

The Inquisitive Christ

12 Engaging Questions

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New York Nashville

Introduction

*I towered far, and lo! I stood within
The presence of the Lord Most High,
Sent thither by the sons of earth, to win
Some answer to their cry.
“The Earth, say’st thou? The Human race?
By Me created? Sad its lot?
Nay: I have no remembrance of such place:
Such world I fashioned not.”*

—Thomas Hardy,
“God-Forgotten”

In a few hours’ time, everything would change. Their plans and hopes would collapse on the hillside of Calvary. Their faith would shatter like glass into a million shards.

Jesus knew this. He knew his friends were walking into crisis and perceived abandonment. In the deepening shadows of Passover, he also knew what they did not—that in his physical absence, his presence would remain. His care for them, his preparations, would be specific, individualized. He’d told them so, many times.

But they didn’t trust the promises he’d made to them that night or any other. Their doubt, long embraced, would not allow them to risk believing in the dark.

He passed through Jerusalem’s twilight streets, their fear and unbelief the landscape he was passionate to navigate. In the pause of this holy night, in the gap of their mistrust, he entered with a question.

“If [my intimate preparations] weren’t so, would I have told you that I’m on my way to get a room ready for you?”

John 14:2

His question, though somewhat chiding, was meant to expose the deep-rooted lie attached to every heart since the Garden gates clanged shut in Genesis 3. This lie fuels human doubt like gasoline, compelling us to wander our green-and-blue planet, fending for ourselves and searching for a home we are afraid we’ll never find.

This lie wraps itself around our souls with clinging tenacity: *God has forgotten me.*

But Jesus’s question, posed to his disciples and extended to all, kindly reminds us that the lie, while loud, has never been true. We are not abandoned. We are not unseen. We are not “God-forgotten.”

Something in each of us needs to be pointed repeatedly toward these truths. The questions of Jesus serve as the signposts, showing us the way.

In the year I turned thirty, I desperately needed these signposts. That year, my husband, Jimmy, and I first stepped American feet onto Ireland’s dark loam, our ancestral soil. We’d been married for ten years and had begun to observe something unsettling. This unsettling thing had crept into our lives quietly, unnoticed. While we’d been busy making a life for ourselves, we had accidentally embraced a paradigm of mistrust. Like the disciples, we were doubting the relevance of God’s promises for us and our messy lives.

We had slowly transitioned from living as beloved children to forgotten ones, and in the midst of this subconscious belief, *we* ended up forgetting *God*. It’s easy for an orphan to make that leap of doubt.

We had forgotten him, his desire to walk with us in union, his intimate preparations on our behalf. On the outside, I’m sure we seemed content, and we were pleased with this appearance. The truth was that contentment was far from us. We were restless and dissatisfied.

Dissatisfied in our comfort.

Dissatisfied with the relational status quo.

Dissatisfied with the dryness of our slumbering Christianity.

Painfully dissatisfied with the small story we'd written for ourselves.

This is where the invitation to risk more with God entered, into a place just empty and quiet enough that the echo of something unexpected could be heard. From this experience of deep dissatisfaction, of needing to both remember and *be* remembered, we did something completely outside our carefully crafted twenty-year plan. With urgency nipping at our heels, we decided to throw our lives into the air like confetti, watching where the pieces would float next. We wanted to shrug off the protective cloak we'd worn over our tiny world, the covering that kept us cloistered within, and God with all his wildness out.

In other words, we decided to move to Ireland.

Both Irish in ancestry, we desired to see the land of our forebears, perhaps finding true contentment there. I had known that ancient Celtic tradition calls Ireland “the Terrible Beauty,” and, by instinct—although I didn't understand it—I knew I needed exposure to something unapologetically wild. I wanted to remember the God who had once caught my imagination and intellect, my heart and my soul.

But I was scared I'd become even more dissatisfied.

Ireland isn't a large country, by any means. Although only the size of Indiana, it is certainly big enough to overwhelm two untested American parents, responsible for our daughters, Macy and Jo. We knew this wouldn't be a sightseeing vacation. It would be a pilgrims' voyage, an answer-seeking course correction, done with a five- and six-year-old in tow.

It felt like we were walking blind into a minefield.

We narrowed our focus to County Kerry, the largely rural southwestern border of Ireland. We threw a dart at the county map, picking a peninsula. I spun Jimmy seven times with his eyes closed, and he poked the village of Caherciveen with a tack.

We scolded ourselves for our ridiculous behavior, for moving forward with this irresponsibility. We prayed fervently, argued and kissed, emoted like maniacs, and obsessively researched the Internet.

