

## The Invitation to Ask

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

July 17, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

**I Kings 3:1-15**

**Matthew 7:7-11 (6:28-33)**

*“At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ‘Ask what I should give you.’”*

Like children asking a father or a mother for the very thing that hurts our well-being rather than for what would keep us in life, our prayers, especially those prompted by our anxious fears, are ignorant of our needs. “But after we have been instructed by faith to realize that whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring,” wrote John Calvin in his *Institutes*, “it remains for us to seek in him and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him.” The sentence is worth memorizing: *it remains for us to seek in him and in prayer to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him.* At the beginning of his reign, we read that Solomon seeks in God and in prayer asks of God what he apparently has learned, in a dream, to be in him: Solomon asks for a heart that listens, a mind that understands.

For any who know the story, you cannot miss the massive disconnect between the Solomon we have met thus far in his rise to power and the king who converses with the Lord God in a dream. This is no David, no humble shepherd boy anointed by God in the fields outside of Bethlehem. This is David’s entitled son, according to his mother Bathsheba, an heir whose dark deeds include conspiring with Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan to murder first his brother Adonijah, then his father’s secretary of defense Joab, and finally his rival in the northern kingdom Shimei, as well as sending Jerusalem’s chief priest Abiathar into exile. This is a man whose dark deeds have gained him the throne. Moreover, Solomon’s recent and politically motivated marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh the king of Egypt (a foreigner, an idolater), and his subsequent worship of other gods on the forbidden high places, portend not only his own downfall, but also the eventual division of the monarchy. It is on the principal high place (at Gibeon where Solomon has come to make a sacrifice) that the Lord appears to him in a dream.

Given Solomon’s questionable character, two things astonish me about his conversation with God, neither having to do with the prayer itself. First I am astonished that the God who made the heavens and the earth should begin the conversation that is prayer by saying to God’s deeply flawed servant, even though he is a king—or perhaps especially *because* he is a king, “Ask what you think I should give you.” How should this scoundrel know? The second astonishing thing has to do with God’s response to the king’s request. In a word, God goes overboard. Not only is Solomon’s humble petition granted, but because of what he did not ask, God also lavishes the king with riches and honor and long life, provided Solomon will walk in God’s ways and keep God’s statutes. It is a gesture, given Solomon’s propensity for intrigue and idolatry, which makes me wonder what God was thinking, wonder, in the words of Old Testament professor Samuel

Balentine, about “the nature and character of God that both summons forth [invites us to ask] and enables the response of prayer [listens to our cries].”

There are three primary places to go when asking after God’s nature and character; and there is one place not to go. The place not to go is my own little mind, the place that Calvin called an idol factory! If it is only to my own thoughts about God I go, thoughts formed out of what I surmise by looking around, chances are that I am having to do—and consequently I am making you do business of a Sunday morning—with either a straw figure of a god who is an easy target for my doubts or a god cut down to the size of my so-called higher reason. Instead, the places I go, the places you have ordained me to go when wondering about God’s nature and character, are the places people have gone for thousands of years: first I go to the Scriptures where words both hide and reveal the God who invites us to ask; second I go to the One in whose flesh God has chosen to be known, the One who says to you and me, here and now, “Ask!”, that we might seek in him and in prayer ask of him what we have learned to be in him; and finally I go to the church’s confession that speaks of the mystery of the triune God who is a conversation, and in whose image we are made.

If we begin with Scripture, seeking the nature and the character of the God who invites us to ask, we are met with God’s body parts: mouth, face, ear, eye, arm, hand. These are metaphors, we say, words drawn from the known world and placed up against the mystery of our lives in relation to the God who invites us to ask. But they are more: they are the faculties necessary for human communication and, to push it a bit further, they are the faculties employed in the act of giving one’s self away in vulnerability to the other. To know you, I scan your face, look into your eyes, listen for a catch in your voice, try to decipher the grasp your hand, all in the hope that you will let down your guard, let me in on the mystery that you are, give yourself away. As ethicist Paul Lehmann observes, “To communicate is not merely ‘to talk to somebody’—surely an idle use both of time and of the basically human in us all. ‘To communicate’ is to be in an actual relationship with somebody in which you give yourself to him and he gives himself to you. Luther shared the New Testament discernment that to communicate in this way takes a bit of doing. It requires, in fact, a redemptive element.” The God we meet in Scripture is a God whose mouth, eyes, ears, arm, hand give God away, making room for us in God’s life, inviting us in and bidding us ask, seek, knock on heaven’s door. Mostly looking back and through the lens of Scripture, we borrow the language of Scripture, saying as we push words to their limit: “I saw God’s hand in this life-changing decision because, frankly, it was not what I wanted at the time and yet it turned out for my good.” Or we exclaim with the psalmist after we have made it through deep waters, “God heard my cry and then, almost I want to say I heard a voice bidding my anxious fears subside”; or “Though my foot was slipping in the mire, God’s arm upheld me and kept me from falling.” Page after page, we read of a God who hears human cries, sees injustice, upholds the broken-hearted with an almighty hand, speaks with his servants, and in so doing, gives himself away, in all vulnerability, to a people who cannot quite seem to return the favor, who prefer idols to the intimacy of a God who would know them and be known by them.

