

## Sermon Series: Questions God Asks

“Do I drink the blood of goats?” by Jason Byassee

Psalms 50

Boone UMC

May 17, 2015

This is one of the greatest Sundays of the year. Our confirmands have worked so hard to get to this weekend, with five of them baptized yesterday in the Watauga River along with several others, 24 of them to be confirmed for their faith in Jesus Christ today. Parents thank you for your commitment to this year-long process. Dan and Colette Krontz thank you for your leadership. Mentors and prayer partners and other volunteers thank you all. It's taken countless hours from hundreds of people to get to today.

It's such a big day you get two sermons. These are both part of our series on Questions God Asks. The first question is this, and it's a strange one, are you ready?<sup>1</sup> “Do I drink the blood of goats?” It's a question God asks in the psalm you're about to hear. I ask it for this reason—lots of people spend the rest of their lives rejecting the version of the Christian faith they learned when they were twelve. I know this because some of you have told me when you've come to our church hey, I don't really believe this thing I was taught as a kid, I don't have to, right? And it's usually something wrong that the church universal through space and time doesn't actually teach. For example that everyone of another religion is going to hell. Or suicides are going to hell. Or all gay people are evil and, you guessed it, going to hell. Notice hell comes up a lot in these versions of faith you are right to reject. Here's what's interesting. *The bible itself* rejects such foolish notions of faith. We think we need to get away from the bible to ask hard questions but no, the bible asks harder questions than we've ever come up with.

In this psalm God speaks. This is the God *who told Israel to sacrifice* in the temple to get rid of their sins and please God. And God says, hey, do I need your sacrifices? Do I need animal flesh? If I were hungry or thirsty would I tell you? No! Don't be silly. That's a kid's version of faith worthy of rejection. But do *you* need to be people who sacrifice? Who give generously? Who call on God and glorify God? Yes, you do. All people need that. Hear the way this story rejects childish notions of God and grows up into mature adult notions of God. Just as our 12 year olds today leave behind childish things and grow up into mature adult faith.

Two points for today. I teach the confirmands this first one,<sup>2</sup> if you understand it, it is not God. If

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<sup>1</sup> Ps 50:13 Do I . . . drink the blood of goats?

<sup>2</sup> “I. If you understand it, **it is not God** --St. Augustine”

you understand it, it is not God. That's from St. Augustine, one of the most important thinkers in the church's whole life. As we listen to God's word let us stand and sing and turn and listen.

## Psalm 50

*The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. 2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. 3 Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him. 4 He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: 5 "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" 6 The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. 7 "Hear, O Israel, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. 9 I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. 10 For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. 12 If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. 13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? 14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and pay your vows to the Most High. 15 Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."*

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

I hope you heard as you read not just talk of goats and bulls and sacrifice, but talk of church and churchgoing and membership. God asks us, do I need you to be members of a church? To give? To serve? These are, you will note, the very thing I and the other pastors are constantly trying to get y'all to do. Here's the childish notion of faith that this psalm undoes. And many people think of religion in this childish way so pay attention. We think faith is a matter of doing things for God so God will do things for us. That's how many relationships work, right, I flatter you so you'll do for me; you scratch my back I'll scratch yours. But it is not so with God. God needs nothing from us. My dad is here since my son Jack is getting confirmed so I'll tell a story he may not remember. I'm about Jack's age and Duke is playing at Clemson and getting mauled. But there's this new invention called the three point line and we're coming back and I'm praying. Maybe out loud. And dad says, kindly, Jason, you know that won't affect the game, right? Well. On the last play of the game Tommy Amaker takes a 3 for Duke that hits the rim, bounces so high it looks like it's out of play, it's not, it comes back down, carems around the rim and drops through. And I look at dad. *What do you think of prayer now eh?*

He was right of course and I wasn't. God isn't waiting for us to do something religious so God might do something miraculous back. Childish. Grow out of that. Now, here's how faith works. God does for us what we could never do for ourselves. God takes flesh and dies. And God gives grace to us sinners who could never deserve it. In faith it's not that we bring 50% of what's needed and God brings the other half, no, God brings 100% and we just receive gifts. In Christian faith God does everything. We do nothing. Except say thank you. Make our whole lives a thank you. And if you can understand that you're doing better than me.

Let me give you a much more serious illustration. Our community lost a lovely young man this week, 21 year old Travis Eggers-Gryder, his mother Judge Becca Eggers-Gryder plays blue grass for us sometimes, his aunt Margaret Eggers and his cousins Four and Kim and Luke Eggers are part of our church. He was well loved, hilarious, and served his community in a fire department and as an EMT. He lost control of a new motorcycle, veered left of center, and was hit by an SUV. No childish version of faith can survive one tragedy that awful. What's faith say to that? It says . . . I don't know. There are no words for such tragedy. But God undergoes tragedy himself in Christ. God dies a tragic death. Can I put it this way? God goes to hell. And we send him there. And then God is raised at Easter. And gives resurrection hope to us. There is hope beyond tragedy. It's not a natural hope. It's not our memory of the person or what lives in us of them or any of that. It's hope nestled in the heart of a God who made Travis, mourns like us, suffers worse than us, and will one day raise him and all of us. That's the only answer possible for a tragedy that horrifying. And the only faith worth believing in the face of death. When we baptized 9 of you yes<sup>3</sup>terday we took you under the waves to say hey, from now on, you're dead. Nothing worse can happen to you than the death of your sins. And nothing better than resurrection. We know live is unpredictable and dangerous. As terrifying a fate could await you as met Travis—in fact we'll all meet death one day, I promise you that. And yet Jesus' resurrection is stronger than death. And here's the thing. There's a childlikeness to resurrection faith. Not childishness, but childlikeness. The resurrection is not reasonable. It's sounds too good to be true, like magic only better. And it is. So we grow up in faith partly by becoming like children who'll believe good news that big. If Christian faith won't work at the edge of a grave filled too early then it's altogether worthless. But it does, it will, count on it. I promise you that too.