Kerry, or as its people call her, “the Kingdom,” sits at the westernmost edge of Europe, and we liked that. We’d heard there were more sheep there than people. As introverts, this statistic appealed to us. We wanted soul-quiet, and our world at home had gotten loud with people, places, and things.

This predictable family of four did what no one predicted, stepping off the edge of our lives. We closed our home in Virginia, put the house on the market, and gave our key to a real estate agent, never planning to return. With four enormous suitcases, we said goodbye to everything we’d ever known. Sitting on the runway, Jimmy and I held hands, our trusting little girls waving goodbye to America from the windows of the plane.

After two flights, a five-hour drive across country, and several Dramamine, we arrived—frazzled and believing we may have made the biggest mistake of our lives.

We were wrong.

Pulling onto the gravel drive, our Irish cottage peeking around the next bend, we could sense immediately that God was there waiting, a huge grin on his face. Glimpsing the fresh-catch fishery across the street and the newborn lambs mewling around the outer courtyard, we knew he was there, antsy like a kid at a party, itching to finally yell, “Surprise!”

We had not been God-forgotten.

As he’d said in John 14, he spoke the same over us: In spite of our wrestling, everything would be okay. He was preparing something special all along.

“Would I have said it if it weren’t true?”

We had traveled with so many personal questions, expecting them to be met by either God’s certainty or his silence. In reality, he gave us very few answers, but he was not silent.

Instead of the answers we craved, we got something else,

something unexpected and infinitely better. God surprised us with his inquisitive nature. He met us with holy conversation and tailor-made dialogue.

God gave us *his* questions.

In County Kerry, he revealed his desire to draw us near by asking us a host of soul-penetrating, Gospel questions, abundant as Irish rainfall. As with the disciples, his questions pointed the way along the winding path to intimacy with him.

We thought we understood questions—we'd been asking them our whole lives. But we discovered we'd been taught the Socratic method by the wrong teacher. There is a motivational chasm between fallen questions asked by fallen humanity and these unexpected questions offered by God.

Fallen questions accuse. The questions of God invite.

Fallen questions mask what's hidden beneath. The questions of God are revelation.

Fallen questions stifle discussion. The questions of God breathe life into conversations with him.

The deep-rooted lie that we're God-forgotten in turn compels us to question God, to forget him *before* we can be forgotten. But through his questioning, he gently offers us a safe place to lay down our doubt, sitting with us in the unknown space between inquiry and answer.

We all are making the risky and bewildering journey to our ancestral Home. We have so many decisions to make from what feels like far, far away.

His presence, however, is closer than we think.

Jesus isn't spending eternity concentrating on his own personal comfort. At this very moment, we are on his mind. His plans for us are both grand and individualized. He dwells with us, and he doesn't miss a thing.

We all throw darts at the spiritual map. Our best efforts are stumbling in the dark. But we are not forgotten for even one second. He walks with us, always available, always present, providing the questions that point the way forward.

While not limited to a dozen, this book explores twelve of

those questions in the Gospel narratives. To engage what he asks will take patience. It will take stillness. It will take courage. His preparations are in place even now, beginning with his questions.

Godspeed to you, friend, on the road paved with Gospel questions.

CHAPTER ONE

“Where Is Your Faith?”

Drowning in the Current of Mistrust

*Why can't you see
What you're doing to me
When you don't believe a word I say?*

—Elvis Presley,
“Suspicious Minds”

“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

—Jesus Christ,
Matthew 14:31, ESV

On the western edge of Ireland, the Atlantic rushes from North America like a refugee in flight. Despite the promises made by the Gulf Stream, at the height of an Irish summer, the temperature of Kerry waters huddles in the mid-forties. The air temperatures don't cross into the seventies save a miracle, and there's always the breeze that bites.

Nevertheless, the Gaeltacht Irish are sailors and fisherfolk and lovers of the sea. The cold does not keep them landbound any more than it does the native sea mammals that soak in the chill tub of Ireland's bays. Even wee Irish children swim in these waters.

The Murphys were not going to be put to shame. When in Rome, and all that nonsense.

We determined not only to get our feet wet—we were going to submerge. We were going to swim to the local fishing pier and back, the length of three football fields in one direction. We

decided to do this great feat the next warm, sunny day. That day came and went, and we found a legitimate reason to back out.

Despite the sun's warmth, the water was still cold—iceberg cold.

We waited a few more days until the forecast called for a June heat wave, when the air temperature would reach a whopping 68 degrees Fahrenheit. That day came, and that day it rained.

We procrastinated until evening, knowing the beach would be empty. When we arrived, the only other person crazy enough to swim was an older man from the village, wearing nothing but a tragically small suit and a swim cap. He swam belly up, lazily backstroking near the shore like driftwood. He waved as we picked our way down the stony beach.

