment I die? What will I experience, if anything?

These are big questions—important questions. How these questions are answered will determine, to a large degree, how you look at your life and how you live your life.

II. Going to the wrong places for answers leaves us in the dark

So, where do you go to find answers? You could go to Google. But, try googling “Should sex be saved for marriage” and see how many different answers you get. Try googling “Why am I suffering” and see if you can find a definitive answer. Try googling “Is there life after death?” When I asked Google that question I was given over thirty-three-million search results. You are not going to discover definitive answers to life’s important questions on Google. You could ask your friends, neighbors or co-workers for answers. But, guess what? There will be nearly as many opinions as you have friends, neighbors and co-workers. And, who is to say which of those opinions is correct? Where can you find answers to make sense of things?

The question is not a new one. It has been asked for time immemorial. In our first Bible reading this morning we heard from the prophet Isaiah. He lived about twenty-seven hundred years ago and he knew that many of the people in his day were trying to find answers in the wrong place. He wrote: “*When they tell you, “Consult the mediums and the spiritists, who whisper and mutter,” shouldn’t a people seek their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?*” (19) Things were starting to look pretty dark and bleak for the nation of Israel. The Assyrians were moving in on their northern borders with a force they couldn’t possibly hope to withstand, so the Israelites definitely had questions. “Should I go to fight? Should I send me sons to fight?” But the problem was they were looking in the wrong place for the answers. There was no Google in Isaiah’s day. But there were those who claimed that they could communicate with the dead. So, some of God’s people were going to them and seeking answers to their questions.

When you look more closely, as Isaiah points out, the mediums and spiritists “*whisper and mutter.*” This may refer to how the voice of the medium changes when they are supposedly channeling the voice of dead person. It could also refer to the value of what they say, it is vague and evasive at best, in reality no better than “chirping and muttering” as some other versions translate this. Then there is the question of why anyone would ask advice of a dead person in the first place. We note that they couldn’t keep themselves from dying. We are talking about desperate people, people who have no God, no hope in this world. And seeking help in these ways is not going to help them.

Plenty of people are still doing this today—going to mediums who hold séances, claiming to put the person in contact with someone who has died. The desire to hear from a loved one who has passed is understandable. We miss them. We would love to hear from them and speak to them again.

But, Isaiah’s reply is simple: “*Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?*” “You are looking for answers in the wrong place,” Isaiah was saying.

He would say the same to us if he knew we were looking for answers to life’s great questions on the internet or in the philosophy books or from our friends. Because, the truth is, when we look for answers in any of those places, we are just stumbling around in the dark, never

sure what is true, never knowing what is right or wrong, never knowing how to handle the suffering in our lives, never sure what will happen to us when we die.

Isaiah described people in this condition this way: *“They will pass through the land, distressed and starving, but when this happens and they are starving, they will be frustrated, and they will curse their king and their God. They will turn their faces upward, and they will look down to the ground, but listen: They will see only distress, darkness, and the gloom that brings anguish. They will be banished into thick darkness”* (21-22). Isn’t that a strikingly accurate description of many people in our day? They see the problems in our world—the war and the suffering and the chaos—and, because they are looking in all the wrong places for answers and aren’t finding any answers, they shake their fists at God in anger and slink into depression. And, so do we when we look for answers in all the wrong places. We stumble around, confused and angry.

III. Go to the Lord to be enlightened

So, what do we do? Where do we go to understand what is really going on around us and inside of us? Isaiah tells us. *“Turn to the law and to the testimony!”* (20) That’s another way of saying: “Go to God’s written Word!” Here (the Bible) is where we find answers. Here we discover that there is one true God, that he created this world and everything in it. Here we discover that sin has ruined this world, our relationship with him and our relationships with one another. It is like a light switch being flipped on in a dark room. We can suddenly see things for what they really are. We see why things are so messed up.

The Bible can be trusted for answers. The unity and continuity of the Bible, its circulation, the history of its translation, its preservation, its accuracy of prophecy, and in particular its impact and power in human hearts and lives all bear witness to one great truth: the Bible is unique and unparalleled in the history of writing. This fact, worthy of more in-depth study, is stated to demonstrate that a trust in what the Bible says is not irrational or the result of any “blind faith.” Christian faith is based on fact.

And now we know what his will is for our lives—what is right and what is wrong... and how far we are from fulfilling that will in our lives. But, when that light switch goes on we also discover how great his love for us is and how he came to rescue us from this ruined world.

In fact, if we really want to know who God is and what God is all about, we need look no further than Jesus. That is what Isaiah prophesied seven hundred years before Jesus’ birth. He wrote: *“In the former time, he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will cause it to be glorious, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, the light has dawned”* (1-2). A light would come to bring the people once again out of the darkness. We don’t have to guess what Isaiah was talking about here because we read about the fulfillment of this prophecy in our Gospel lesson this morning. Isaiah was talking about the coming Messiah. He was talking about Jesus. When Jesus set up his base camp for his ministry in Galilee, Matthew tells us that this prophecy was fulfilled. Of the three years of Jesus’ ministry here on earth most of it was spent right there in Galilee, calling people out of the darkness of their sins in the light of his kingdom.

Read his story. I encourage you to read any (or better yet, all) of the books that tell his life story—Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. And, as you read about him, as you see him there, realize that you are discovering who the God of this world is and what the God of this world is

like. You will see that he is a God who cares—about sin and suffering... and you. You will see that he is a God who wants to restore his relationship with you and that he was willing to go all the way to the cross to pay for your sin and restore that relationship.

You will see that he is a God who is more powerful than death—who can promise and provide eternal life. You will see that he is a God who knows what is best for you and can tell you what is right and wrong for you. He sheds light on all of this—on all of the most important questions of this life and the next.

So, do not look anywhere else for answers. I mean, it's fine to go to Google if you want an opinion on which pepper grinder to purchase or which restaurant serves the best Taiwanese cuisine. But, when you are in the dark about life's most important issues, look to the Lord. Only he can light up your life. Amen.