

Religion: Response to Mystery Emerging Naturally

From the series: The Fundamentals a Century Later

Text: Psalm 8; Acts 17:16-23; John 1:1-5, 14-18

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
August 31, 2003

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Today I wrap up the summer sermon series, “The Fundamentals a Century Later.” The fundamentals were set forth in a very positive fashion. These were doctrines affirmed by conservative, responsible scholars in the face of the rise of liberal theology at the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. The conservative and orthodox tradition was being eroded. There was an explosion of knowledge of the natural world and a rise of historical thinking where people began to understand reality in terms of process and development.

The liberal tradition recognized that it had to face that knowledge which was empirically verifiable, and figure out how to think and to be religious. Essentially, they had to dismantle any external authority and simply accept what was coming to expression, what was becoming manifest, and then to say, “In the light of the world as it is, how does one live devotedly with wonder and awe, reverence and gratitude?” Liberal theology recognized that the theological task was more one of interpretation, of hermeneutics, than it was of an absolute, definitive, final creedal statement, some absolute truth that was given once and for all.

Because of the eroding tradition, conservative scholars wrote these essays, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, in order to affirm the faith. They did so very responsibly, but the mistake that they made, from my perspective, is that they affirmed the faith very responsibly in terms of the faith understanding, but in terms of a world-view that was passing away. They failed to recognize that there was a world-view in the Bible, but the world-view wasn’t what the Bible was about.

Everybody has a world-view. Every generation has a world-view. It is just a commonly accepted conventional knowledge of the way things are, and so what came to expression in the Bible came to expression with a certain world-view. But that wasn’t the important thing. Once the book was absolutized, it seemed as though that world-view also was absolutized. And so it was a struggle, and it exacerbated the division between science and religion. It also has had a rather serious harvest in terms of the failure of the religious thinker to be able with

freedom and confidence to continue to negotiate life's passages and to be open to knowledge from whatever discipline it comes.

The fundamental affirmations, again, were given in terms of an old world-view and it was the consequence of absolutizing the text and having an absolute authority in which one had to work, whether it was viable or not. The failure was a failure to understand that religion is not about a series of truths. It is not about A, B, C, D; it is not something you can put down in a series of propositions. Religion is about finding meaning. The religious questions are life's ultimate questions: why is there something rather than nothing; from whence have we come and whither are we going; why are we here; what is the meaning of it all? Those are the kinds of questions that the human family from its inception has inevitably raised, because our life is shrouded in mystery. To be human is to live in an existence that is surrounded by ultimate mysteries that are not just mysteries that one day will be unraveled, but ultimate mysteries. In our humanity we will never be able to comprehend and to explicate that mystery that surrounds us, embraces us, undergirds us, overshadows us. That is the nature of our human experience.

The Bible is a treasure of religious wondering and religious experiences. Psalm 8 is just amazing. The poet, perhaps having gazed into the blackness of outer space, seeing the twinkling stars, the moon, and in the heat of the day the sun, wondered about the vastness of this planet, a vastness that he didn't begin to understand in terms of the expanding universe that we know about. Nonetheless, the evening sky does instill awe in one. He says, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. When I consider the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars that you have made, who am I? What is the mortal human being that you should be mindful of us?"

And then he comes with a profound insight. He becomes aware that, even in his limited sense of the expansive universe, he is the one—this insignificant little blob of protoplasm—he is the one that is contemplating it all. So what are a billion years, what is space, what is all of that if there is no mind to think it, no heart to take it in, no human awareness brought to awe and wonder? And so, the Psalmist centuries and centuries ago had the sense that something was emerging in the human, that God had brought the human to the point of awareness.

Paul in Athens is in the academy of the Western world. Someone has said, I think it was Whitehead, "All Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato and Aristotle." And now Paul comes to Athens and he goes about the city and is disturbed by the evidence of temples and statuary that represent the respective deities of the Greek people. Unappreciative, being distressed in his spirit, Paul is invited finally to the forum, to the Areopagus, where, it is said rather disparagingly, the Athenians like to sit all day long and talk about something new. That is a kind of put down. Believe me, Athens is quite wonderful! I've stood on Mars Hill with a little group of pilgrims and preached there.