Reluctantly dropping our towels, we stepped into the water, holding hands. Jimmy and I stood there, hopping from one foot to the other, shrieking like distressed animals. The next moment, Jimmy Murphy dropped my hand and ran like a wild man into the crashing surf.

I followed. We were going to touch that pier if it killed us.

When I first dove under the water, I thought with shocking ire: *The Atlantic has betrayed me.* This water was for penguins and Antarctic explorers—not for normal swimmers. Instantly, it felt like every ounce of breath was sucked from my body, and every muscle strangled itself seeking warmth. We were gasping and swallowing water all while trying to move shocked limbs that were furious at our brains. Somewhere in the distance, I heard the whoops of my children.

Within steps, the rocky bottom gave way, and we were well beyond our depth—the fishing pier still far in the distance. I rolled over on my back, concentrating. I needed to regulate my labored breathing. Thick, tan seaweed, ten feet long or more, danced just beneath my back and legs. It tickled and bumped against me. We knew whale life was abundant in Kerry. I was picturing what mammoth sea creatures were watching me from the weeds below. I tried imagining that I was simply swimming in a backyard pool. This did not work.

Jimmy and I reached the pier at the same time, but the waves were too rough to climb the narrow concrete stairs to the platform high above. They were slick and algae-covered, and I imagined my head cracking like a waterlogged melon with the next thrashing roll. We touched the pier with our toes in defiant joy and kicked off in a rush, turning to go what felt like miles back to shore.

What we didn't realize was that our swim to the pier had been in cooperation with the current. Now this same current opposed us, violently, and we drifted quite a bit as we fought with heavier limbs toward shore. We were completely numb. For the first time, I thought of how dangerous this was, how easy it would be for one of us to lose control, carried into the sea beyond from sheer exhaustion. When we finally hauled ourselves onto the shoreline's slimy rocks, white as sheets and panting for breath, I thanked Jesus. Our girls, first-grader Macy and kindergartner Jo, ran to us, cheering, unaware how precarious life had just been.

We'd been naïve, foolish.

We bundled up in our towels and drove home to our tiny Euro shower, where American heads and shoulders stuck out above the curtain. We hunched under the hot flow for an extravagant amount of time, uncaring that we had to pay extra for hot water. Jimmy stoked the peat bricks in the grate. I made scalding mugs of instant coffee. It took us several hours, a heap of Irish blankets, and a nap to feel warm again.

The Irish Atlantic water is an untamed environment, unfriendly for play, dangerous for extended immersion. We stayed in too long, we swam out too far, and we'd come close to true peril. We were way out of our depth.

Each of us is irresistibly compelled to make this foolish swim daily, never expecting that we won't be able to return to shore when we've had enough. What many would never choose for our bodies, we force upon our souls. This self-inflicted peril is the universal story of our time.

There is an ancient wound in the beating heart of the world,

a wound that spreads doubt like toxins into every exchange. There is a Mariana Trench down the center of the cosmos, a rift as dark as death itself. In reaction to the taunts of betrayal, corruption, and the evasion of truth we live with every day, we've all plunged into the ever-moving current of suspicion.

We, the image-bearers, do not trust the image we bear. God, the image-giver, is deeply misunderstood. We keep seeing through the eyes of betrayal, expecting to find him exposed as a divine fraud.

We trust nothing, doubt everything. Questions and mistrust are as involuntary as sweating in the heat or shivering in the cold.

This swim we're in is not a hospitable environment. Our limbs are numb, slothlike in a sea that feels more like mud than saltwater. We forget how cold we are, thinking we're safe, but we're not. We've just lost feeling, we've lost control, and the current is steering.

SCHOOL DAYS

Being deceived by someone in authority, someone meant to protect and uphold truth, is not a moment easily forgotten. My parents were teenagers during Nixon's America. They both remember where they were when they watched the highest official in the land shake his head and swear he was not a crook. They can also remember the day this same president was caught in his lies and corruption.

My generation remembers its own moments. It was the mid-nineties, the decade of MTV and Doc Martens, when young millennials first began to learn that our world was full of questions, an unsafe place for us to grow. This was a world where a famous football player allegedly committed a double homicide, walking free when so many thought him guilty. This was a world that broadcasted the Somalian genocide alongside news of Julia Roberts's latest beau. This was a world where the United States

government quibbled fiercely over what constitutes Oval Office perjury.

At the same time I was taught “Just Say No” to sex and drugs, my president was lying about his abuse of them. My peers and I watched the media coverage in our social studies classrooms. We were being educated by our country’s humiliation and exposure from the top down.

