

Mystery's Face and Flow

Trinity Sunday

Text: Job 23:3; 11 Corinthians 4:6; and, John 14:9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is Trinity Sunday; the Sunday after Pentecost, and it's the time when we focus on God. It is God Who brings us together week after week, and we have many things about which to think and speak together. On Trinity, however, we go right to the core, to God, and to focus on that conception of God which has been shaped by the Christian tradition and has, indeed, shaped the Christian tradition, that conception of a Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, One God blessed forever.

God in the modern period has become a problem, and although high percentages of people affirm their faith in God, in the intellectual centers of reflection and deep thinking that eventually impact popular opinion, God has had hard times in the last two or three centuries. We no longer simply take for granted the existence of God, and the nature of God has been thought about a good deal. The religious quest will always be there. But, God has become a problem. That statement of the problem was probably set forth as profoundly and as critically as anywhere by the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. You've heard me refer to Feuerbach, on occasion, over the years, because his critique of the idea of God goes to the heart of the matter. It is his idea that God is the projection of our human needs unto the screen of reality, after which we bow down and worship, that God is the consequence of human need and that God is a human construction or a projection. It is certainly true that when we ask about God, we are asking about ourselves. The questions about God are really questions about our own existence. Whence have we come? Whither are we going? And in the meantime, what is the meaning of it all? Is there any purpose? Is there any direction?

The human situation is fraught with peril. We are threatened creatures; our human existence is perilous. At any moment we well know that we could be wiped out. We stand at the side of those we love, helplessly seeing them die. We, ourselves, are vulnerable to a medical diagnosis at any time that could be fatal. The human condition is one of contingency; it is a perilous life we lead, and the religious quest is quite a natural quest after some anchor, some place to stand, some place of comfort, some place to rest the soul. And so, when Feuerbach said

that God does not exist except as we have created God and objectified God and constructed God out of our own human needs, he was putting his finger on something that was true. He was roundly criticized, of course, and the Church rose up with great defensiveness at such a suggestion, that God is a human creation. Feuerbach, nonetheless, had looked at the human person and the human situation, had sensed the fearfulness and the anxiety and the fragility of human existence and detected within the human person a kind of weakness that longed for some strong source of support and comfort and strength. Feuerbach's mistake, which is a mistake all of us often make, was to absolutize his claim, that is, that God is nothing but... To say that God is nothing but the projection of human need is to say too much. But, his insight is telling and you must be aware, as I am, of that which goes on in your own soul and heart and you must observe as I do all about us those for whom God is a crutch, a safety blanket, a security measure. God, for many of us, is the God we need. But, that's not all there is to say.

I point that out because we are downstream from that movement of modern atheism. From Feuerbach came Freud who said that religion is an illusion, Marx, who said that human life is nothing but economic determinism, Nietzsche, who said all is nothingness. The nihilism that is laced within contemporary society is the consequence of that conception of things that has ruled out God, that conception of a Feuerbach who saw so much of human need projected into God that he simply wiped God away. But, as Nietzsche said, God is dead, and everything is permissible. And I would say that the 20th century is probably a good example of the fact that, when God is dead, anything is permissible, and very soon the fabric of society begins to unravel.

Karen Armstrong, in her lecture a couple of weeks ago, spoke of the future of God, and she alluded to the contemporary atheism that pervades the lives of so many, even though they might answer a Gallup Poll, "Oh, yes, I believe in God." But there exists a practical atheism, living without any engagement or any regard to God. Karen Armstrong, said we are in one of those periods of history when we are simply waiting in the darkness for some future image to arise. But atheism, she said, is not to be feared, for it is not a rejection of God, but it is a rejection of inadequate conceptions of God. And so, we are in this present darkness, waiting, confident that there will yet emerge that understanding of God that can call forth from us worship and commitment to the ways of love and of justice.

We have had inadequate conceptions of God. We have archaic, naive and primitive ideas of God, which we have not updated with everything else that we know in our world. With all of the explosion of knowledge, we have not done much with our idea of God.

Yesterday it was a nice day and I was beckoned out of the loft to contemplate God. I went out on the bluff to soak up a little sunshine, thinking that I could think there or not think at all there, and lo and behold, God got me there, too, for

as I sat down there was a little table in front of me, one of those little, low tables. It was made of slats of wood and those slats of wood had little spaces between them, and as I contemplated the table, there was an ant. So, I will now tell you the story, "The Ant and I."

