

Restless Mind and Quiet Heart

Quest and Rest

Text: Job 23: 1-10; Psalm 42: 1-5; John 3: 1-10; I John 4: 7-8, 12, 16

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Transcription of the written meditation

Once in a while in the ministry of preaching I have discovered not only some fresh insight into the biblical faith as I worked on a passage, but some new insight into myself. Now on the threshold of my 80th birthday, it happened again.

When I decided on my theme for today I was well aware that I would be probing the question of my life – the God Question. I have lived a “God-obsessed” life and that not surprisingly. On the day of my ordination to the ministry I received a letter from my father relating the fact that, when my mother was carrying me, he prayed that, should I be a boy (women’s ordination not yet in the picture), he would dedicate me to God’s service. Well aware that we don’t choose, God must call, one of my early memories as a child is his telling those who referenced me as a young lad that his prayer was that God would call me to the ministry. As a child I was a bit embarrassed but I got the message!

Interestingly, I never considered doing anything else and I never rebelled against the pre-programmed vocational “choice.” However my ministry has been a journey of probing the God Question and the years of my retirement have only given me more time to continue the quest. I still read and wonder, question and probe. And, as I do that, I never doubt being held in the embrace of God’s love as I have come to experience it in the face of Jesus.

When I decided on my theme –

Restless Mind and Quiet Heart – Quest and Rest,

I was well aware that I was describing my own spiritual journey –

always wondering, questioning – always securely resting.

However, as I began to gather materials and ideas for this meditation, I came to a realization that the God Question goes on and is alive and well to the present. I saw afresh, or for the first time, my own spiritual journey – a restless mind

seeking to come to a critical, intellectual understanding of the story of religion and, specifically, the Christian faith. But doing so with a quiet heart because of the fundamental trust in which I was spiritually formed.

The insight into my own journey had to do with what was happening on the broader cultural scene. I was ordained in 1960 as a very conservative Reformed Christian minister. I'm sure you remember the 60s. Just for fun I googled the term and was reminded of that decade, so tumultuous, as much that had been taken for granted was put in question or simply overturned.

The 1960s was a decade that began on 1 January 1960 and ended on 31 December 1969. The 1960s term also refers to an era more often called *The Sixties*, denoting the complex of inter-related cultural and political trends around the globe. This “cultural decade” is more loosely defined than the actual decade, beginning around 1963 and ending around 1974.

“The Sixties”, as they are known in both scholarship and popular culture, is a term used by historians, journalists, and other objective academics; in some cases nostalgically to describe the counterculture and revolution in social norms about clothing, music, drugs, dress, sexuality, formalities, and schooling. Conservatives denounce the decade as one of irresponsible excess, flamboyance, and decay of social order. The decade was also labeled the Swinging Sixties because of the fall or relaxation of social taboos especially relating to racism and sexism that occurred during this time.
From Wikipedia

The world was changing around me. *Time* magazine for April 8, 1966, (the Easter Issue!) had a black cover with the question “Is God Dead?” in red letters. The God is Dead theologians created quite a stir. The *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (August 6, 2013) reports:

A popular debate over whether “God is dead” was occasioned by the so-called radical theology propounded in the 1960s by such theologians as William Hamilton, Gabriel Vahanian, and Paul van Buren. The best known of these proponents was Thomas J. J. Altizer, then a professor of religion at Emory University in Atlanta. The controversy reflected many of the broader cultural and political changes in American society often associated with that decade. “We must realize that the death of God is an historical event, that God has died in our cosmos, in our history, in our [existence],” Altizer claimed. His frequently provocative manner of speaking, which masked a more complex discussion taking place among academic theologians, for a brief time made him a minor celebrity in the popular media.

Although the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had asserted the “death of God” nearly a century earlier and a theological movement had already adopted the phrase to express the perceived incompatibility

between a modern worldview and belief in a transcendent deity, the controversy did not fully erupt until 1965. For a decade before this, Altizer wrote, he “had been torn between an interior certainty of the death of God in modern history...and a largely mute but nevertheless unshakable conviction of the truth of the Christian faith.”

It was in such a time that this very conservative, very traditional, rather insecure and somewhat defensive preacher began. I won't bore you with the details but, after four years in Spring Lake and three in Midland Park, New Jersey, I had begun to realize that I needed help; I needed to go back to school! Again, without boring you with the details, I went to The Netherlands, the University of Leiden, being accepted as a graduate student by a great theologian and wonderful human being, Professor Hendrikus Berkhof. As I rose to leave his study after our initial meeting, I noticed a piece of paper pinned to a drape. On it in the blue ink of a ditto copy were the words of Tennyson:

Our little systems have their day,
They have their day and cease to be.
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.

It was an epiphany moment. My little system was broken. I desperately needed a new understanding of the Christian Faith if ever I was again to bring the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But God was more than my little system that was broken.

Four years of intensive study, reading, writing, conversation with my Professor followed. During those years I was not sure if I would preach again, but I was learning and getting the education I never had, not because I didn't have good teachers but because I was not open to learn. Now with existential hunger I began at least to understand the questions.

The Spring Lake congregation invited me to return and I did. And so I began again, this time quite a different person, now preaching and teaching out of my European experience, the restless mind now dealing with faith's question but, saturated with Grace, a heart at rest.