It wasn’t just a political problem, nor could all the blame be assigned to Hollywood or sports organizations alone. The worldwide church fared no better. From the Vatican to the Bible Belt, pastors and priests fell like dominoes in the game of tawdry vices. The dress of Christ’s bride was being dragged through the mud at an alarming rate, and corruption was leaking out everywhere. Televangelists, prosperity gospels, false healings, and big hair became the face of the church. Thanks to modern media, the church could no longer hide its mess.

The doubting world watched with rising anger, growing in proportion to the current’s magnetic pull on our homes and families.

At that time, I wanted to be a lawyer or a writer when I grew up. In my idealistic youth, both occupations were held by defenders of justice, culturally appointed truth-tellers. I’d heard it asked in the televised trials we watched at school: “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

The appropriate response is to put hand to Bible and promise, “I do.” It reminded me strangely of a wedding. But like many marriages around me, I found that the vows could be broken before they’d even been made. It seemed no one was capable of telling the *whole* truth. My formative teenage years were saturated with these small betrayals. This awakening to the fragility of trust took the yielding material of childhood clay, spinning and shaping us until we all understood what must be done: Trust no one. Doubt everything.

We were being schooled in the most important lesson of our times—the value of the question. This was not simple rhetoric

or healthy analytical processing. We weren't being taught simply to think—we were taught to doubt, to mistrust.

We were choking down the salty seawater of mistrust because that was the thing to do. To survive, suspicion and doubt would be my allies. Questions and cynicism would chart the course like glittering holes in the black sky.

SLIGHT MOMENTS IN PUBLIC RESTROOMS

All stories end the same. Sooner or later, every kid realizes that the world isn't a safe place to grow up.

For some, one traumatic event defines the insecurity of the individual position. For others, it's a series of frightening disappointments, slight moments that leave us feeling small and scared in a world of mean giants. These moments create in each of us a capacity that we were not born possessing: the capacity to mistrust. It's this world-bred capacity that teaches us that to survive we must be tough. We must not trust. We must question the people around us and suspect the things they say. None of us escape this capacity for self-protection.

As a parent, I thought I could shield my daughters from such a capacity. I could not and cannot still. This painful discovery, fraught with a maddening helplessness every parent understands, was made certain when my oldest daughter, Macy, was seven. This girl is a fierce, ninja-warrior princess. Macy is strong and brave and full of wonder, but even Macy is not immune to the increasing capacity for mistrust.

The slight moments found her out, just like the rest of us.

We were in Killarney, the city closest to our home village on the Kerry peninsula. It was less than a couple of hours away, but we didn't go there often. It was a different kind of beauty than the coast—a manicured, civil beauty that lacked the raw wildness drawing us to the seascape. In Killarney, there is an old estate, Muckross House, surrounded by an Old World park with clipped lawns and gardens, a lake, and a closely trimmed

wooded path. The times we visited, it reminded me of Central Park—overrun with tourists, people taking pictures and buying souvenirs. We hadn’t been there long when Macy tugged my sleeve with an urgent need to find a restroom. We followed the signs and found what we needed.

One thing important to know about Irish public restrooms is that there are no stalls—not in the same way we have them in America. Each toilet area is a tiny room, much like a broom closet. There is no crawl space under or over the door. When the door is shut, the occupant has barely any room to move, let alone remove the necessary clothing. Elbows touch the sides of the walls, and knees press against the door, shut to freedom.

Macy didn’t like the look of it, but her need was pressing. These small, cramped rooms designed for relieving oneself threatened my own adult sense of personal security. She asked if I would go in with her, but there simply wasn’t room. I remember impatiently urging her to go in, that everything would be fine.

Everything was not fine.

When she tried to get out, she found that she couldn’t turn the doorknob. The rusted lock had stuck, and the door was jammed. It took exactly one second for my sweet, trusting daughter to get hysterical. She started shrieking and sobbing, pushing the door, pulling the door, kicking the door with her pink rubber Crocs. She jiggled the knob as hard as she could. I could hear her muffled fists pounding on the solid wood. She couldn’t hear me trying to calm her down. I was starting to get hysterical myself. Irish women were staring helplessly.

I didn’t know what to do. Macy didn’t know what to do. Never had I felt so far from all that made me feel safe and in control. I’m sure my daughter felt the same. We both just did the one thing that the moment called for: panicked twisting of the lock and the doorknob.

I’m not sure how long we did this. It could have been two minutes or twelve. Eventually, something clicked into place and the knob turned. She burst from the stall into my arms. I’ll

never forget her flushed, sweaty face, the matted hair plastered to her forehead, her terror-filled eyes.

