

## A-Theism?

From the series: Can I Honestly Believe?

*Text: Isaiah 43:18-19; Psalm 137:4; Acts 17:28*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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I continue today the summer series which I inaugurated last week on the overall theme, "Can I Honestly Believe?," an attempt to look at the same old questions and say that which we affirm is also consistent with that which we know in the exercise of our minds in regard to the whole of reality. Is there a consistency between the faith structures that we hold and the knowledge that we have of our world, of our lives? If that isn't true, there is a cognitive dissonance and then religion becomes a compartment of our lives. We come into a sanctuary on Sunday morning, but it isn't that which illumines our total human experience. Ideally, it ought to do that. Ideally, our religious faith and devotion ought to be the expression of the deep wells of our being that is consistent with who we are and what we know and how we live. So, we are going back to visit some of the old, fundamental questions once again, and this morning to talk about God under the subject, "A-Theism?"

The most important matter for you to understand as we begin is that *A-Theism* is *not atheism*. Atheism is a belief that there is no God. "A-Theism?" raises a question about that conception of God known as Theism, or a theistic conception of God. Now, what is that? Well, it's everything you've ever known, everything you've ever been taught, everything you've taught. It is a conception that informs you when you pray, when you sing hymns, when you do liturgy, because Theism is the most common conception of God in the whole western culture, including Judaism and Christianity and Islam. Theism as a conception of God is so common that we speak of Theism as identical with faith in a God. That's not true. And that's what I want to say this morning, and, if I can get that through to you this morning, we will have accomplished something.

Last week I asked you, "Do I Need Religion?" and I said, no, I'm not going to claim that. But, I do claim that there is a fuller, richer experience of being human if it includes God, worship, devotion, and so on. This morning I want to go on with what I was trying to say last week when I said that religion is a human, creative, imaginative construct. Religion is a human, imaginative, creative construct. You will not hear that from many pulpits, and understandably so. If

too many people get too loose with this whole matter of religion there won't be enough jobs to go around and it's detrimental to my profession. But, since I'm almost old enough to retire, I can be honest and I can tell you that religion didn't fall out of heaven, our human religions are not the product of revelation from heaven, they are human, creative, imaginative responses to the in-breaking of that Ultimate Mystery that we speak of as God. Now, when we took a vote at the end of last Sunday, you did agree that I was right on that. (You did vote, didn't you?) You have to be careful, because if you grant me some of these things, before you know it, I'll have you, you see. I'm setting you up.

Religion, that is, institutional religion, any kind of religion that involves doctrinal beliefs, cultic forms of worship, ethical modes of human living - any kind of religion is a human response to the in-breaking from beyond of the Mystery. That's a wonderfully liberating idea, because then I can acknowledge from the beginning that my human religion with its forms of belief, its forms of worship, its manner of life, will be laced with error, misconceptions here and there, that it is sometimes fruitful and profitable and sometimes less than that. I don't have to defend my religion. The world is full of religion being defended because the claim is that the religion fell out of heaven and therefore, if there is something wrong with the religion, there's something wrong with heaven, there's something wrong with God. Not so. God can't help the kinds of religions we create. God is not into religion. God is into breaking through to us, to say, "Be still and know that I am God." As Isaiah said in passage, "I birthed you, I've born you, and to your last days I'll carry you." All of it symbolic language that points to that kind of security that is craved by the human heart. But how we construct, how we concoct our human religions, is not God's problem, although it can create a real problem for God sometimes, I think.

Religion as a human, creative, imaginative construct. Now, if that is true, then of course, right at the core is our conception of God. And what I'm going to claim this morning is that we have a very imperfect conception of God, necessarily so, because the Mystery that is God is a mystery that leaves us dumb. I could have brought you a marvelous quotation from St. Augustine who said, "I used to speak about you until I experienced you, and then I found to experience you, I was unable to speak about you." God breaks through or manifests, and we respond. Moses responds and we get the whole liberation movement of the slaves out of Egypt, and we get the nation Israel and that founding experience in the Exodus. Jesus comes along and Jesus, the Jew's conception of the intimacy of the relationship with God becomes very threatening, indeed. Paul, the Jew, experiencing Jesus, having this breakthrough, this manifestation, tries to give expression to God. On Mars Hill he borrows from the Stoic philosophers of Greek culture and actually, in a way, a conception of things much closer to a modern conception than the Theistic conception which basically he did hold - in God we live and move and have our being, we are God's offspring. But, the whole human story is an ongoing attempt to bring some meaning, to bring to expression that reality that always eludes us. And I say that that's a liberating idea, because I

don't have to defend it. I don't have to claim that it's given once for all. And I don't have to panic when the major configuration of things begins to move off in another direction. That's really what I'm talking about this morning. A-Theism, signaling that at our time, in our world, with our knowledge of reality and of the human person and of human society and human developmental history, that the most classic, bedrock conception of God is challenged and has been simply written off by many, many, many of our contemporaries. We don't have any sense of that, really, in this area, and we live in a nation that is peculiarly religious. We live in a nation where there are megachurches that are flourishing, but also a nation in which the mainline church is deeply in trouble, trying to hold on and survive. But folks like us don't really have much chance to realize the degree to which classic, biblical, Christian conceptions are in trouble. I want to say that's okay. God will not go down the tubes when the conception of God in theistic terms is shown to be no longer compelling.

Well, what is that theistic conception of God? Let me read you a couple of definitions. From the *Oxford Dictionary*, Theism is a belief in one God as a Creator and Supreme Ruler of the universe. Isn't that what you always have believed? Or, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Theism is the view that all limited or finite things are dependent in some way on one Supreme or Ultimate Reality which one may also speak of in personal terms. Or, another - Theism holds that God is something like a person without a body who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe.

