

The Challenge of the Modern World

From the series: The God Question

Text: Isaiah 45:23; Philippians 2:10; Luke 4:18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Last week I began a brief series on the question of God, the question that will not go away, and this morning I want to say that God has gotten into trouble because of the explosion of knowledge in the modern world. It's not that God is in trouble, but the church has been in trouble, because the church has failed to understand the nature of its own religious life and quest, and has gotten into a futile battle with the advance of scientific knowledge and understanding of this world. The church has been in a futile and tragic, losing, intellectual battle with the march of modern knowledge for the last three hundred years. Even as we speak, the church in its evangelical and orthodox expression has not yet come to terms with acknowledging the place and the function of modern knowledge, that which is available to us through the scientific disciplines, the scientific method, through the empirical quest through verification experience. The church has still not acknowledged the legitimate place of the scientific endeavor and the knowledge that is gained through that method, and it has failed, obviously, also, in understanding what religion is all about and what its business is, for *the business of the church or the business of religion is not to give us knowledge of the natural world*. It is not to give us a map of the heavens or the anatomical structure of the human creature, or the emerging, developing cosmic drama, or the course of history. Religion is about the experience of God. Religion is about the experience of that other dimension of reality that is beyond time and space and touch and smell. Religion is about human experience of meaning. Religion addresses questions about "Who am I and why am I here and how should I live, and what is of value, and what brings quality to human existence?"

The onslaught of knowledge in the modern world over three centuries has put the church in a defensive position, for we have failed in the church to understand that religions arose in response to the human awareness of being creatures, of being alone in this vast universe with all of its wonder and all of its threat. Out of the fear and vulnerability of the human creaturely condition, once the human creature came to awareness, to consciousness, self-consciousness, once the human creature came to a sense of him or herself over against the vast cosmic scheme of things, at that point these deep and profound existential questions

arose and the religions, as they took shape and form, were the response to the answers that now and again came to one here or there, some answer that seemed to resonate in others about the meaning of it all or where value lies or where quality can be found, some interpretive word about the Mystery that seems to bear us up and yet is always beyond our grasp and grip.

That is the nature of the obtuse paragraph printed in the inside cover of your liturgy by the philosopher Santayana, one of America's great thinkers. In this paragraph (not particularly easy to comprehend; don't try to read it now, it will take about a dozen readings this afternoon, after which you will say, "Why did he have that printed?"), what Santayana was saying in that context was there are poets and philosophers and saints who now and again bring something to expression and we say, "There is divine grace and truth and beauty." And what they said as a human channel is the important thing. The fact that they were historical figures was not critical. In fact, what we do with the historical channels through whom have flowed truth and grace and beauty, like Shakespeare or Jesus, what we do with those historical figures is that we soon wrap them in myth and they become mythical heroes. Did George Washington ever tell a lie? Did he chop down the cherry tree, or was it the outhouse with his father in it, I'm not ever sure? But we have human channels who bring something to expression, something of truth and grace and beauty, and we say, "Aha." The person has had an epiphany, if you will. And through their expression of it, they create an epiphanic experience for others. A Buddha experiences an enlightenment, a Jesus grasps the essence of what the Hebrew prophets were speaking about. And then we wrap those historical figures into mythical wraps and garments because they become symbols of that grace and truth and beauty which came to expression through them.

I read from Isaiah where the prophet appeals to the Jews in exile to remember Yahweh their God, the God who says, "Before me every knee will bow and every tongue will confess." Then I went over and read from Philippians 2 where Paul is dealing with a congregation much like you and saying to that congregation, "I so wish you could get together, particularly you ladies. Stop all of that fracas. In fact, let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." And then the humility of Jesus, the mind of Christ demonstrated in that descent from the glory of the Father through death and exaltation to the point at which what Isaiah said of God, that every knee will bow and every tongue confess, Paul now says is true of Jesus, the risen, ascended one at the right hand of God. *This* one, before this one every knee will bow and every tongue will confess to the glory of God. The passage is about an ethical matter. It's about the concrete way to live in a congregation. The illustration is the humiliation and the exaltation of Jesus. Well, of course, we got all wrapped up with christological discussions about who Jesus was, divine, human, pre-existent, present, exaltation, coming again - all of that made great fodder for theological discussion. What was missed was Paul's point and that is that people ought to get along together, following the example of Jesus in his historical, earthly sojourn here. But, what was Paul trying to say? Paul was trying

to say that what did come to expression in that one was light and grace and truth that was reflective of none other than the eternal creator of all, the eternal God. The historical channel becomes the mythical hero who symbolizes the values and the qualities that are being advocated as the way to live, as the path to follow.