From that point on, Macy was terrified to shut the bathroom door. Any bathroom door. Even when we returned to the States, with our wonderful, wide, roomy stalls, Macy had been so traumatized by the bathroom's betrayal that she could not close herself inside any restroom.

What could be simpler, safer than a child using the bathroom without fear? It's at the basic level of our core human need to have domain over our own bodies. Even in the simple things, however, we are daily confronted with how precarious our situation remains. Not even the bathroom is a given.

The slight moment had found her, and her own young capacity for mistrust was born.

I tried to reassure her that she was safe, that she could trust me and other bathrooms—but in one instant, Macy had learned the lesson the world loves to teach, the lesson we all learn early and keep learning along the way.

Trust is for children and fools.

NOTHING NEW

We are all Macy in the bathroom—trapped, betrayed by false promises of safety in a reality that seems unsafe. At a deep level, we are all unable to escape the frightening world that surrounds us on a daily basis. Therefore, we can see only two options for getting out of bed every day. We can either live in constant fear or we can choose to embrace mistrust. Ironically, making this choice eradicates neither. Day after day, we find we're still stuck with both fear and doubt.

However, the culture at large still believes it has a choice, and we tend to choose the latter. "Doubt has become a virtue," warns author John Eldredge, "a means of rejecting intolerance and oppression."¹ Popular opinion idolizes the unbeliever. Cynicism is prized over belief, suspicion over faith. Skepticism is

our strongest asset. Accusations are our cultural companions. So much is wrong with the world, and we want to uncover it with questions.

We are born looking for who we can trust, but we’re nourished on the milk of suspicion.

We want to trust. It’s not that we want to be infested with doubt, but we’ve been burned too often and too long. We watch and wait for those around us to fail, to fall, to disappoint us yet again. After a while, we take a strange sort of satisfaction in being proven right. We may even hope we will be disappointed, because knowing we cannot trust is at least the one thing we can trust.

This generation of questioners is not unique. What looks like a twenty-first-century problem turns out to be a human problem. Scandals and media-delivery systems come and go, but the capacity for doubt is at the core of every civilization.

Doubt is our silent inheritance from the culture before us, and they before them.

What was will be again, what happened will happen again.
There’s nothing new on this earth. Year after year it’s the same old thing.

Ecclesiastes 1:9

Words penned by a cynical king, this verse reminds us of the damage the world does to each successive culture. Remove social media and satellite television, and all cultures share “the same old thing” in common: doubt and mistrust. We’ve been drifting in these twin currents since the snake first whispered into humanity’s upturned ear, and we’ve long since forgotten how to use legs on dry land.

FIRST-CENTURY JEWS AND MILLENNIALS

Religious exploitation. Political unrest. Social injustices and human atrocities. An unseen God who has been silent for so

long one forgets he was ever capable of speech. The New Testament reads more like a journalistic exposé than first-century Judaic culture.

Yet, this *is* the culture into which the incarnate God entered. This is the culture he enters still.

The doubt *du jour* centered around Messianic expectation and a desire to break the yoke of foreign tyranny. Galilean and Judean Jews had lived lifetimes of moments, both slight and graphic, moments designed by a Roman dictatorship and corrupt Jewish governance to break spirit and will. Mothers and fathers watched in enraged horror as Jewish babies were ripped from cradles, slaughtered. Families, already struggling to fill stomachs, were stripped of the little money and property they had to fill Rome's fat coffers. This was a world ripe with the stench of crucified bodies that could be seen from holy walls.

The Jews could not trust their government.

The Temple in Jerusalem—a spiritual gathering place that was to be their refuge—took more from the people than it would give. The religious elite led the people with the shepherd's rod of guilt, intending to beat the law into the hearts of their broken flock. Theft, corruption, and bitter accusation filled the Temple courts alongside the thick smell of animals' spilled blood.

The Jews could not trust their religious leadership.

And Yahweh. Where *was* he? Why had he sent no prophet? Why did he keep silent? Why did he allow his holy city to be overrun with pagans? Like our time, the faithful remnant was choking on questions that remained unanswered by heaven. They cried out for saving, for God's burning wrath to fall on their enemies like fire and rain. They cried for Messiah. They watched for Messiah. They put all the remaining fragments of hope like Fabergé eggs in the militant hands of a Messiah-to-come.

But the longer they waited, the harder it was to hope. Their own capacity for doubt in Yahweh eventually blinded most Jews to all but their own ideas of God's plan for salvation.

Almost no one expected the Messiah they got.

