

Naturally curious, children ask good questions about faith



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

And a child shall lead them. This famous line from the prophet Isaiah (Chapter 11) is a favorite for preaching “the peaceful kingdom.” All creatures living in harmony: the wolf with the lamb, the leopard with the goat, the calf with the lion, the cow with the bear, the ox with the adder.

A startling scene, like something from Narnia or “The Lord of the Rings.”

Though this is Hebrew scripture, some want us to believe this is a prophecy of the Christian savior — Jesus — the only one “the spirit of the Lord shall rest” upon, that he is the only one who will “judge the poor and the meek” with righteousness.

Of course, they may leave out the part that says “he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.” Not exactly a peaceable vision.

This gets me thinking less of theology and ancient scrolls and more about what it would be like to listen and learn from children — the younger voices. In the great distracting debates over religious faith, adults often neglect to pay attention to what the young people are thinking or what they feel about beliefs that unite or divide the world.

I asked my North Carolina niece and nephew what they thought about some of these things. It is instructive to pay attention to their responses (especially since their mother is a teacher and their aunt is a minister).

I asked, What does the word “God” mean to you? What comes to mind?

My 11-year-old nephew became very thoughtful. “Loving,” was all he said. When we came back to this later he added, “Grateful.” He clarified, “God is



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This photo by Chris Highland is titled “Nature's Lessons.”

grateful and we're grateful.”

Separately, my 13-year-old niece said, “Someone to look up to.” Then she smiled and said it was like “a floating person.”

What do you think of church? I asked. My nephew said, “Quiet.” My niece said, “Singing.”

Asking if kids at their public school heard talk about faith, they both answered without hesitation, “No.” My nephew added that if students did talk about their faith, it might cause trouble. I explained that it's OK for kids to talk about faith as long as it's respectful and not disruptive.

Then I asked if they learn about religion in school. My niece said her teachers were “not allowed” to talk

about faith, but they teach about religions all around the world — she named Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Muslim. Both kids seemed to understand the basic idea of separation of religion and state.

Something my nephew said made me curious. He said a girl in his class from another country wears a head covering. He eats lunch with her sometimes. He's not sure what religion she is or why she wears the scarf. He says some classmates are “scared to ask” her about it. I encouraged him to ask.

What about people who don't believe in God? Their answers were encouraging. “It doesn't really matter — we're all just people.” “It doesn't bother me — it's a free country!”

Do you think there's a place called “heaven” or “hell”? Thankfully, the 11-year-old simply said he doesn't think about it. The teenager thinks heaven is “a happy place, somewhere in the sky” and hell is an “evil or bad place — down in the ground where the lava is.”

Now there's the classic image! I asked her where she learned that. “Books and movies.” No surprise.

For fun, I asked if there was ANY question they could ask in church, what would it be? The younger one said, “Why is world peace not a thing?” I asked for more. “Why is there so much terror?” Wow.

The older one took it more lightly: “Why do we only get communion every once in a while?” I smiled, looking puzzled. She said, “So I can eat!” Here she giggled, as only a precocious girl can.

I couldn't resist asking, What does nature mean to you? (I'm fascinated by the ways we conflate god-talk and nature-talk). The elementary school student said, “Interesting — all the colors and sounds all around us. Every part of nature is important. It can be dangerous, so we need to be careful.”

The middle schooler rattled off: “outdoors, hiking, exploring, animals, trees.”

They were much more animated and bright-eyed talking about nature. Of course, in my secular view, this was delightful.

These are deep questions for any age and I'm proud of my niece and nephew for being so honest. It makes me wonder, what if children were our leaders, teachers? And maybe they are.

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