In his book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, Bishop John Shelby Spong writes of Theism as a belief in an external, personal, supernatural and potentially invasive being. Marcus Borg, in his *The God We Never Knew*, speaks about the image of God in the Hebrew scriptures as that God enthroned above the heavens, that God who is ruler, who is sovereign, who is king, and even in the Hebrew scriptures, Father, but that idea of a supreme being with all of the apparatus of supernaturalism so that this world and our lives are over against that being. Now classically, in our theological tradition, we also spoke about that transcendent being "out there" also touching us "in here," so that God was also immanent. But, the immanence of God in our traditional classical understanding of things was never realized very deeply. Rather, God was that figure out there, ruling, controlling, directing, guiding, bringing everything to its consummation, the Supreme Being. That, says Spong, has had its day. I want to say to you here, it hasn't had its day here, and I want to be very clear that, if it's working for you, keep working it. There is no one that needs to move the mental furniture of one's religious construct around just because they happen to be in a congregation whose pastor is a bit strange in probing the outer edges of theological esoterica. Don't change anything that works, because religion is that human, imaginative, creative response to the God beyond our gods, the ultimate Mystery of things, and that response that is meaningful for you, deepening your humanity and enriching your life is just fine.

But Christ Community is a place where we do think around the edges and this summer I am trying to think as clearly and simply as I can about these ultimate matters. I'm simply telling you that we are a part of a massive shift in the broader ranges of western culture, a massive shift in the understanding of God. Many of our contemporaries have just turned off from God, so they have moved into atheism. And if you chart the modern period, you would do so from an orthodox view of God as that Supreme Other up there, potentially invasive, the episodic God who moves in and out of creation, to Deism in England at the time of our founding of this nation. Deism was kind of a halfway house, the God who created it all wound it up like a clock and now is letting it tick off, but doesn't really have an intimate relationship. There was the orthodox conception; Deism was a step removed, and Deism was really a halfway house to atheism, where we didn't really even need the hypothesis of a God. I'm trying to say this morning that if we want to avoid eventually, down the road, we or our children or our children's children, that slide into atheism, the denial of God, then it is incumbent upon us to think and to think hard about the nature of God that we have experienced and how to bring that to expression.

I don't know how to do it. Oftentimes, we know when something isn't working before we know how to fix it. Karen Armstrong, in her lecture, "The Future of God," which I heard a year and a half ago, when she was at the Diocese of Bishop Spong, talked about that cognitive darkness, quoting the poet Keats, waiting for the poem to write itself, as she said, quoting the poet, the poet doesn't sit down and just write the poem. The poet waits in the darkness until the muse speaks, until the poem writes itself. You don't call a committee and write a poem. You don't call a committee and write a creed. You wait with openness. You wait in expectation for the idea, for the vision to emerge. And I do believe that that is where we are, globally speaking, today. The great religions of the world are in dialogue with one another. The west has become largely secular in its greater expression, and it is a time of waiting, I think, in the darkness for God to reveal God's self.

In Psalm 137, Judah was in exile and their captors said, "Give us a little Jewish song," to which they replied, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" We take the Hebrew scripture seriously, but we ought to recognize that they're very, very human. This document is very, very human. If you would go on to read those verses, beyond those verses that were sung for us, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land," you would come to the last verse where all of the anger and hostility of the Psalmist is expressed when he prays to God to dash their little ones against the rock. It gives you goose bumps. It's chilling. The God of Israel in that instance was a tribal God. That tribal God couldn't move into exile, and so they were godless. And they couldn't sing their God's song in that situation. But, then there arose a prophetic voice that said, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, says your God. I am the creator God. I created a way through the sea, the horse and chariot were overcome. Now, don't look back, for behold I am doing a new thing."

Israel, Judah, had to gain a bigger conception of their God, a God who could accompany them and indeed be with them in exile and still be God to them in exile, a God who would, ultimately, bring them home.

And Paul - how could he say God in the face of Jesus Christ on Mars Hill in Athens? That was his problem, his challenge, his struggle. He quotes their poets; there's some truth there. Paul is standing in the Acropolis, the center of human learning, trying to bring expression to that which had encountered him, and that which had encountered him was the God of Israel as Israel had conceived God, but, now that God is given a different spin, now seen through the lens of Jesus Christ. For Paul it was still quite a simple matter. He said God arranged the times and the boundaries wherein people dwell. Kind of a small project. But, he was reaching and stretching to bring to expression a bigger view of God and that's what we are about, as well.

You say, well, what about the revelation of God? Yes, that's what I mean when I'm talking about the breaking in or the manifestation of the mystery. I don't deny that God reveals God's self. But, there's a problem with revelation. Everyone who has one thinks it's the last word. And then they build a structure and absolutize it, trying to freeze the moment and perpetuate it on forever so that there's a block to any further manifestation, any new experience. We can't afford that anymore. Our world is exploding. The growth in knowledge and understanding is exponential. It's breaking out all over. And the mood of the church in the mainline, by and large, is to hold on, to survive, to nail down and to re-imagine yesterday.

I guess the big thing I say to you is wait in the darkness. What works, work. And where there's cognitive dissonance, live with it, keep thinking about it, and eventually the new will emerge, the idea will show itself, and when it shows itself, you will recognize how weak and paltry is our present institutional Christian religious form and structure, because when the new emerges, when we learn to say God in a new way, it will sweep all before it. Someone has said there is no military might that compares to an idea whose time has come. So, we're out testing ideas, confident in the meantime that we can rest in that Ultimate Mystery, that God beyond our gods.