Under twilight’s blanket, Jesus slipped quietly into their world, thwarting expectations in a way that felt like betrayal. He spoke treasonous words. He shattered widespread expectation like grandmother’s crystal, and he didn’t apologize for it. He seemed to belong to no political party, no factional affiliation, no alliance that had been established for generations. Many ignored him. Some looked on with mild curiosity. A few risked trust, believing he was who he said, and he took their trust right to a Roman cross.

They weren’t ready for this Messiah. They didn’t want this Messiah, and the stink of suspicion only thickened in the sticky, Middle Eastern air.

They called him a law-breaker. They insinuated demon possession was to blame. They told bawdy jokes with him as the punchline, calling him drunkard, glutton, at home with the shady element. The greedy looked for a magician to entertain them. The confused wanted a rabbi with all the answers. Almost everyone cried for *basileus* (bä-sē-lyü's)—a king greater than Caesar.² They sneered at this Nazarene carpenter who didn’t play by their rules, wanting instead a political mastermind or military zealot.

What they got was Jesus. The long-awaited Messiah was not who they’d been waiting for at all.

They had been wrong to wait, to expect God to send a savior. They’d been wrong to fight against the world’s current of doubt. They’d been wrong to trust. Because they didn’t want him, they hated him. Like a thankless child at Christmas, disappointment in the reality gave birth to wayward thought. Doubt makes hatred of the undesirable easy as breathing.

As they watched him die, they knew how wrong they’d been to believe his claims, and they kicked themselves for it. Misplaced faith. Abandoned expectations. The same message inundating our culture also swallowed theirs.

Trust has always been for children and fools.

AFTER DINNER

They rowed from shore with full stomachs, the first they could remember in weeks. As they maneuvered their open vessel through calm waters and light breezes, they could almost feel the smile of God cresting on each wave, sea-foam teeth and a wide, glad grin riding bareback on watery haunches. At this moment, the God who could bridle the sea was real. He had filled their gullets with fish and their bowels with bread.

They trusted because they had tasted.

He'd insisted they go ahead without him. He'd promised to catch up, but nobody knew how. They had the boat. They had the crew. Jesus had nothing with him but his own two legs, not even an old donkey to plod the narrow path that skirted the lake. They took their time on the evening crossing, thinking they'd surely need to return and fetch this absent-minded rabbi.

As evening crept into the sky, the twinkling mischief of the day grew to an offended sea of growing crests and troughs. The last of the sinking sun wiped the smile of God from the water. The men dropped the mainsail and stowed their meager gear. They didn't like the hostile expression of the sky.

They spent the night bailing the boat, trying to keep the sea in the sea where she belonged. The relentless battering caused her to spin like a top. A few of them leaned white-knuckled over the side and fed to the fish the contents of a miraculous dinner. Even in fear, Peter smiled to himself. "All fish return to the sea," he muttered, remembering his graying father saying the same.

By wee morning, they were clinging to gnarled ropes and oars and the hope of the coming sun. They rowed and rowed their boat, and they were no closer to either shoreline. The hour grew darker than ever, and with it the sea. The skiff rose and sank, matching the rhythm of waning belief. Peter wondered why Jesus had sent them on, if this was some test from an eccentric schoolmaster.

It was with those questions that he first spotted something

odd in the water. No, it was something odd *on* the water. It was too small to be a vessel. What kind of sea creature could swim upright? The others saw it, too, and a common scream of terror and wonder leaped from the boat and was carried off by the hungry wind.

They stared hard into the distance. It looked like a bearded man, crowned with sea spray, billowing with wind-whipped robes like a sail. Someone cried out, “It’s Neptune!” and they all howled with fright and disbelief.

So much for orthodoxy.

As the god came nearer, they saw that he meant to pass them on their stern. He hadn’t even looked in their direction. Peter squinted against the salty bite of wind. He’d know that profile anywhere.

“It’s the Lord!” Peter bellowed, standing so fast that he knocked his head on an unsecured oar that slammed against the gunwale in a wild drumbeat. When he looked again, Jesus was looking back. He couldn’t discern the expression in the dark, but Jesus’s eyes were glowing with a piercing question.

The figure called out to them, speaking their names as one who knew them. It sounded like him. It looked like him. They couldn’t know for sure.

“If it’s really you, then ask me to come to you,” Peter heard himself shout. He wished afterward that he’d just kept his flapping trap shut.

“*Come on then,*” Jesus replied, as if inviting Peter for an evening’s leisure stroll.

Steadying himself with an oar, he balanced on the rocking lip of their skiff. The breath before he jumped, he wondered what he was doing. He was suspended above himself, watching the whole moment and yet unable to intervene.

