

This past Monday morning
 I decided to treat myself to one of those nice coffee drinks
 handmade with milky foam
 because, well,
 MONDAY.
 So, I stopped by my local coffee shop
 on my way to work.

I was able to walk right up to the counter
 because there was no one in line,
 but the two employees—baristas—
 were deep in conversation with one another.
 One was sitting on the counter,
 the other's face only inches away.

My presence surprised them.
 The one jumped off the counter
 as he realized that good customer service
 required them standing attentively waiting for customers
 rather than immersed in their own conversation.

"I'm sorry,"
 the young barista said to me.
 He took my order, and the other barista went to make it.
 He again apologized,
 "I'm sorry. We were telling horror stories about car batteries dying
 and lying to your parents."
 Then he paused *only slightly* before he asked me,
 "Have you ever lied to your parents?"

THIS was NOT a question I was expecting
 before my Monday morning coffee.
 I actually wasn't expecting any questions other than my order,
 let alone such a personal and confessional question.
 But for some reason,
 I was open to the question.

It couldn't have been more than three minutes that followed—

I mean, how long does it take to make a latte?—
 but in that short time,
 the barista told me the brief version of his car-battery-dying-lying-to-parents
 horror story
 and I told him the brief version of my one teenaged violation
 of the combined Fourth and Eighth Commandments.
 Towards the end of the conversation,
 we discovered that we had grown up in the same county,
 which made the high-school stories even more hilarious,
 because we could picture where the delinquency took place.

My moment with this barista felt honest.
 And amusing.
 And it started
 with
 that
 question.
 That unexpected question
 and our answers to it . . .
 drew us closer.
 Even for a moment.
 It's not like I had found a new best friend;
 heck, I didn't even ask the barista's name.
 But I did feel our common humanity.
 Because of the barista's spontaneous question,
 and the mutual ground we two strangers found in answering it,
 I did leave the coffee shop
 with a spring in my step at 10 a.m. on Monday morning,
 before even taking a sip of caffeine.

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Sometimes questions draw people closer.
 But not always.
 Some questions cause trouble.
 Some inquiries divide or disrupt a relationship.

That's how the serpent uses a question

in today's reading from Genesis:
to establish distance, and divide.

The serpent, remember, is more crafty than any other wild animal
that the Lord God had made.

The serpent asks the woman,
"Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'"
She corrects the serpent, by saying,
"We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;
but God said,
'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden,
nor shall you touch it,
or you shall die.'"

The serpent had the facts wrong.
The woman tried to correct it, but it was too late.
The question was already out of the bag,
driving a wedge between two of God's creatures.
This question and response
is one of the first disagreements in the Bible,
creating a distance between the serpent and the woman.

And the story's next steps
spiral down into more distance and division.
The serpent twists the design of God's prohibition
and tells the woman that she won't die if she eats from the aforementioned
tree.
Then she eats from the prohibited tree,
and then her husband does as well,
disobeying what God had instructed them.

Eventually the two humans realize that they've disobeyed God.
They feel shame and disgrace and vulnerable
all the way down to their bones and in their bodies,
which they attempt to cover with feeble fig leaves.
Then the man and woman *hide from God*,
trying to stow themselves away,

and out of God's presence.

The serpent's initial *question* sows division,
and that division trickles down
all the way
to dividing the people from God.

The device the serpent introduced—
the Question that Divides—
still has a controlling impact on our human relationships.
Consider how some questions get into our heads,
causing doubt and sowing suspicion,
which drive us apart.
Or how some questions mislead us,
pushing us to question the foundation of a relationship
to second-guess our impressions of a person or group of people,
to feel uncertain about our convictions.
There are people and institutions
who still use questions this serpentine way
in our lives.

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But let's look at how GOD uses questions.

Because when God goes looking for the two humans,
and when God calls to the man,
God asks him
a question.

Where are you?
Where are you?
In the Bible's original Hebrew, the question is one word:
Ah-yeck-a?
Where are you?

God calls to the two with a question
because God knows that a question

can also create closeness.
 God uses a question
 to bridge the divide that now exists between God and the humans.
 God uses questions to draw closer.

“Where are you?”
 “Who told you that you were naked?”
 “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”
 “What is this that you have done?”

For the entirety of this conversation—
 which is the first conversation between God
 and between the people we call Adam and Eve
 after their eating the forbidden fruit—
 God speaks solely in questions.
 God only asks questions.

God does not immediately condemn them.
 God does not instantly curse the serpent
 nor increase the woman’s childbirth pangs
 nor condemn the man to a life of toil.
 First, God simply asks questions.

Now, God’s inquiry could seem like harsh questions—
 “*Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you NOT to eat?*”
 “*What is this that you have done?*”—
 but even harsh questions can draw people closer,
 much in the way that the truth creates intimacy.
 God is willing to get to the bottom of the matter with the beloved creatures,
 willing to follow the spiral of their division,
 all while drawing closer
 through questions.

Where the serpent uses the question to divide,
 God uses it to bring people together.

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Throughout the season of Lent,
we will explore *this exact* dynamic.
We will hear God ask us many questions,
because each Sunday in Lent at least one reading
contains questions.

Questions from God to a prophet.
Questions from the psalmist to God.
Questions from Jesus Christ to the disciples.
From the disciples to Christ.
From Christ's enemies for him.

My hope is that by listening to these questions
and engaging with them
we will hear and feel God drawing closer to us.
We will hear God, our creator, like a loving parent,
calling, "Where are you?"
We will hear Christ, our Savior, like a protective brother
inquiring, "What have you done?"
We will hear the Spirit, our Supporter, like a good friend,
asking, "Who told you that about yourself?"

Each week we'll invite you to take a notecard
printed with a question from that Sunday's Scripture reading
and meditate on it over the week.

On the front is the question directly from Scripture.

On the back of the card

there are more prompts to help your consideration.

Then, you're invited to write down any thoughts.

Responses.

Further questions!

And bring the card back the next Sunday.

Over the following weeks, we'll write your responses
on the windows in the back of our sanctuary.

Or you can grab a marker and write them, too.

And the hope—our Lenten prayer—

is that through these questions

we will feel God drawing us closer:

closer to God
and closer to one another.

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By the way:
I probably won't go back for a latte tomorrow—
during Lent I try to curb caffeine habits.
But I'm still thinking about my Monday morning run to the coffee shop.
The barista's question could have divided,
could have sounded like a chastising accusation.
But it didn't.
Instead, the question becomes the opportunity for confession,
for closeness,
and for comedy.
Unifying us, even if only casually, instead of dividing.
Just like how God works
with questions.

AMEN.