Friends, will the first half of you come forward to be confirmed in what you believe.

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<sup>3</sup> *Childlike*, not *childish*

For sermon 2 we will turn to the book of Joshua. It illustrates the other half of what I've taught the confirmands, point two for today: <sup>4</sup>the answer is always Jesus. I take this from the children's sermon story. The teacher asks "What's gray and fuzzy?" And the children all cry out "Jesus!" but one brave soul says, <sup>5</sup>"Sounds to me like a squirrel." The answer is always Jesus. Joshua is the Hebrew form of the Hebrew name Jesus. The story you're about to hear is of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River the way they had crossed the Red Sea before. Faith is always crossing dangerous boundaries, miraculously through raging water, in Egypt, in Israel, in the Watauga River yesterday, in each of our hearts. Hear this word and listen for what Joshua has the Israelites do as they cross, how he wants their children to remember.

Joshua 4:1-8a & 20-24

*When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: 2 "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, 3 and command them, "Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight." 4 Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. 5 Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, 6 so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, "What do those stones mean to you?" then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever." 8 The Israelites did as Joshua commanded . . . 20 Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, 21 saying to the Israelites, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' 22 then you shall let your children know, 'Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.' 23 For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, 24 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever."*

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

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<sup>4</sup> II. The answer is always Jesus

<sup>5</sup> <http://ididafunny.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Silly-squirrel-I-Did-A-Funny-16.jpg> (only up for a moment)

<sup>6</sup>If you try to cross the Jordan right now you can hardly do it without getting your feet wet. It's a little bitty creek, in some places gone altogether, like our Colorado River on this continent. The Israeli government has dammed it in multiple places for water.<sup>7</sup> Back then though the river flooded every year and become impassible, like a sea. And just as the Israelites crossed out of Egypt from danger through the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army drowned behind it so now Israel crosses into the Promised Land through the flooded Jordan. Faith always crosses through the impossible, the dangerous, into new life.

And look what the people do.<sup>8</sup> They gather stones from the bottom of the Jordan to set up a memorial in the promised land. They want children to ask, "What do these stones mean?" And to tell them God delivered us to this land through a dried up Jordan River. Whoah, really? Tell me the story grandpa. This week we tore up the sidewalk we most use to get into church, and I wanted to keep chunks of it in a tower, wait, that cement is soaked with holiness. Nearly everything the Jews do is designed to teach the next generation. On Passover the elders are supposed to act strangely until one of the children asks, how is tonight unlike any other night? Well, my child, we were slaves in Egypt. Baptizands, confirmands, I hope you grabbed a stone from the bottom of the Watauga River yesterday to remember God brought you through that water to new life. God is faithful and always will be.

In the African-American church they speak often of the Joshua generation. That is, Moses and Aaron and his generation of leaders is gone. Joshua's generation is here. Who is Joshua? He's not the miracle worker Moses was. Not the liberator. He's next. Kind of deflating right? Sometimes faith can sound this way. Wasn't everything great way back when? I mean the 1950s, everyone went to church and America was more moral. Yeah, and we were about to nuke the planet and black people couldn't vote and women couldn't work. Here's what the bible says. Sure it's good to remember. Israel gathers stones to remember, wants children to ask so we'll tell them the stories. *And* God raises up Joshua. A new generation. Faith isn't just a monument to things past. Faith is trust in a future. Jaroslav Pelikan makes this contrast,<sup>9</sup> "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. *traditionalism* is the dead faith of the living." Moses is amazing. Joshua will be more amazing still. Israel is amazing. Jesus is more amazing still.

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[http://waterinventory.org/sites/waterinventory.org/files/styles/chapter\\_normal/public/images/Chapter-06-Jordan-River-Basin-01.jpg?itok=F4u1kBSK](http://waterinventory.org/sites/waterinventory.org/files/styles/chapter_normal/public/images/Chapter-06-Jordan-River-Basin-01.jpg?itok=F4u1kBSK)

<sup>7</sup> <http://i.ytimg.com/vi/quDZ298uF4E/maxresdefault.jpg>

<sup>8</sup> <https://artfromtheword.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/ebenezer-rock.jpg>

<sup>9</sup> Attributed to Jaroslav Pelikan

When I went off to college my dad gave me a great gift. He said lots of people will tell you this is the best four years of your life. It's not. Don't get me wrong. College is wonderful or I wouldn't be paying for it. No he said this is just the beginning. Life just keeps getting better. Thanks for that dad. So it is with faith. Baptism, confirmation, is just the beginning. Life just keeps getting better, because each year is a chance to meet Jesus all over again and see his faithfulness. Joyce Davis, 94 years old, last came to church some months ago and fell in Sunday School class and broke her hip. Sounds bad for someone that age. When I saw her this week she bounced out of her chair quicker than I could. She's radiant as ever. And she said her favorite visitor in her weeks in rehab has been her sister...104 year old Charlotte Stanley. Think of the 2 centuries on those two sisters and what they mean to one another. And you'll see a glimpse of the God who is always faithful, who is unimaginably ancient and also newer than our newest newborn. Confirmands this is a great weekend. And it's only the first step. Much more lies ahead.

So come and be confirmed in the faith as you know it now on the way to knowing it face to face when you're in the presence of Jesus forever.