

I. Introduction

A. Good morning Waterford Church friends, I'm Pastor Neil Amstutz and welcome to the final sermon in our series about following in the footsteps of a subversive Savior

1. Today we're examining “answering” ... the unexpected words Jesus used to respond to confusing and demanding situations
2. Before jumping back 2K years to Jesus’ day, or into 21st Century, let me take you back about 40 years to my high school days

B. When I was in high school in KS, I was a very good student

1. It may not surprise you to learn that I was good with words
 - a) Now numbers and science were not my forte, but I was good with words ... at least on paper
 - b) Yes I played in team sports (football and tennis) but I was probably known more as an academic kid
2. But there was one academic team that the other smart kids would NOT have wanted me on: I was not a debater in high school
 - a) I had friends on the debate team, and I always admired those kids who were not only persuasive speakers, but who were quick on their feet
 - b) I always wished I could instantly recognize faulty logic when I heard it
 - c) I wanted to be the one whose impeccable argument left people speechless

C. But alas, my friends I have usually been the speechless one in a debate, not just back then but even today

1. I avoid getting into debates with smart people because in a verbal war of words, my best weapons come to mind only AFTER I am already vanquished ... when I realize what I wish I had said!
2. My daughter has an awesome ceramic mug covered with clever supposedly Shakespearean insults, like “Thou cream-faced loon!”
 - a) But my favorite one cannot be attributed to William Shakespeare, as I learned on a fact-checking website,
<https://checkyourfact.com/2019/08/13/quote-shakespeare-battle-wits-unarmed/>
 - b) Nevertheless, if I were in a role play, I imagine that **I am the one** this insult would be spoken to. It goes like this:

“I would challenge you to a battle of wits, but I see you are unarmed.”

3. Now I’m not suggesting that this is the kind of answering that Jesus did, but when we today think of this word “answering” some of us kind of like the snarky quick-witted kind.

II. This Sunday's Jesus theme is “answering”

A. Some of you may have thought that theme should have been used for last week

1. After all, just a few days after a huge national election, surely that would be an appropriate time to look at how we as Jesus-followers give “answer” to the election results
 - a) But instead, last week we had Jesus staying silent at his trial before Pilate, as others expected him to speak up when so much was at stake
 - b) So is “answering” a better fit for this service today, now 12 days after the big election?
2. Well at the time I’m recording this, we certainly have 1 political party “answering” about the election outcome and the other party largely staying silent.
3. Both of them may claim their stance is all for the good of the nation, but whether they speak or stay silent, it’s also clearly for their own self-interest!

B. In the worship materials helping us with this series, today’s materials had this explanatory statement: “*When others seek to confuse, Jesus answers.*”

1. The focus Scripture text is when Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness, just before he starts his public ministry
2. With no one else around him, it is fitting that these model responses by Jesus to half-truths are spoken to the Evil One himself, whom Jesus later calls “The Father of Lies” (John 8:44)
3. So the devil is seeking to test this newly baptized Jesus, to trip him up, to pull him away from the mission God has sent him on.
 - a) And right here at the beginning of his ministry Jesus is NOT silent or passive ... but the answers he gives tell us a lot
 - b) First I’m noticing what Jesus’ answers to the devil are NOT based on:

C. I see 2 common human characteristics that the answers of Jesus are NOT based on ... What we humans often do in stressful or conflictive conversations is to:

1. Answer by pulling rank:

- a) This means we play the power card, using the greater power or resources we have available to settle the situation
- b) We all know this one because it happens all the time: (examples)

Yes you do have to do it because I'm in charge here.

If you can't work this out among yourselves, I'm calling the police.

- c) So in Luke 4, it's just the 2 of them: the Son of God incarnate, and the devil out in the wilderness, mano a mano, but Jesus does not pull rank
- d) He doesn't say, “OK bad boy, give up. We both know who wins this! Do you really want me to call in The Big Kahuna from upstairs?”

2. Answer by superior logic and reasoning

- a) This is what the high school debate team does. This is what we expect from trial attorneys in the courtroom.
- b) This answer is about who is the cleverest, or who can trap people into saying what they don't want to say
- c) But Jesus does not pick apart the reasoning of the devil's argument ... doesn't try to point out the faulty assumptions in Satan's words

III. Instead, Jesus answers ... with Scripture

A. Jesus is not drawing revelations out of his head in the moment: **he answers from the known Word of God**

- 1. He draws on the spoken and written Word that has already been handed down over centuries as guidance for God's people
- 2. At a surface level we see short little Bible quotes that Jesus seems to spit out, without any sermonizing or explanation
 - a) That Bible quoting ability is impressive to most of us today, even though a few of you also grew up with strong Bible memory programs
 - b) Memorizing Scripture is a treasure and an inner resource for our Christian journey. It is always a good thing, and I encourage it.
- 3. But being able to whip out certain Bible verses as a sword or a defense is not the real lesson for us.
 - a) After all, even Satan can quote back chapter and verse to Jesus, showing that Scripture itself can be twisted & improperly used
 - b) Jesus is not defeating Satan here by making tit-for-tat arguments, seeing who is quicker on the draw to unload their Bible ammunition at each other.

