

The Question That Will Not Go Away

From the series: The God Question

Text: Psalm 42:2; Job 23:3; John 3:9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

While away on vacation, I was so glad, although I celebrated my 65th birthday, that I did not retire because I am still wrestling with the God Question. It is the question that will not go away. I find the God Question more fascinating with every passing year - and I've been thinking about it again intentionally, reading and reflecting, knowing I would be engaging with you, on my return, in conversation about God.

Conversation *about* God, not *with* God. Ah, that is the problem, of course. You come longing for the experience of God and I speak to you *about* God. There is a difference, of course, a vast difference, the difference between experience and thought. The one is existential, the other intellectual, and every time I attempt to deal with the God Question in a sermon, I am sharply aware of the dilemma. How can I speak so as to create the possibility of some experience of God, some brush with Grace, without simply engaging your mind, your intellect. Can we think our way to experience?

Let me be clear; I am painfully aware of the dilemma, but yet would claim that there is an important place for thoughtful reflection on the God question, lest our experience be devoid of understanding. And further, I would contend that the experience of the sacred that we have from time to time cries out for understanding.

And so, let us begin - acknowledging the difficulty, being clear that our aim is not simply knowledge, but *experience*, or *experience illumined by understanding*. 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.

This 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? And while I am not naive enough to believe that we all awoke this morning with the thought, "Thank God it's Sunday! I shall arise and go to worship and have an experience of God," nonetheless, we have gathered here in this sacred space - we have prayed and sung hymns of praise and longing, and we place ourselves before the Word, the story and the sermon – and, so doing, indicate even if unconsciously our longing for some touch of Divine Grace.

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.

The excellent British news magazine, *The Economist*, has a regular feature at the end of every issue entitled simply "Obituary." It features the death of some significant person from whatever area of life. The last issue of the 20th century, dated 12-31-99, a special millennium issue, was given over to *God*. It began,

When your friends start looking for proof of your existence, you're heading for trouble. That was God's situation as the millennium got into its stride. Under the portrait (of whose imagination it doesn't say), are the words,

After a lengthy career, the Almighty recently passed into history. Or did He? And to let it be known that the editors did not really think they had written God's obituary, the piece suggests near the end that as the 19th century ended, Nietzsche announced God was dead, but the Superman Nietzsche promised never got born and the Communist promise was never realized - the people did not agree; and the corpse just wouldn't lie down. He popped up in the oddest places.

A. N. Wilson, the English writer, published last year a wonderful work on the 19th century entitled *God's Funeral*, a review of significant thinkers, poets, writers, politicians, and churchmen of the 19th century who saw the exploding knowledge of the modern world work its acid of doubt into the form of traditional Christian faith and God talk. The title comes from a deeply moving poem by Thomas Hardy in which he portrays the funeral procession bearing away the God figure that had informed the Christian faith for 19 centuries and Judaism before that. The poem is full of sadness and longing expressing great loss.

But Wilson knows, too, the suggestion of "God's Funeral" is premature. The opening words of the preface are, "The God-Question does not go away."

Another 1999 volume, *Working on God* by Winifred Gallagher, is a sixties person's account of reaching her forties having "dismissed religion as anachronistic wish fulfillment - half Brothers Grimm, half Hallmark, dreadful at worst and limited at best - that failed to jibe with my accumulating knowledge and experience." Gallagher chronicles her search for God or for some spiritual reality, returning to investigate her Catholic Christian roots, the Jewish tradition of her husband, and the Buddhism to which she was attracted as a spiritual seeker. She coins the phrase neoagnostic for her kind - those who long since gave up on traditional, institutional religion, becoming modern super-achievers, super consumers, now repelled by blind ambition and workaholism. "Rugged individuals" who were living on empty with low-grade alienation. She describes what is a growing phenomenon in our time - "millennial religion" is her term for it - the spiritual quest of so many who have given up on church and synagogue,

dogmatic claims and moral certainties, who yet recognize a void in their lives that can be filled only by an authentic spiritual dimension.

Three big questions Gallagher suggests motivate such seekers -What is real? What do I feel? What are my choices?

I am struck by the contrasting situation of our culture as we begin the third millennium to the culture to which I addressed my early preaching. Ordained in 1960, that early preaching was in the context of the breakdown of much that had marked western civilization and certainly the institutional forms of society in politics, religion and social mores.

In the early 60s, Harvey Cox, Harvard Professor of Theology, published a best-selling volume entitled *The Secular City*, which celebrated a new day for our culture, marked by the secular. His intention was to find ways to find God in a secular culture that had thrown off traditional religious forms and practices. I took that book to Europe with me in 1967, arriving there on March 1. The *Time* magazine issue published just before I left for Europe had a black cover with huge red letters that asked "Is God Dead?" Harvey Cox was attempting to address that cultural situation. Now Cox has written again. There have been several volumes from his pen, but the latest is *Fire From Heaven*, a study of the world-wide phenomenon of Pentecostalism, in which he sees a global spiritual renewal. In the preface, he writes,

Even before I started my journey through the world of Pentecostalism, it had become obvious that instead of the "death of God" some theologians pronounced not many years ago, or the waning of religion that sociologists had extrapolated, something quite different had taken place. Perhaps I was too young and impressionable when the scholars made those sobering projections. In any case, I had swallowed them all too easily and had tried to think about what their theological consequence might be. But, it had now become clear that the predictions themselves had been wrong. Cox writes that the prediction of eroding participation in "Mother Church" was right, but what was not foreseen was the disillusionment with the promise of secularism and science to bring in a new day. What emerged was a spiritual wasteland.

A final sign of the spiritual landscape of our time: Upon my return last week there was a package in the mail, a book, gift of the author sent out by the publisher. It was Karen Armstrong's volume just now becoming available entitled *The Battle for God*, a study of the phenomenon of fundamentalism - Christian, Jewish and Muslim - in our present cultural-religious situation. I can hardly wait to get into it; maybe before this brief series ends I will have something to share from Karen Armstrong's massive research.

Do you sense the vitality and the dynamism of the present discussion of the God Question? Do you not find it fascinating that this question that will not go away is so widely recognized and discussed in our time?

Let me conclude by saying how privileged I feel to be in a community like this where we can live together the God Question, acknowledging the Mystery while recognizing that that Mystery will be experienced in wholly new circumstances by means of fresh insight offered by the ongoing explosion of human knowledge and experience.

The great religious traditions have changed and evolved over the centuries to accommodate new human experience. It is so today and will be so tomorrow. And what pleases me and stimulates me is that we have moved beyond a certain dogmatic system and rigid biblical interpretation that disallowed a wide-eyed openness to the ongoing saga of the human story.

We are a free people, serious in our engagement with the Ultimate Mystery of our existence, open to fresh winds of the Spirit, yearning for the brush with grace in this amazing cosmic drama.

Oh, that I knew where I might find God!
My soul longs for God, the living God!

Hear this word of assurance - "You shall search for me and you shall surely find me when you seek me with all your heart."

References:

Harvey Cox. *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century*. Da Capo Press, 2001.

Winifred Gallagher. *Working on God*. Modern Library Paperbacks, 2000.