That's what religion is all about. And what is dead in religion is religious content that refers to the nature of the world, to the factual description of reality which is the domain of the sciences, and the conflict between science and religion has been the fact that the church has failed to recognize that its domain is a domain of mystery, that what it is concerned about is the human question, "Who am I? What does it all mean? Whither am I going?" Not the date of creation or the nature of how everything has evolved and developed. The nature of religion has not really to do with the philosophical concepts like the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, how history will end, whether Jesus will come again. All of these things that have divided the church, caused people to argue and fight, exclude one another and excommunicate one another.

Sigmund Freud, who perhaps I could use as a symbol for modern knowledge, who was certainly one of the giants of human thought, who died earlier in the last century, beginning his work in the previous century, spoke of himself as an aggressive atheist. He would have affirmed the Death of God theologians who, in the sixties, were the subject of the *Time* magazine discussion about the death of God. Sigmund Freud believed that the sciences and religion were mortal enemies. I re-read again his fascinating little tract, "The Future of an Illusion," where he recognized quite correctly the origin of religion in that human consciousness and awareness of helplessness and aloneness in the vastness of this mysterious and threatening cosmos, and he recognized how the myths and the rituals were created in order to respond to that mystery, in order to come to terms with that reality, in order to be at one or at peace with whatever God may be. But Sigmund Freud, coming at the end of three centuries of the explosion of modern knowledge, was simply convinced that they had to get rid of religion in order to let science emerge and the human race mature. He was quite blunt about it.

Well, in the middle of this past century, as I said, the theologians were talking about the death of God, and here we are at the beginning of the third millennium, and God is alive and well. But, God is alive and well still by those who are fighting a rear guard action. The fundamentalist response in the respective religions is an attempt to beat down and defeat the modern knowledge that is as obvious as the hand in front of me. Fundamentalism, with all of its present strength and vitality, cannot possibly have the last word.

But what Sigmund Freud didn't understand is that the function of religion and the religious quest and the ubiquity of the spiritual quest is the consequence, not of needing knowledge about the natural world, but coming to some understanding of who we human creatures are in the vast scheme of things. Freud said very clearly we could do away with religion, we could have the human

person live out of intellect by reason, and it would bring about liberation and maturity. He was wrong, as subsequent decades have demonstrated. We can think all day long, we can exercise our mental powers, we can acknowledge all of the knowledge that is available from all of the sciences, we can gather all of the data as accurately as possible, and what an explosion of knowledge, and what is available to us in our day, it's absolutely amazing. It's wonderful! But, once we have a handle on all of that and, of course, who can get a handle on all of that, but once we have, there remains the question, "Who am I? And what is the mystery that grounds my existence? What am I called to be? How should I live? Is this all there is? Is there anything more? What is of value? What are the qualities that are important?" Those are religious questions and those questions will not go away in the wake of the explosion of knowledge of the natural world, of the planetary system or the biological makeup of the human creature. Those are questions of meaning and those press in upon us as strongly today as ever they did in the dawning of the first awareness of the creature that we would call human.

Your religion isn't "true," nor is it "false." True and false don't apply to religion. Religion is about quality and value. Why we fight about facts, I don't know. We are together on a journey in community before life's ultimate questions in the face of mystery, trying to find our way together. The Buddha has an illumination and that light shines on a vast community. Socrates comes along and says, "Know thyself." Jesus suggests we should love our enemies. Now and again a human channel becomes the conduit for divine grace and beauty and truth, and then we catch it and say, "Ah! There it is! I can live with that. I can rest in that. I can live fully, fully alive with a sense of well-being and peace and harmony with all that is about me and with those who are about me, from what I see about the nature of things in the contours of the face of Jesus."

You see, he's our story. He's our window. There's not a lot of factual stuff that makes a great deal of difference. Unfortunately, the Bible is full of superstition and error, the reflection of the writers of the day and the culture in which it arose becomes a battleground for people trying to prove that all of its factual claims of science and history, and so on, are actually true. They are not true. They are simply the garments in which the respective channels gave witness to the truth and grace and beauty that was flowing through them, emanating from that mystery that grounds us all and embraces us all and overshadows us all, and as we make our way together, we share with each other and eventually, hopefully, we find our way to a place of peace, having experienced the mystery that is always beyond us, that is always pressing in upon us, and we rest our case, blessing the scientists and falling to our knees.