B. The Scripture answers Jesus gives are more than just whatever relevant verse he can pull out of his Bible toolbox.

- 1. This “answering” of Jesus is not subversive simply because he carries around in his head some repository of sacred words
 - a) His “answering” is subversive because Jesus grounds himself in the Big Story of Yahweh and Yahweh's special people, as told in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings
 - b) That big salvation story is what we called the Heilsgeschichte during our Year of the Bible in 2014

It's the saga of a loving God whose vision for healing and wholeness in this world is so great as to tirelessly keep reaching out and redeeming a stubborn chosen people

As Christians we see that this salvation story is extended and supremely lived out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as told in the New Testament

2. The true success of Jesus in this testing is not because he refutes Satan on doctrinal matters like not worshipping false gods.

- a) Jesus models how to face testing because he connects Scripture back to God's larger saving purposes
- b) Jesus uses Scripture out of his own grounding in that larger God story, a story of a headstrong chosen people being freed from slavery but always being tempted to abandon the God who saved them
- c) That is the background of these verses that Jesus is quoting to the devil, from Deuteronomy chapters 6 & 8

IV. This morning I'm wondering “What can we learn from these particular Scripture references Jesus quoted?”

A. Let's remember that all these quotes come from the book of Deuteronomy, which was addressing God's people as they found themselves in a major transitional time

1. Deuteronomy is basically God's instructions spoken through Moses to the ancient Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wilderness wandering, but BEFORE they were to cross over into the promised land

- a) Notice that when Jesus needs words for himself *in the wilderness*, he quotes words spoken to God's people *in the wilderness*
- b) In other words these were not just random biblical laws that Jesus plucked out ... the context was very fitting for his own situation

2. Specifically there are 2 realities we should remember about the Israelites who received those divine instructions that Jesus quoted:

- a) 1st they were coming out of a vast extended wilderness location, and they were anticipating feeling more settled and more prosperous.
- b) *This was about the people's sense of place.*
- c) 2nd they were coming out of a seemingly endless time of waiting and literally “going in circles”. They were anticipating a new period of fulfillment and progress.
- d) *This was about the people's sense of time.*

3. When people or churches are in transition ... leaving something familiar and entering something new & unknown, that in-between space is often called “liminal space**”**

B. My friends, here in Waterford Mennonite Church near the end of 2020, don't we also find ourselves in liminal space and time, kind of like that Israelite audience that Moses addressed?

1. I think this is true in both politics and public health. For e.g. ...
 - a) We're on a threshold **between** a land overtaken by political divisions and chaos, **and** a new political landscape that we haven't yet entered.
 - b) Many today are anticipating and yearning for a country that feels more settled and prosperous
 - c) We're also in a liminal time **between** the waiting and “going in circles” that we feel in the endless campaign season, **and** a new time that people want to see things getting done
 - d) Many today are anticipating and yearning for an American era of fulfillment and progress
3. Similarly, in our assumed world of public health, which we used to know as “ordinary life”, we've had the rug pulled out from under us
 - a) We're located in a space **between** the disorienting, disrupting and isolating “wilderness” of COVID-19, **and** a “promised land” of full health, full socializing, full mobility and full range of activities
 - b) Many today are anticipating a place of settledness and prosperity, both personally and as a church
 - c) COVID also puts us in a liminal time, **between** 8 long months (and counting) of waiting and waiting for the pandemic to go away or get under control, **and** regaining a “normal” sense of time passing, with the expected markers of gathering for weddings and funerals and Thanksgiving
 - d) Many today are anticipating a time of progress, both in our personal and church lives

C. And in case you happened to somehow escape the personal angst of these national examples of liminal space and time, let me bring it closer to home

1. In the last several weeks we pastors have been quietly occupying a difficult liminal space and time, in which the congregation joined us this week:
 - a) I'm talking about the liminality of accompanying Pastor Terry and Cheryl on an unwelcome journey with cancer
 - b) We all know we live under an illusion that time and good health will continue with us indefinitely, and yet most of us choose to keep dwelling in that illusion, until something wrenches us out of it
2. For me as a pastoral colleague and a personal friend this has been an in-between time and space like none I have ever known.

- a) And none I ever wish to walk through again. Our goodbyes to Terry are coming faster than we ever imagined.
 - b) But this particular liminal time has pushed me to rely more on God and on Scriptural promises and on our great pastoral team ... And on Terry himself who has been an amazing teacher on this journey.
 - c) Throughout this roller coaster ride of cancer, I have been inspired by how Terry has modeled faith in God, honesty in expression, dedication in service, and beautiful love for Cheryl and his boys
3. I don't include this in my message to put a downer on the service, nor to simply play with your emotions. But I want it to be real

D. So where am I going with this? Actually to conclude, there are 2 points I want to leave you with:

1. First: Liminal space and time can hit us in all kinds of ways in life.
 - a) Not many people enjoy staying long term in liminal space. Sometimes being in that space is slightly uncomfortable, and sometimes it is excruciating.
 - b) But there is no liminal space or time that is beyond the loving reach of the God whose story is told in the Bible!
2. Second: At about age 30 Jesus moved from the provincial life of a carpenter to the public ministries of a traveling preacher, teacher and healer
 - a) And as he did, he used Scripture to answer the challenges of living in liminal space and time ...
 - b) And so can we.

V. Conclusion

A. As we continue finding our way in our many in-between spaces, let us follow our subversive Savior in courage, to “answer” back when we’re tempted to stray from our calling in Christ

B. While we’re on this side of heaven, “Answering” does not mean we always have the answers

1. Nor does it mean we use the Bible as a weapon against others
2. But it does mean we respond as people who have been deeply formed by God’s big story, which is all about amazing unconditional love

C. In liminal times like these, we can have no better foundation for “answering” than grounding ourselves in the salvation story of God’s love, contained in the Bible as a whole. May it be so for us!