

Where in the World is God?

From the series: Spirituality in the Modern World

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8; John 14:8-20 Text: Isaiah 6:1; John 14:8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Some of us were on retreat yesterday and listened to a futurist whose business it is to think about what is coming. He described for us the world of 2010, a world not so far off, and yet a world that, frankly, I can't even begin to comprehend as he speaks about the technological advances that are just over the horizon with artificial intelligence and so forth. I don't know enough to make an intelligent statement about it. It is the kind of a world that is inconceivable and yet, it will be here before we know it. How do you experience God in a world that is developing with emergence that boggles the mind? There is too much to take in.

Oh, there are those old images and the old clichés and the platitudes, and I suppose most of us will go to our grave with them. They will be pointers to us, indicators of the reality and the presence of God. And those of us who are in the Church are those who have stayed, but there are multitudes on the outside who have left because their experience and their knowledge of the world made it impossible for them to find the genuine spirituality within the context of ancient symbols and metaphors, stories. And so, it is always a challenge to the Church to think again its faith and, where it can, to revision and re-imagine in order that folk in every emerging age can live with a genuineness of faith, an integrity of human experience, or, as the song says, to "find Jesus in our time."

What shape does he take? How does one say God today? How can we experience that presence of the holy and the sacred in the knockabout world of our everyday experience?

We live at the far end of the modern period. We live in a time that has been called the post-modern period. The fact that we call it post-modern means that we don't know how to label it, we don't know how to name it, because it is a world that is emerging.

Modernity had a very definite character. We speak of the Enlightenment. During that period, the amazing, amazing breakthroughs of the natural sciences, and the success of the natural sciences which have been registered in the technological

marvels of our day, which a person like me can't even begin to take in when told about them. That dominant scientific outlook has, for many, crowded out the possibility of God. We have lived in an age in which many, particularly in the intellectual establishment of our time, have said that there is nothing but material. The material universe which can be measured and tested and put into a formula. What you can touch is real, and there is reality denied to that which is invisible or spiritual. And so, we have one such as Huston Smith who, with his wonderful credentials, takes on the scientific establishment, and he makes room for God, calling to account those who have ruled out the possibility of Spirit, calling again to the celebration of that spiritual reality. There is room for God in the world, as we noted last week.

Huston Smith reaches back to a philosopher born in Britain, but who spent much of his time in this country in the first half of the last century, Alfred North Whitehead, who said there are two great forces in the world, the force of Religion and the force of Science, and these two enterprises each have their respective dogmas and those are simply the crystallization of the best insights that they have formulated in rational propositions. Whitehead pointed out that you can be a dogmatist whether you are a scientist or a religious person. You can deal in obscurantism, denying any light or knowledge from the other side, from either perspective. Huston Smith is calling the scientific establishment in our day to a fresh awareness of the spiritual dimension of life, because, as Whitehead pointed out long ago, that religious experience is also a very real part of being human.

We speak of the Sundays after Epiphany. Epiphany means manifestation. Suddenly one "sees" something. And Isaiah had an epiphany, or we might call it a theophany, a manifestation of God. It was in the year that King Uzziah died. Maybe that is a statement like, "It was that November day when John F. Kennedy was shot." Or, "The seventh of December when Pearl Harbor was bombed." I don't know - the year King Uzziah died, was there some political crisis? Was Isaiah a member of the court and was everything suddenly thrown into chaos in that time at the death of the king? It was such a time as that, anyway, that he went into the temple and he said, "I saw the Lord high and lifted up, and the temple was filled with smoke and the pillars shook. I felt myself unworthy and experienced the ministration of angels and heard the voice of God calling me into prophetic ministry."

Don't literalize that vision. Being one who was nurtured on that story from childhood, I could see the temple, I could see the smoke and smell the incense. But, that, of course, is to miss the point of it. The point is that there was some kind of a breakthrough in the experience of the prophet in that moment. Suddenly he was overwhelmed with the presence of God. Alfred North Whitehead would say that is experience, that is human experience that has to be taken just as seriously as the substance of some soil that may be analyzed.

