

## Answerizing

By [Kyle Childress](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Childress's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Some years ago, a small group in our church watched the award-winning documentary *The Fog of War*, in which former secretary of defense Robert McNamara talks about his life, especially the Vietnam War. At one point McNamara says this:

Never answer the question that is asked; always answer the question that you want asked. That is an important rule that I learned to follow and I still follow it to this day.

McNamara reminds me of what author David James Duncan calls "answerizing," which he says grows out of the conviction that the only right way to handle any question is to offer The One Correct Answer.

In the first several chapters of Job, Job's three well-meaning friends come to him to try to explain what has happened. Job's friends were experts at answerizing. They could not accept or tolerate the inexplicable complexity and mystery of Job's suffering and were sure there must obviously be One Correct Answer to his predicament. Job refuses their answers by insisting that his suffering remains a mystery.

If you read on in the story, you know that God sides with Job. And by the end of the story, you will know that there is no real answer for Job. Before the One True God, Job realizes that all of life is beyond answerizing--and we cannot explain suffering any more than we can explain God.

Browning Ware, long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, was a hero of mine. Ruggedly handsome, tall, with a gravelly voice and a dry wit, Browning was accomplished in the ministry of listening. He was at his best listening to waitresses in a late-night coffee shop or sitting and listening to a homeless man on the streets.

Some years ago before he died Browning wrote the following:

When younger, I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time, I knew many of the answers.

I knew about parenting until I had children.

I knew about divorce until I got one.

I knew about suicide until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year.

I knew about the death of a child until my child died.

I'm not as impressed with answers as once I was. Answers seem so pallid, sucked dry of blood and void of life. Knowing answers seduces us into making pronouncements.

I still have a few friends or acquaintances who are 100 percent sure on most anything and are ready to make pronouncements on homosexuality, AIDS, marriage problems, teen-age pregnancies, abortion, sex education, or whatever is coming down the pike. But when we get shoved into our valley of the shadow, a pronouncement is the last thing we need.

A friend wrote recently, 'I too get Maalox moments from those who know. I'm discovering that wisdom and adversity replace cocksure ignorance with thoughtful uncertainty.' More important and satisfying than answers is the Answerer. 'Thou art with me' - that's what we crave. There may or may not be answers, but the Eternal One would like very much to be our companion.