When he leaped, he expected immersion. What he got was glistening earth, so solid it jarred his knees and knocked the breath from his lungs. He looked at Jesus, then back at the boys, then back at Jesus, a huge Peter-grin splitting his face in two. He roared with laughter. Jesus roared back. He picked up

one foot and stomped it down as a test. He didn't even make a puddle's splash.

He started to walk toward the laughing Jesus, one surreal step at a time. He was halfway there when he felt the pulsating current beneath his feet. One gnarly wave rolled between them, and for a moment, he lost sight of Jesus.

Seeing was always believing. He mistrusted what supported his enormous frame. Just as if the ground had dropped away, he felt emptiness beneath his feet and seawater choking his throat.

"*Help!*" he coughed as he surfaced.

In the next moment, he was grabbed with a steel grip and found himself standing beside God-Made-Flesh. He was completely dry.

Jesus didn't hesitate. He reached down and grabbed his hand. Then he said, "*Faint-heart, what got into you?*"

Matthew 14:31–32

When Peter jumps from the boat into the water, we see a man ready to reverse his own capacity for doubt. He leaped from the safe womb of a wooden skiff into the volatile belly of a thrashing sea storm. We see someone impetuous but also willing to risk trust. Peter did a very brave and very strange thing in a vote of God-confidence. What were his actions if not trust in this gravity-defying Son of Man? But Jesus's reprimand of Peter seems disproportionate, harsh even.

Jesus's response surprises us, because it is not how we would respond. The response of God's Son is not directed toward Peter's glorious and impulsive moment of faith. He focuses in dogged determination on the doubt plaguing Peter's heart about the goodness of God.

He wants to address not the trust we possess, but the trust that we've lost.

In the addressing, his strategy is most unexpected. His rescue came with a question.

SURPRISED BY QUESTIONS

Meek and mild Jesus. The stained-glass portrait of a simpering Savior, wearing a lamb upon his shoulders as a woman might wear a mink stole. Jesus—eternally patient, forever unflappable. We, too, may have some misplaced expectations about the Messiah we’ve got.

What he asked Peter is difficult and *seems* impatient, with a tone that would alarm the symbolic lamb from his shoulders. If we listen intently, we hear with surprise that he is addressing all his disciples.

He is questioning the current-caught church. He is questioning you and me.

“Where is your faith?”

Like Peter, as Christians we still have not escaped this capacity for mistrusting the heart of God. None of us can. We see this in the frustration of John the Baptist. The first prophet in four hundred years, this mouthpiece of Yahweh did not expect the Messiah he got. In the wake of misunderstanding, mistrust came to dwell in this New Testament prophet.

John, meanwhile, had been locked up in prison. When he got wind of what Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask, “Are you the One we’ve been expecting, or are we still waiting?”

Matthew 11:2–3

Even John, the locust-eating Baptizer, had the capacity to ask from a place of doubt lodged deep in his hairy breast.

As much as we’d like, let’s not make doubt into something mental, some deficiency of our doctrine. The solution to wrong doctrine is simply more self-sufficiency. We study harder, we read more, but the problem lies much deeper, within the soul.

What is authentic lack of faith but our hearts telling God that he is not trustworthy? That we will not believe him? More facts

will not cure what ails us. Each one of us must be rescued from the relentless current of suspecting God of foul play.

When we continue to be carried along by mistrust, we are choosing rebellion against the Messiah we got. We are choosing to tell him he's not worthy—or *trustworthy*.

Let's call a spade a spade. Jesus does.

A.V.I.R. SYNDROME

We require rescuing. We cannot be children of God and adrift in this current of doubt and mistrust. The two are mutually exclusive in a world that hardens us, keeping us ignorant of our peril. Both the individual and the culture are in grave danger, and we don't realize what's coming next.

Drowning. We are drowning, leaving behind an ever-growing capacity for mistrust.

We were not designed for this current. Our legs were meant to walk, run even, on the firm ground of true faith, experiential faith. We were created to know in the core of our beings that the One who gave us breath and life is really, truly good. He is trustworthy. He desires, above all else, to have deep communion with each one of us in the current.

The invitation of the Gospel is to walk on firm footing, to give up this life of treading water, but we can't. We are in a state of drowning, hopelessly tangled in lines of clammy seaweed. We've made the sea our home, and to climb out and dry off would be too risky. Besides, we're not even sure we can. Our limbs don't work like they once did.