Don't you love Philip's question? "Just show us the father and we'll be satisfied." Have you ever said that? Whether you said it or not, have you thought that? "God, just show me. Would it be so difficult to write in the sky, 'I Am. I exist'? Couldn't you give us some token, some hard evidence?"

"Just show us the father and we'll be satisfied," Philip says to Jesus. Jesus says, "How long have you been with me? Still don't get it? If you've seen me, you've seen the father."

I suppose that is because Jesus was special, right? I suppose that is because Jesus was the son of God, right? Wrong. What did Jesus mean? I'm not sure Jesus even said that. I'm sure that the author of the Gospel was saying that in the human face, there is God. And in Jesus, the encounter with Jesus, sixty years after, I still remember it, the encounter with Jesus - it was God. Because Jesus was special?

I think he was special, special in degree, not other than you are. Special because the luminosity of God shined brighter there, but not because he was other than human. I think what the Gospel writer was trying to say was that we saw God in that human visage, and what the fourth Gospel seems to be saying in that classic statement, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us," is that God is found in the human. Isaiah, in a moment of personal epiphany, is overwhelmed with the presence of God in the solitude of the temple, but John's Gospel suggests that God is found in the human encounter, in the community, in that moment when soul meets soul and there is a melding of two making one, and there, in that relationship of love and grace, one says, "My God!"

So, human experience of God is that which has been attested to by the generations. The whole human story is replete with that witness to the reality of the experience of God or the holy or the sacred. If you scratch the veneer of this world as it appears, there is that sense that there is something more, that presence.

Here we are. We have emerged. We have emerged in this cosmic process and we didn't make ourselves, and there is something that buoys up this magnificent, awesome reality of which we are a part, and what do you call that? That which shines through now and again, that which becomes apparent here and there, that spiritual reality which suddenly is the vertical presence in a horizontal relationship, what do you call that? *God*.

And so, people like us of the twenty-first century, with all of our toys and all of our gadgets, all of our technology and all of our knowledge of the cosmic reality, still attest to that experience of God. Alfred North Whitehead says you can create a chemical formula in a test tube and have empirically verifiable results, and you have to take that human experience of God seriously, as well. You can't put it in a test tube; you can't measure it. There's no way to verify it. God doesn't write in the sky. And so, it is a faith perception, but it is that spiritual dimension that is in and with and under, that encompasses the totality of our life and our experience.

Having said that, and wanting to say that clearly, I want to say that from within the Church, it is necessary for us to do some re-imagining and some revisioning of those old faith stories and symbols and metaphors by which all of that has been communicated to us. That is, at least if we would communicate this experience of God beyond the walls of the church. Just think, for example, of the natural world as we know it. We call it cosmology, the cosmos, the totality of things. Think of what we know about it. Fifteen billion years old.

At this point I should call forward our resident physicist-astronomer Dr. VanTill, who could tell us about the speed of light and the expanse of the universe and the expanding universe, and the amazing, amazing physical, natural reality of which we, too, are a part. It is awesome. It is mystifying. It causes one to be silent. It can well cause one to worship before the wonder of it all. And then, I think about the Genesis story, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," and all with a click of the finger, all those things happened. And there's Adam and Eve in a garden of perfection, Paradise, and they are tested and they fail the test and so they are alienated from God. We speak about the fall and it is that fall into sin from which they have to be redeemed, and so we have the whole biblical story.

That's not the way it was. We really know that. All natural disaster and all the trouble in the world is not the result of the initial sin, the original sin. There were storms, there was chaos, there was terror long before the human person emerged, and we have emerged, creatures of self-consciousness, awareness. Fifteen billion years of this cosmic, whirling mass of energy.