But Paul missed it, I think. How could you be in Athens in the shadow of the Parthenon and be distressed by the representation of the religious quest of a people? Well, because Paul thought he, Paul, knew the God of Israel who was God alone, the only true God. Paul thought that God had intervened in history in Jesus Christ and that history itself was about to be wrapped up. Paul was on a mission. He is the kind of a convert that should be caged for ten years before you let him loose. Preachers should be, too, when they come out of school. It would have been beneficial to this congregation if I had been isolated for a period of time.

We understand what Paul was about, but my point is this: In the academy of the Western world, the heart and the source of Western civilization, there was the religious quest. There were all of those philosophical questions, and they were answering them in a variety of ways. Of course, Paul threw his own Christian gospel into the mix, but the point is, to be human is to wonder and to ask questions and to reflect, to come to consciousness and awareness of the embracing mystery of this experience of being human.

Go to the passage that I have gone back to again and again so that it is becoming my core passage, the prologue to John's gospel. This is not because I think the author had some pre-revelation of the cosmos as we know it, but just because his telling of the story of the incarnation can be so beautifully understood in terms of the cosmic drama of which we are aware. "In the beginning was the word," or in the beginning was the Divine Intention and the Divine Intention became flesh. "No one has ever seen God." The only son is the exegesis of the father; he is the interpretation. The mystery now has a face. That infinite source of all that is has taken tangible and concrete form in the finite. That's an amazing, profound understanding that in the human there is the emergence of the divine. In the consciousness and the awareness of the human there is the emergence of that infinite source of all becoming conscious of itself.

So why should we hunger and long for reunion with the infinite? Why should we wonder about that? If that is our source, then it is also a longing for homecoming. That first chapter of John has all of that profundity in it. It is something like the Psalmist who began to put together his own human self-consciousness with an awareness of God and said, "You have created us a little less than God." In the old King James Version, it says, "a little less than the angels," because the writers were afraid of what the text really said: "You have created us a little less than God."

That's really something. These are religious questions and these are religious insights, and that is what religion is all about. I tried to put it in a statement which is the title of this sermon, "Religion: Response to Mystery Emerging Naturally." There it is. It is response. It is not as though the human animal is natively religious. It is the human animal becoming conscious, aware of living before the face of that which must be the creative source and ground of all that is.

It is response. Something lures us. Something attracts us. Something beckons us, and so we respond to that mystery, the Sacred, the Holy, God, that Ultimate. We respond to that which is calling us. Response to mystery emerging. The mystery itself is emerging. It is a process, not a divine fiat, a snap of the finger, or an instant finished cosmos, but a process.

We are relatively the first human family that is aware of the fifteen billion years of process. That process took billions and billions of years for life to emerge, and then more billions of years for life to become conscious, and we are still relative newcomers in this whole cosmic drama. It is mystery emerging through development, process, emerging naturally. It is not the old idea of the clockmaker, God, putting the pieces together and getting it ticking and then occasionally reaching in and adjusting the hands, tweaking it here and there, interrupting its natural process. No.

From all we can gather, this process is simply in motion. It is moving from its creative source, its generative center, randomly it would seem for all we can figure out. It could have gone one way, it could have gone another way, but it has emerged in humankind. There has been an emergence of mystery naturally, an unfolding, a development to bring us here talking about it and thinking about it. It is an amazing thing. And the amazing thing is that the randomness can now be interrupted by that which has emerged, for we have emerged and we can impact where it goes. We can destroy the planet or we can bring Shalom on earth. Biology is no longer our destiny. Evolution is no longer a locked-in process. We can affect it. We have emerged to the point where we can be like God, where we have through our human decision-making power, our mind and our soul and heart, a shaping determination of what will follow. That's amazing.

Religion is simply response to mystery emerging naturally.

Let me tell you a story and I'll let you go. This story happened to me last weekend. About a year ago a member of the church called and wanted to come in with his daughter, who wanted to be married. There was a problem. She fell in love with a young Jewish man. I said it was no problem for me; I'd be glad to do a joint service with the rabbi.