The ant went all the way up one board to the corner, and then he made a left turn and went down the short side and got to another corner, came all the way down the long side, came to the corner, went up the short side. And I thought, "Now, what will you do? You've been all the way around the perimeter. Now, what will you do, little ant?" He did it all over again. Got to every crisis point, made his turn, in his case, always the left turn, and got back to the starting point. And then one time, as I was about to drift off, he came to the edge and he went down and he found the supporting board underneath which created a bridge for him to get to the next board. He came up on the next board and then he went all the way down on the board, across, all the way up, down, and he did that several times. And I thought, "You know, ant, you ought to give me some interesting plot to follow because I don't have time just to watch you continue to traverse all these boards."

But, then I realized that God had placed me there in order to contemplate God, not the ant, for my contemplating the ant is that old image of God that we've grown up with that has come to us out of an ancient past where there was a heaven and an earth and the waters under the earth, the three-storied universe, where God was a being on the throne "out there," in heaven somewhere, and we were here, and God, although totally apart from us, would come down into our history and affect circumstances and then return back to heaven. I thought to myself, if I contemplate the ant, I am like that childhood idea of God which I had. Here I am, totally unengaged, just a spectator, observing. Now, I thought to myself, I could take a piece of dune grass and I could wiggle it in front of the ant, seeing whether or not I could influence the pattern of its peregrinations. But, I didn't do that. Then I thought to myself, I could crush that bugger! But, I didn't do that. And then I thought, I could help him. I could save him; I could redeem him from his dilemma. He is on the surface of a table and the poor dear really is trying to find the sand. He's trying to find the sand where there is sustenance, where there is community, where there is home. He's trying to find his brothers and sisters. I could actually pick him up and put him down on the sand. I didn't do that, either. When I left him, he had gone down into one of those deep valleys between the boards, he was down on that foundation piece which probably was a deep, dark valley of the shadow of death for him. I was half-tempted to pick him up and put him down, but I thought, "No, I think I'll just leave you there."

Then I thought to myself, "I am like my old image of God, sovereign, absolute. I can do what I will with that ant. I can crush the ant. I could redeem the ant. I could observe the ant. I could get engaged with the ant. But, I'm totally apart from the ant, even though I have the prerogative of getting involved with it, but I live a separate existence far superior and beyond the ant."

That's the God I learned in Sunday School. How about you? And then I thought to myself, "That isn't the God that makes sense of my universe at all today. That's not how I understand human existence, the world, the cosmos." Oh, I understand how that old system worked and if we wouldn't be literal about it all, it would still work for us because it tells us, according to Paul, of God Who said, "Let light shine out of darkness." In other words, the Creator God Who, in the fullness of time, shined into our hearts the light of the Gospel of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And Paul, in his writing to the Corinthians, was talking about the fact how we even look at that mirror of Jesus mirroring God, and how we, as we contemplate that image, are changed into that image by the Spirit of God. So, I see what Paul meant. In the biblical material, I can understand that God, the incarnation of God, the Spirit of God shaping me into the image of that incarnate One according to the purposes of God. Or, as John witnessed, really quite simple.

Jesus said, "I'm going to leave you." Thomas said, "We don't know the way."

Jesus said, "I am the Way. I am the Truth. I am the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me."

Phillip said, "Ah, I've been wanting to talk to you about that. Just show us the Father and we'll be satisfied."

It's that deep longing. I don't sense that Phillip was in any particular crisis.

Job was in a crisis! Job said, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him!" In the midst of his burning anguish, Job was in a crisis, with the problem of suffering and of tragedy in the world that has wrenched that cry out of the human heart down through the centuries.

Phillip? Phillip's just, well, still longing, though. He said, "Just show us the Father. Oh, if I could just know, if I could just see."

Jesus said, "Look, how long have I been with you, you still don't get it. You see me, you see the Father. There's no other access. There's no other map. There's no other possibility except as you behold God in my face."