The irony is that we would fight any would-be rescue. Anyone who would jump into the water would inevitably drown as they tried to save us. We see this concept played out in the tragic scenarios of physical drowning statistics. Scientists and first responders name this high rate of double drownings and failed rescue attempts the aquatic victim-instead-of-rescuer, or A.V.I.R. syndrome. According to the *International Journal of*

Aquatic Research and Education, “Attempting an in-water rescue, especially by untrained bystanders, is notoriously dangerous with the significant likelihood of death.”³

Our politicians cannot rescue us. Our celebrities and athletes cannot rescue us. Our pastors, ministers, and priests also cannot, for all are swimming in this current alike. We cannot put our trust in any of these, for none have the power to save. We are stuck as perilous companions in this ancient sea, and the rescue cannot come from any mortal drawing breath.

There are no heroes when the whole world is drowning. We end up dragging one another down.

What we need is Someone free of the water, Someone strong enough to pull us out of the current in which we’re trapped.

AN INQUISITIVE CHRIST

Victims ensnared in this current cannot be convinced of personal trustworthiness by manipulation or persuasion. For God to enter our world, holding out his hands, shouting, “I AM not a liar!” won’t work. Seeming evidence to the contrary is constantly flung in our faces. His shouts would only entrench us further into mistrust. Like Peter, we have a Savior who walks by us on the water, not assuming we’re ready to stop treading.

A sledgehammer doesn’t integrate hearts but shatters them. Compulsion never succeeds, and, frankly, is undesirable. Voluntary trust can never be forced. Belief cannot be demanded. To woo the frightened animal from the cage, once abused and cruelly betrayed by those meant to protect it, a different approach must be taken.

His methodology of resolution is curious. Once again, he shatters our paradigm as we drift toward disaster in the current. His tactic for dealing with the traumas and slight moments that have created this capacity for suspicion, doubt, and mistrust is clever and kind. A complex problem must be provided a complex solution.

How does God pursue the hearts of a culture that celebrates doubt and avoids pursuit?

He asks questions.

At all times, he sees the trust-to-mistrust ratio with laser accuracy. At all times, Jesus knows where our faith is. He knows where the doubts are, too. If mistrust has punched holes in our faith, an authentic encounter with the questioning Christ will quickly make the holes known. He knows it better than we do, but he invites us to observe the nature and true placement of our faith by asking us questions. It is in his severe mercy that he exposes doubt in us. He is jealous for our whole hearts, all our trust. He is passionate to rescue our hearts from this posture. He pursues us with a holy and fierce pursuit, and he wants our faith to rest in him alone.

Jesus is the only One ever to live without this capacity for mistrust. In all times, and in all ways, he never stuck one toe in that dizzying current. Yet he doesn't observe our plight from a safe distance. He sees us and is overcome by what he sees. He knows we are struggling with wanting to trust. He understands we've been betrayed by all but him.

He walks on the water toward the scene of our sinking, offering us questions that still the waves crashing on our heads. With the current under his feet, he experiences with us the current's strength without being submerged. He feels the mighty pull and swift movements that threaten to take everyone he loves far from him. But we must remember—the current is *under* his feet in submission to his authority.

He will stop at nothing. He's the only One who can rescue. He commands that the waves hush and the breakers still so his voice can be heard above the rushing din and chaos of our times and the times of every wave of humanity. He is saying something, something crucial, it turns out, for our rescue. If we lean in and listen very closely, we can hear something with waterlogged ears over the crying wind. We can hear what it is that proceeds from the curious mouth of God.

We hear questions—many, many questions.

“*Where is your faith?*” he asks each one of us—literally. Where? Where has our ability to trust wandered?

I’m afraid it’s been swept out to sea.

Jesus wants to recover our lost trust, and he chooses questions in service of this recovery. We have an Inquisitive Christ, and his questions are a matter of life and death.

FOR CONTEMPLATION AND DISCUSSION

Lectio Divina Exercise:

Place yourself in the boat with Peter and the disciples. What are you thinking as you push off with a stomach full of miraculous abundance? Watch the sun sink and the clouds gather. Imagine the rising sensation that things are out of your control in this boat. At the height of your fear, you see Jesus walking on the water. What does this gravity-defiance look like? Do you want to go to him, or do you want to stay in the boat? What happens if you dare step into the sea with Peter? What does the water feel like as you lose faith? Look up as you see his face above the water, rescuing you from being sucked down by the current.

For Reflection:

1. Think back to your formative years. How did those in power reinforce the message of mistrust?
2. We all experience slight moments like Macy’s. What are some of yours?
3. What are your thoughts about similarities between first-century Jews and our present culture?
4. Looking ahead to Jesus’s rescue strategy, why do you think he asks questions? What is it about questions that speaks to the human heart?
5. What is your answer to Jesus’s question: “*Where is your faith?*”