Put in a contrary way, the idols in Scripture are deaf, dumb, and blind: have mouths but do not speak; eyes but do not see; ears but do not hear; hands but do not feel. Against just such idols we rail, when our asking does not result in receiving or our seeking in finding, all the while missing the God who has come to us not as we want but as we need. “[I]t is so much more comfortable,”

said Emil Brunner, “to have a pantheistic philosophy than to believe in a Lord God....A God who is neuter makes no claims; He simply allows Himself to be looked at.”

Up until the night when the Lord God came to him in a dream, this consummate and ruthless politician either could not tell the difference or was intent on covering his bases: pledging loyalty to the God of his father, the God who had promised never to withdraw his steadfast love and faithfulness toward David’s dynasty, all the while sacrificing on a high mountain to the deaf and dumb gods of other nations in order to secure his own power on earth. On the night in question, the nature and character of the God who came to him in a dream both took the initiative, inviting him to ask, and also demanded of him obedience and loyalty. What was God thinking? The God who hears and sees and speaks and feels, invites us into a relationship of reciprocity, a relationship of promises made and kept, a relationship of trust and so into a redemptive conversation.

Prayer, says Balentine, “necessarily involves the mutual participation of both divine and human partners in the task of communication. If one or the other fails to participate, if there is an ‘I’ but no [‘thou’], [a ‘thou’ but no ‘I’] then dialogue becomes monologue (or reflection, meditation, soliloquy) and the result for both parties is something less than could have been.” To be astonished that God invites a character like Solomon to ask is to be astonished that God invites broken and untrustworthy characters (invites you? invites me?) into a conversation fraught with risk and vulnerability, which leads me to the second place I go when I am wondering about the nature and character of God, wondering what God could be thinking.

I go to Jesus. We meet Jesus in Matthew’s gospel on a mountain where, among other things, he is speaking about prayer. Listening to his words with Solomon’s prayer in mind, it is as though he means to tutor our prayers before we open our mouths. Do not be anxious about your lives, he says, what you shall eat, drink, wear. In other words, when God says “ask”, you need not waste your breath asking for these things. God knows you need them. Rather live in a great trust that God will give you all good things, because in the gift of the life, death and resurrection of the one who is speaking, God already has, giving himself away in the face, voice, eyes and arm of Jesus Christ.

Or to return to the words of Calvin: the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ is whatever we need and whatever we lack, so that it remains for us to seek in him and in prayers to ask of him what we have learned to be in him. I imagine that every other thing seemed pointless to Solomon when he was met by the living God in a dream, save the ongoing conversation. What more could he ask than for a listening heart? I imagine that every other thing seems pointless when we are met by the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ: whose voice we know, whose eye we avoid, whose ear we would bend, whose hand we reach out to hold.

Finally, when I find myself wondering about the nature and character of God, I go to the church’s confession, a confession that speaks of God as a conversation among three persons: Father, Son and Spirit, the Spirit that helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray. Believing God did not become such a God in the fourth century when the church happened upon the doctrine of the Trinity, but that God is eternally a contrapuntal conversation, I imagine that God’s extravagance toward Solomon, showering him with riches and honor and long life when

he asked for none of these things, was simply the self-giving nature and the character of the God who is love, who is an overflowing stream of grace, to use Calvin's metaphor, from which we may draw.

Scoundrel that you have been, up to this moment, ask if you dare, for a listening heart, a heart readied to receive the God who, in Christ, gives himself away. God falls for it every time and will lavish you with the riches of his grace—his eye watching over you, his ear open to your every cry, his voice calling your name, his arm holding you close, his hand outstretched to grasp your own—God will lavish you with his love that has been yours all along...for the asking!