A little while later the problem occurred on the eastern side of the state in one of the large Jewish congregations. The groom's rabbi didn't feel he could do a service with a Christian minister. I said to the couple, "Well, my friend Alan Alpert in Muskegon—Rabbi Alpert—I think he would do it." They talked to him, they loved him. To make a long story short, we worked out a service which happened last week in the Amway Grand, and it is always great to work with Rabbi Alpert, such a dear man. We spent a couple of hours putting the service all together, all the pieces—who would do this and who would do that. (He did the Hebrew parts.) In my little meditation, I said, "One of my favorite musicals is *Fiddler on the Roof*, and when I first experienced it as a musical, I loved it.

Someone asked about the significance of the fiddler, and I was embarrassed to say I didn't have the slightest idea. So when it came out in the film, I was watching for a clue. The opening scene shows the fiddler on this steep roof, fiddling, and to be fiddling on a steep roof is precarious. But life is precarious, and how do you keep your balance? Tradition."

So I said to these two, "You both have wonderful traditions that have shaped and formed you. Now, don't do as so many have done who come from different traditions—just let them both go—because they are so important. They give you a life map, tell you who you are and guide you."

I told them sharing traditions is nothing new. In the Hebrew Scriptures in the Book of Ruth there is such a story, the story of Naomi and Elimelech. There was famine in Israel, they went to Moab with their two sons to get food, and the two sons fell in love with Moabite young women and got married. What were the boys going to do? They stretched tradition a little bit.

Then Elimelech died and the two sons died. Naomi was left with two Moabite daughters-in-law. She wanted to go back to Israel. She started back and the daughters-in-law followed. Naomi says, "Look, I don't have any more sons in my womb. Please, just go back. Why should you come and share my bitterness? Go to your people."

Orpah kisses her and leaves, but Ruth says, "Implore me not to depart from you, for where you go, I will go. Where you dwell, I will dwell. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God, and where you are buried, I will be buried, and even in death we will not be parted." Well, in this beautiful expression of a Moabite young woman to a Jewish mother-in-law, traditions were transcended in love. So I said to these young people, "What a fortunate time for you to have fallen in love, because your parents flank you here and neither one of them are embarrassed about this or wish it wasn't so."

There were 350 people at the wedding and white yarmulkes all over the place, for there were about 200 Jewish people from the other side of the state. I said that this was a beautiful celebration because we know today that religious traditions are to shape us and form us and help us find meaning, but not to isolate us and divide us, for they can be transcended in love and therefore be mutually enriching.

The wedding concluded, they broke the glass, away they went. Rabbi Alpert and I remained under the *chuppa* together and I looked at him and said, "Alan, when we step from under the *chuppa*, I'm going to give you a hug."

He smiled and said, "Okay." So, we did.

You know what happened? The place erupted. It erupted in applause, and the applause didn't quit until we got way down at the end of that long aisle. The wedding party had already exited the hall. They didn't know what happened, and the applause didn't quit because the people had seen a symbol, they had experienced a symbol of what in their hearts was a deep truth.

Then there was the grand reception. Jewish people know how to have a party, how to do a wedding. There was wonderful music and a great band and vocalists. It was just marvelous. All of a sudden it was quiet and one of the uncles of the groom, a Jewish man, took the loaf of bread and said the blessing in Hebrew. I said to Nancy, "Oh, they asked me to say grace! I put the prayer in my portfolio which is in my room." She said, "Go get it." I said, "There's no time. Maybe they'll forget about it."

Just then the soloist said, "And now, Reverend Rhem." I walked up there, and of course, in the joy and celebration of this moment, I just gave a little prayer. You know what happened? The place erupted in applause again! It did! As I went to my seat, they said, "Bravo! Bravo!" People were experiencing a moment of truth. They were experiencing concretely what they know down in their souls: that good religion does not divide, but unites; that good religion does not denigrate, but affirms; that good religion enables us to transform all that would divide us and gives us the possibility of global community. That is where I trust we're moving.

A dozen or fifteen years ago, my dear friends, because of my religion, I could not have been the facilitator of that kind of joy and truth, so I know this is not incidental stuff. This is as critical and as important as the possibility of peace on earth living in the abyss of God's love, the God who holds the whole world and all the children in God's hand.