So, Paul saw God in the face of Jesus. John saw in his witness to Jesus, God in the face of Jesus. I can understand that. But then, as I was thinking about the inadequacy of my King of the Universe model over against the ant, I realized that that old model wouldn't work anymore, because that table is not just a thing. That table is dammed up energy, because we know that for 15 billion years it has been a cosmic river of energy expanding time and space as it moves, and we know that that table is simply energy, for a time coalesced, gathered into material, but that material can as well be transferred back into energy because energy and matter are interchangeable; they're all one reality. It is not as though I have a life other than that ant; the life of the ant is the life in me, as well. It is God's Spirit, God's breath that enables the ant to live and me to live, and I am just a cut above

the ant in that I am conscious of the ant and the ant is not conscious of me, but consciousness is that uniquely human capacity. But, the human, although having that consciousness, that self-awareness, that ability to observe the process, is not apart from the process, for that table and that ant and my body are all one reality, and all of it alive because of God. Nothing exists except God's Spirit, God's breath, God's enlivening presence.

So, I have to do away with that old King model of a God, "out there" ruling, some sovereign Absolute Who can dip down, Who can save or damn. I have to get God, somehow or other, into the reality of my world, to see that my world is because God's breath is or God's Spirit is, and behind and beyond that cosmic drama there is a mystery, a mystery that we cannot fathom, that totally Other, that wholly Other, totally transcendent, Ultimate Mystery that is the Source. I don't know how to say anything more. And even to say that is an article of faith. There's no empirical proof that there's any Source! But, I cannot believe the marvels and wonders of the cosmic drama, except I think of a fountain of creativity that continues to pour forth and that the cosmic drama itself continues to be laced with that creativity as that develops in all of its diversity in a thousand directions with possibilities unlimited.

But then, I think to myself, "So I have an Ultimate Mystery. But, what is the nature of that Mystery other than a creativity. And I have a cosmos of tables and chairs and bricks and bodies and everything existent, and all of that diversity - what does it mean? What is the nature of the Mystery? And what is the meaning of the manifold diversity of my reality?"

And then I see a face. I see the face of Jesus. And suddenly I'm back at an old Triune God. Suddenly I see the Trinity with new eyes. Suddenly I see the Ultimate Mystery totally hidden from us, but totally present in all that is, defined in a face, the face of Jesus. That enables me to have a sense of the nature of the Mystery, to sense that that Mystery which is creativity is driving things toward an order of love and justice, because if that face, that representation in history, that concretization, that incarnation - if that incarnation of Jesus is really a reflection or a mirror of the Mystery, and as I reflect on that reflection in the face of Jesus, if I am being thus shaped like Jesus, then perhaps it is the intention of that whole cosmic drama that there be those who be human who are thus shaped, who are joining in those currents that lead to justice and to love.

Suddenly I have a three-pointed God again. I have the Ultimate Mystery, the Source of it all; I have the enlivening presence of God in all that is, and I have a definition, I have a specificity, I have an image, an icon, a concrete shape that calls me to meaningful living.

The way of Jesus. The way of justice. The way of compassion, moving, moving, I trust and hope, to the Kingdom of God, Shalom, the Cosmic Harmony in perfect pitch.

Now I have a sense of my whence, although I cannot penetrate the Mystery. I have a sense of my aliveness, thanks to that breath, wind, Spirit that's been flowing now for 15 billion years, and I have a marker, I have a way, I have a face, and it's because of that face that we gather here, lost in wonder, love and praise, before the Mystery, and go out of here to live a certain way.

My economic decisions are not just economic decisions. They are economic decisions that I make in light of my call to follow Jesus.

My political decisions are not just arbitrary political decisions; they are decisions that I make in the light of the face that I see.

The total way that I am is not arbitrary. It is a way of commitment, following the one whose commitment led him to death and resurrection, by the Spirit, moving, moving toward that final Kingdom.

In the light of all that we know about that cosmic river of energy that now and again is dammed up into material stuff like chairs and tables and bodies, I can't believe that, caught up in that process, I still need three points of light, or a Triune God, or a God creatively present, concretely representative of that life to which I am called.

The Church is a place where we gather where all lobbying ceases, all selfish ambition comes to an end, all personal advantage ceases as we commit ourselves to the cause of the Ultimate Mystery Whose clue we've found in a face. It's just as simple as that.