

911: To An Unknown God – This is an Emergency!

Acts 17:16-34

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November 25, 2001

Prepared text of the spoken sermon

We hear repeatedly that September 11 has become one of those defining moments in the history of the nation. Although there was the immediate shock and the strong emotional reaction, that level of response cannot long be sustained. Nonetheless, the trauma of that tragedy, the demonic dimension of its conception and the brilliance of its execution remain with us. Reality has not changed but our awareness has, awareness of our vulnerability and, one hopes, recognition that there are some fundamental changes that must take place in this world of ours.

In crisis times we flee to old securities – to patriotism, for example, the flag. That's certainly understandable. It is a symbol of what we cherish, of those freedoms that have marked our national life, those values we hold dear. Yet, there is also a show of nationalism which is simply tribalism on a large scale, a very natural response as well – all too natural, for it reflects our animal nature – an instinctual reaction which is exceedingly dangerous in a world like ours where there lie in many quarters the capacity to destroy this spaceship we share.

But there is another old verity to which we flee with which I would deal this morning – namely, piety: the flight to God for refuge and protection. The churches were full for a week or two after the attack of September 11 but, of course, people got over that in a hurry. Still, “In God we Trust” and “God bless America” are blazoned across the landscape as we appeal to almighty God, the Lord and sovereign of history, the one who guides and controls the course of human history.

Once again, such a response is quite natural, understandable – it too is almost instinctual, at least to the extent that the human creature, having evolved to the point of consciousness, self-awareness, awareness of the other, has lived in the face of Mystery.

Living in the face of Mystery is the context for the origins of religion. So far back as we can trace the human story, there is the presence of the religious response to the mystery of being human, being before the mystery of existence.

The great religious traditions of the world are those that began with a vision, an experience, some founding story which found resonance in a community, developed a cult, a form of worship and a way of life, a moral code. That is what constitutes a religion:

A teaching, doctrine, dogma;
A mode of worship, of observance, a ritual;
A way of life, a moral code –

all of this creating a mode of adjustment to the mystery of existence.

And so we should not be surprised that post-911 there has been a flight to piety. The realization of vulnerability often moves us to seek some shelter, some security. This is as old as the human story.

It was true in the ancient world. When Paul came to Athens, he surveyed the city and was distressed at the variety of temples and statues to a pantheon of gods and goddesses. His Jewish tenet, his monotheistic faith, is summed up in the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is one!” This passionate man was not only a Jew who was convinced that God was one – Creator of all – but also that this God was the God of Israel and, further, that this God had visited the human scene embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. Soon we will celebrate Christmas, the Word made flesh – the heart of Paul’s faith.

And Paul was nothing if not bold. He believed he was living on the edge of history – the End was approaching. He was a preacher of the last times and he was imploring all to recognize the true God and the revelation of that God in Jesus Christ.

Athens, of course, was the greatest university city in the world, the city whose Golden Age boasted the greatest philosophical traditions the world has ever known. Even 500 years after its Golden Age, Athens was still a place of philosophical conversation and debate. And so Paul was invited to tell his story before the elite court of Athens.

He began by complimenting the Athenians on their quest. And then – here’s audacity – he claimed to be proclaiming the Unknown God. Six hundred years earlier, a plague had been experienced. A Cretan poet Epimenides devised a plan. A flock of black and white sheep were let loose from the Areopagus. Wherever they lay down, they were sacrificed to the nearest god. If a sheep lay down where there was no shrine, it was sacrificed to the Unknown God.

“To the Unknown God” – there too you see, the plague drew them to piety. Paul takes this occasion to claim he knows this Unknown God who is God alone: God, Creator, history’s Governor, and the one who is bringing it all to its consummation. Some 600 years after Paul, another visionary received “the Truth” dictated from Heaven – the Prophet Mohammed, with every bit the conviction of Paul that he had the latest Word from the same God Paul worshiped, only under a different name.

