

The Art of Asking Questions

by Patricia W. Van Ness

Being asked to lead a group is an awesome and maybe intimidating challenge. It is also an incredible opportunity for your own intellectual and spiritual growth. The primary task of a leader is to *open up* the Scripture. Socrates was right. The way to lead is to ask questions. But, as those who opposed him pointed out, it can also be dangerous – it encourages people to think for themselves.

First of all this art does not employ the schooling method – unzip heads, pour in knowledge, zip up heads. Nor are you looking for "right" answers. Rather the primary and final purpose of the questioning process is to embody the questions so that you can live them out in your life. This questioning method encourages and enables those with whom you are studying to embody the Scripture through those questions so that the experience and wisdom of the Scripture becomes theirs.

Questions are a means of "unpacking" and opening up the Scripture. You don't have to be a biblical scholar to do this – you just have to ask questions rather than give answers. But you do need to know the story and make it your own before you can lead others through it. Forget everything you think you know about the passage and read it as though for the first time. Ask yourself the who, where, and when questions to set the scene. Remember, you can always ask basic questions such as how, what, why do you suppose . . . ? To such questions there are no right answers. What you want to do is elicit statements about the facts surrounding the setting. Allow for the learner's imagination to encounter the scene and to encourage living into the biblical story and the feelings around it. Work to open up possibilities for delving into what might have been happening. Remember, the biblical characters were real people with real problems, feelings, emotions, hopes, and dreams just like yours and the learners.

Prepare for a Questions Workshop

Gather together Bibles, leader's guides, learner's guides, and, if possible, a copy of *Imaging the Word*. Read through the Advent 2 lesson, "Get Ready." Since there are parallels in the other synoptic gospels, be sure to read them too. You might want to have the leaders for older elementary through adult look at those parallels as you go through this text during the training session.

Ways to Craft Questions

- ! **Consult:** If there are people, places, words you don't understand, consult a good Bible dictionary.
- ! **Ask yourself** Read the scripture slowly and prayerfully. Then, beginning again at the first verse, ask yourself all the questions you can think of about each verse and write them down.
- ! **Choose:** Keeping the learners in mind, choose those questions that will best lead them through the text.
- ! **Focus:** Stick to the text; get a clear sense of what is happening.
- ! **Seek simplicity:** Keep the questions simple, direct, precise, sometimes obvious, and evocative of feelings.

If you have a copy of *Imaging the Word*, open it to the page on which the painting *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* is printed. This painting is also reproduced in black and white on the adult learner's guide for Advent 2.

Welcome the People

As the people arrive, ask them to look at the painting *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*. Distribute Bibles, and have the group read Mark 1:1-8 to themselves (those who lead older elementary through adult groups may also want to read Matthew 3:1-12, Luke 3:2-17, and John 1:6-8, 19-28 for comparisons). When they have finished, ask the group to briefly reflect on the setting for this passage as painted by Pieter Bruegel in *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*. Discuss briefly the idea that each of these people in the painting must have had different questions about John's message. Ask the group to talk about questions each of their age-level learners might discuss about the scripture readings and painting.

Tell the group that today the focus is on questions. Ask the group to forget everything they ever knew about questions and answers and be open to some new ways to encounter the story through a different type of questioning.

Discover "Fishbowl" Learning

Ask for volunteers to model the way learners might be led through this text. Five or six people per group would be ideal for this experience. The volunteers are to sit in a semi-circle in the front of the learning area as the other workshop participants watch the process.

Model being the leader of this small group and ask them to respond to the questions listed below. They are based on the New Revised Standard Version and would have to be adapted to conform to whatever version you might be using.

Verse 1

Why do you think Mark begins his gospel this way? What does "gospel" mean? Notice the very beginning of the text and ask for comments. This helps people realize that the answers may be perfectly obvious, it's just a matter of looking carefully. So who/what is this book about? Ask "what else" until you have unpacked that verse.

Verse 2

Ask: "What, if anything, does anyone know about Isaiah? Do you recognize the name?" Refer, if possible, to a previous lesson when a passage from Isaiah was used. Ask someone to stand and declare this strongly. Read with feeling! Ask: "Who is speaking? Who is being sent? To do what?"

Verse 3

What is the prophet "crying in the wilderness"? Prepare whose way? Why? What is the feeling around this passage?

Verse 4

Who's this person? Where is he? Why do you suppose he's there? What's he proclaiming? Why do you suppose he's saying that? What do you understand that to mean? (Remember, except for facts, there are no right answers here – just lots of good observations and suggestions.)

Verse 5

So what happens? What do you suppose this scene looked like?

Verse 6

How did John look? What did he eat? What kind of an appearance did he make? How might you have felt about him? It's sometimes useful to have a picture here. Would you like to meet him? Why? Why not?

Verse 7

What does he say? Who is he talking about? How does he feel toward this "one"? What do you know about their relationship? How might they have felt about each other?

Verse 8

John will baptize with what ? With what will "the one" baptize? What might be the differences in the way they baptize? What difference does that make? How would you have felt if you had been there?

Since this scripture takes place during Jesus adult life, just before he begins his ministry, why do you suppose we're studying this scripture during Advent?

Recall what Advent means. What might it be saying to us at this time of year? What does it have to do with what we said last week? What new thing might we need to "keep awake" about as we study this scripture and afterward?

What might John the Baptizer have to say to *us* today? How is this another "sign of God"? Especially with adults, you need to keep this discussion centered on what you have studied.

Continue to summarize by using "drawing together" questions. Some examples are:

Do you remember your baptism? Have you ever had a sense of being baptized with the Holy Spirit? What difference did that make in your life? What difference might it make if it were to happen? In what way might you feel/think/respond differently in your life?

Often people become quite involved in this process. Simply allow it to happen. The Spirit does indeed move mysteriously. It is important to remember that it is best not to answer your own questions. It is especially important not to make judgments or use your time to preach about a point.

Some Added Suggestions

Be open to the fact that learners may ask questions. Go with that question or put it on hold for later. Acknowledge such questions with appreciation and return to them, even if you first think they do not seem relevant. The same holds true for answers; there may be gold in what first appear to be flippant or unrelated responses.

Leave silent spaces between questions and answers to allow for thought and reflection.

Avoid getting into debates around interpretation. If someone tends to dominate, "appreciate" their interest and suggest that they allow others to participate as well.

Try drama. Questioning through the use of drama is another way to open up the Scripture. Ask for volunteers rather than appointing parts. For non-readers, the leader may be the narrator. For readers, drama can be done with open books and individuals or groups taking parts or a narrator could read during a pantomime. Ask questions after the drama.

Process the Experience

Thank the volunteers for their help with the experience. Ask the whole group to reflect on what happened in the fishbowl setting. Ask the group to respond to the following questions:

- ! How do you feel the questions and answers may have opened up the Mark text?
- ! What were some insights gained about the story?
- ! What are some adjectives you might use to describe this type of questioning?

Let the group talk thoroughly about the process and their reactions. Encourage them to consider how they might develop their lessons using this type of questioning.

Send the People Forth

Ask the group to join you in prayer. You may wish to use the prayer below or one of your own choosing:

God, who draws us into expectation, fill our hearts with questions about our faith and guide us to draw others into a search for truth. Let this Advent be filled with getting ready for what is to come. Amen.

Thank the group for their involvement. Encourage them to expand their leadership with new questions.