But it hasn't gotten any easier. If the 60s were revolutionary in society as a whole and the Death of God theologians challenged the very existence of God, there was no possibility of returning to business as usual. The God Question was in play. As I came to my retirement in 2004, a new generation of scholars created the new atheism.

New Atheism is a social and political movement in favour of atheism and secularism promoted by a collection of modern atheist writers who have advocated the view that “religion should not simply be tolerated but

should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.” There is uncertainty about how much influence the movement has had on religious demographics, but the increase in atheist groups, student societies, publications and public appearances has coincided with the non-religious being the largest growing demographic, followed by Islam and evangelicalism in the US and UK.

The 2004 publication of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* by Sam Harris, a bestseller in the US, marked the first of a series of popular bestsellers. Harris was motivated by the events of September 11, 2001, which he laid directly at the feet of Islam, while also directly criticizing Christianity and Judaism. Two years later Harris followed up with *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which was also a severe criticism of Christianity. Also in 2006, following his television documentary *The Root of All Evil?*, Richard Dawkins published *The God Delusion*, which was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 51 weeks. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Atheism)

Recently I have been picking up some well-worn books on my shelves, which I remember were breakthrough books, writings that made a deep impact on me in my quest to understand the mysteries of God, cosmos and human being. The British New Testament scholar John Knox, in his *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, wrote a statement that spoke deeply to me – gave me, I suppose, some self-understanding in my spiritual journey. Knox wrote:

For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false. (p. 107)

I have on occasion rephrased his claim:

The heart cannot rest where the mind cannot follow.

In either case Knox’s claim is that heart and mind, though with different functions, must be in harmony. Intellectual quest cannot issue in a heart at peace. A peaceful heart cannot be secured without the mind’s understanding. And such equilibrium is not static, for life is dynamic, on the way. Thus quest and rest – a restless mind and a quiet heart.

Religion is the quest for God and the great religions of the world point to the Mystery beyond human comprehension, beyond the change and decay that marks our common experience, the shifting tides of human opinion and practices – the Mystery that is sought as the truly Real, the final resting place of the restless human quest, the source and ground of being and the goal toward which all presses.

The human longing for God is well documented in our story, the biblical story. The story of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures is a powerful and eloquent witness to

the struggle to find God in the midst of human suffering. Determined not to yield to the popular theology and conventional wisdom of his day, Job refuses to accept the idea that suffering is the punishment of God for sin and wrongdoing. In the midst of his debate with those miserable comforters who visited him, he cries out,

“Oh, that I knew where I might find God; that I might come even to his dwelling! ...I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him. On the left he hides, and I cannot behold him.”

“Oh, that I knew where I might find God.” Indeed!

Or the Psalmist – again one whose soul is cast down, suggesting that it is most often at life’s extremity that the God Question obtrudes itself – writes:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

Job is a drama, not an historical account; the Psalmist is a poet writing a hymn. This is the stuff of poetry and theater because we are dealing with the depths of human experience, the longing for some clue or glimpse or token that our human existence has meaning, some significance, that it is not simply sound and fury, a tale told by an idiot.

But it need not always be triggered by suffering or threat. Sometimes life experience itself simply raises the question – What is the meaning of it all?

Nicodemus was a religious teacher, a rabbi, and in his own spiritual quest and questioning he came to Jesus to ask about the God Question, to which Jesus responded with the familiar, “You must be born again,” or “from above,” pointing, of course, to a spiritual illumination beyond the capacity of pure intellectual, rational thinking. And Nicodemus reflected what we must all feel at some time: “How can this be?”

My soul longs for God.
Oh, that I knew where I might find God.
How can this be? Born from above?

The God Question – the question that will not go away. What a fascinating quest is this quest for God, and this is a great time in which to be engaged in the quest and question. The God Question is alive and well. It will not go away ever for long, but it is my sense that there is more open discussion about God, about the spiritual life than has been true in my lifetime, and with the vast communication networks of our world, the God question flourishes as never before.

In our human experience, as our minds remain open to new breakthroughs in the understanding of our cosmic journey, we know finally, intellectually we will not uncover the mystery that we call God. Are we then engaged as persons and as a human family in an eternal quest that knows no rest?

No, for what we cannot discover intellectually we can experience as we love one another. In John's Gospel, in The Prologue, we read, "The Word was made flesh and lived among us." And the writer goes on to declare, "No one has ever seen God." He then points to the Word become flesh.

The writer of the First Letter of John repeats the statement of the Gospel writer – "No one has ever seen God!" But then, in a marvelous expansion of the Gospel's focus on the Word made flesh as the place of revelation, the writer of the First Letter of John declares,

No one has ever seen God;
if we love one another, God lives in us,
and His love is perfected in us.

Again he writes,

God is love, and those who abide in love
abide in God, and God abides in them.

The quest goes on. The cosmic journey continues to amaze us as the mysteries of the universe are opened and the restless human mind will continue to lay bare those mysteries. But in the meantime, a quiet heart rests in the Love of God experienced in our human love. The dynamism of the quest keeps the mind open, alert, full of wonder with never ending questions. Loving another, thus experiencing God who is love, the heart finds rest.

From my favorite musical drama, *Les Miserables*, the moving closing song says it all: "To love another person is to see the Face of God" – and experience a heart at rest!