Then, there was a moment when a creature emerges who looks at his hand and then looks at another, becomes conscious, self-conscious, aware. That creature has come, emerged out of the chaotic soup, cosmic juice and stardust, and we have just arrived, relatively speaking. We're still trying to find our way. We really need a new story. We really should write a new Genesis today because the writer was giving expression to his understanding of that human situation and God in the light of the cosmic understanding he had, which was so totally other. We would say so primitive and naive. I know what he was trying to do. That Genesis story is profound. Speaking about the torn tension within the human being, that beckoning toward God, that draw from below, portraying the human dilemma, trying to give expression to all that is rotten to the core, and yet that grace that would transform and redeem. That old story is not at all in terms of what we know about cosmic reality and the emergence of the human and the dawning of consciousness and the coming awareness of Spirit. Someone needs to write a new myth, a new story, which would portray God as not over against us, with that terrible gulf between us because of our sin, but would invite us to a growing consciousness and awareness of that spirit that is within us, that embraces us.

We are a part of this cosmic reality, we are the cosmos coming to consciousness, we are the cosmic reality now with voice to praise, with consciousness to realize and to become aware. We are the cosmos reflecting on itself, with God, that Spirit

that is over and around us and within us, God not "out there," some supernatural being beyond the confines of the universe, as it were, clicking a finger and causing it to be, and then occasionally dipping in here and there. No, but God, that creative Spirit that permeates the whole, God who is closer than our breath.

I don't know what the Gospel writer meant when he had Jesus say, "I am in you and you in me. I am in the father and the father is in me. I in you, you in me," but at least there is a hint there of something that we are becoming more and more aware of, and that is that God is as close as our breath. The Spirit of God, the Hebrew word *Ruach* means both breath and spirit and wind, and so, the enlivening within us and that wind that courses over us become the symbols, the signs of that ever-present God who is our life, not some lawgiver and offended judge ready to damn us.

What a bad idea. Would the creator of the heavens and the earth, would the creator of this fantastic cosmic reality with all of its wonder, would this God create a creature, a human creature with consciousness and giftedness to damn? Hell, no. Hell, no. Just thinking about what we know, what has come to us through the human endeavor and greater understanding, broadening understanding, to think again - how can I be with God, knowing what I know? How is God with us, knowing what we know?

Does that mean that all that stuff in the Bible about sin and corruption has no part? Of course not. Look in your own heart. Read the daily newspaper. We're animals; we're beasts; we're in a life and death struggle to, somehow or other, keep down the pride, throw out the fear, the hostility, the anger, and let the Spirit more and more control us, so we come more and more into an awareness of that wonder of grace and love that is God. It is just a matter of finding a new way to say it so that we could experience it without some of that old baggage.

Just one more thought. We live out of our knowledge of the natural world, and our knowledge of our cultural context which today isn't Western Michigan and it isn't the United States of America. It is a global context, and in a global context where we rub shoulders with people from around the world, and we come to see and to appreciate the spiritual quest, the religious devotion, the multiplicity of practice, then obviously I can no longer speak about "our God." I can no longer think in terms of having some corner on the truth which is denied to all of the rest of humankind. Would God reveal God's self to one little people, leaving the rest in darkness? Don't we know in this world that has become as small as a grapefruit, where we rub shoulders with people of various religious practice, and we experience the seriousness of it and the authentic devotion of it, and the longing quest of it - don't we know that all the great religions of the world are hungering for that one taste, thirsting for that one God who is beyond all of our formulations and structures, for all of our religions are the human structures that we have created by means of which we can see through to that which cannot be seen, but which is as close as our breath?

Ah, where in the world is God? Where in the world is God? God is in the moment of personal epiphany when the sun sets or, as it did this morning, rises so beautifully in the east. The sun is in the forsythia, forced a bit as it is, I suspect. God is in the human encounter when soul meets and there is a transparency. God is in the intuition of the human heart that there is more and that it is good and that we will be sustained, embraced, kept, and that we can rest in that. God is not some other place. God is with us. Thank God.