In the wake of 911, Andrew Sullivan in *The New York Times Magazine* had the courage to raise a question about the religious dimension of the present crisis. He writes:

...this surely is a religious war – but not of Islam versus Christianity and Judaism. Rather, it is a war of fundamentalism against faiths of all kinds that are at peace with freedom and modernity...

It seems almost as if there is something inherent in religious monotheism that lends itself to this kind of terrorist temptation. And our bland attempts to ignore this – to speak of this violence as if it did not have religious roots – is some kind of denial. We don’t want to denigrate religion as such, and so we deny that religion is at the heart of this. But we would understand this conflict better, perhaps, if we first acknowledged that religion is responsible in some way, and then figured out how and why.

Andrew Sullivan, “This is a Religious War,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 2001.

In *The Economist* some years ago I was struck by these words:

History is bound to be bloody when people, hardly understanding themselves, claim to understand God perfectly and then meet people who think the same only different.

But it is not just monotheism that is at fault for certainly that move from polytheism was an advance in human understanding. If there is an ultimate, a final principle, a Life force or Holy Spirit, then oneness is implied.

But is it not time to recognize that the Unknown God proclaimed by Paul is no longer capable of holding us in thoughtful conviction? From all we know about nature and historical development, certainly that a supernatural being “up there” or “out there” is controlling the universe is no longer credible.

Let me cite three voices that represent three disciplines of human learning that, I think, sum up concisely where we are:

In a statement about what is going on in history, Jacques Monad, the Nobel-winning biologist, in his classic *Chance and Necessity* says, if he accepts this negative message in its full significance,

“Man must at last wake out of his millenary dreams and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that, like a gypsy, he lives in the boundary of an alien world, a world that is deaf to his music and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his suffering and to his crimes.”

And Erich Fromm writes in *Man For Himself*,

There is only one solution to his problem – to face the truth, to acknowledge his fundamental aloneness in the universe, indifferent to his fate, to recognize that there is no power transcending him which can solve his problem for him.”

At his inaugural at Cambridge University, G. N. Clark wrote,

There is no secret and no plan in history to be discovered. I do not believe that any future consummation could make sense of all the irrationalities of preceding ages; if it could not explain them, still less could it justify them.”

In a world where religion provides the fuel for fanaticism and atrocities are committed in the name of God, is it not time to recognize the old supernaturalism is dead? There is no God out there shifting the gears, pulling the strings. No supernatural revelation containing absolute truth formulated in dogma and creed or sacred text.

That is probably the most difficult article of faith for the religious person – Christian, Jewish or Muslim – to let go of God in control, omnipotent, almighty. We so long for security; we so desire a Divine Parent and Protector. But can we honestly observe our world without being aware of randomness and chance?

And what is the great temptation of the preacher? To offer a security he cannot deliver. There are fundamentalist churches, conservative churches and liberal churches – the whole spectrum – but all of them are still holding on to a Supreme Being in control. They may make room for free will, etc., but finally one comes to the Rubicon. One must decide: God outside of nature in control, or some sense of the God present within the unfolding process, enlivening, creative, biased toward life but not in control, only persuading by love.

That is quite another understanding. It calls for us to be mature, to grow up, to recognize that the process has brought us to the place of responsibility.

Are we left bereft? Hardly so. Let me offer my own experience because it is still relatively fresh although the result of a long process of years of thought and reflection.

Think of the wonder of the cosmic reality of which we are a part. Think of life in all its variety, nature in all its fascinating dimensions: sunrise, sunset, the seasons following in orderly fashion.

And being human, being here together, thinking together, recognizing our responsibility and experience of community – love, joy, gentleness – the fruit of the Spirit!

911 – after the rush to the God in control, perhaps we will recognize that that conception of God has brought us to an emergency. Perhaps it is time to realize Paul's God needs an update. Not the God out there but God within, coming to expression through the human in the ongoing cosmic dance, full of wonder.