

The God Who Is There For Us

From the sermon series: God, Our Ally

Text: Isaiah 57: 15; Hebrews 4: 13, 16

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God, Our Ally.

That is an affirmation of faith.

It is certainly one of the most significant and meaningful statements one could make and to live with such a conviction is to be in possession of one of the most necessary truths for human happiness and wellbeing.

God is for us.

Human existence is embraced by grace. So to live is to have a foundation for the present and hope for the future.

Who is this God? How do we know Him?

These are deep questions whose answers are shrouded in mystery. God is not "at hand." He is not simply available. To know Him is beyond human capacity; yet He has made Himself known.

This series of messages is an attempt from a variety of biblical texts and a variety of angles to say "God is our ally; He is for us." But to speak of God, let alone to speak of Him in a whole series of messages seems almost presumptuous. How dare one presume to speak of this One Who is hidden in mystery? Would one not do well simply to be silent?

Yet that cannot be the answer, for God has revealed Himself; He has made Himself known. Thus He wills to be known and He wills that we have knowledge of Him. On the other hand, as I reflect on this task, I am quite certain most sermons purport to know too much. I am certain as well that there is often a craving in the human mind and heart to know more than can be known of God and, rather than acknowledging the limits of our thinking in proper humility, we tend to cut God down to a size in which we can handle Him.

I make this confession early on in this series because I want to admit to the impossibility of speaking about God even as I attempt to do so, simply to make you aware that I am aware of how inadequate are these stammering attempts to speak of Him. Thus we look to the Spirit to reveal to us truth too deep for us to grasp through our own power of reason and intuition.

"The God Who Is There For Us." That is the focus. "There for us" in the sense of being the solid foundation of life, the sustainer of our life, the strong support and source of comfort for the human pilgrimage which is our life.

I. Let me begin with the simple assertion that we need God.

The consciousness of that fact must be why we are here. Of course, for some of us this appointment is not a matter of decision. We have made that decision long since - this is the Lord's Day and it is a day first of all for worship. And so it is not as though we awoke with a conscious longing for that encounter and communion that happens in this setting and therefore we have come. Yet, however we happen to be here, it is reflective of some deep-seated sense that we need God, that we long for His presence, that we find a fulfillment of life not within ourselves but only in relationship to One Who is beyond the limits of our time and space and human rationality.

Were I to make a list of the dozen most influential books that have shaped my thinking, one would surely be Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*. It won the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction in 1974 and it is one of those works that gives an overview and summary in lucid fashion of a vast area of human thought and endeavor. In this case the book focuses on the insights gained from the movement of psychoanalysis from its beginnings in the work of Sigmund Freud through the modification of those insights in the work of Otto Rank.

What gripped me in this summarization of the best insight of psychoanalysis into the nature of the human being was the acknowledgment that what a human being most desperately needs to be fully human is precisely what the Christian Gospel offers.

Through the work of Freud, the work of an earlier philosopher and Christian came to be appreciated for the depth of truth it contained. That thinker was Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard summarized the human situation profoundly and found the answer to the human dilemma in the leap of faith, casting oneself into the arms of God. Kierkegaard held that

Once a person begins to look to his relationship to the Ultimate Power, to infinitude, and to refashion his links from those around him to that Ultimate Power, he opens up to himself the horizon of unlimited possibility, of real freedom. This is Kierkegaard's message, the culmination of his whole argument about the dead-ends of character ... One goes through it all to arrive at faith, the faith that one's very creatureliness has

some meaning to a Creator; that despite one's true insignificance, weakness, death, one's existence has meaning in some ultimate sense because it exists within an eternal and infinite scheme of things brought about and maintained to some kind of design by some creative force. Again and again throughout his writings Kierkegaard repeats the basic formula of faith: one is a creature who can do nothing, but one exists over against a living God for whom "everything is possible." (Becker, *The Denial of Death*, p. 90)

From a life-long study of the human psyche in the discipline of psychoanalysis, Otto Rank concluded Kierkegaard was right.

... Rank joins Kierkegaard in the belief that one should not stop and circumscribe his life with beyonds that are near at hand, or a bit further out, or created by oneself. One should reach for the "highest beyond of religion. ... (p. 174)

Rank recognized that the scientific study of the human being could strip him bare, expose his delusion and defense mechanism, but could not

allow the person to find out *who he is* and why he is here on earth, why he has to die, and how he can make his life a triumph. (p. 193)

He declares,

Modern man needs a "Thou" to whom to turn for spiritual and moral dependence, and as God was in eclipse, the therapist has had to replace Him. ...

Becker indicates that these two disparate thinkers, one a Christian of the 19th Century and one a psychoanalyst of the 20th,

... reached the same conclusion after the most exhaustive psychological quest: that at the very furtherest reaches of scientific description, psychology has to give way to "theology" - that is, to a world-view that absorbs the individual's conflicts and guilt and offers him the possibility for some kind of heroic apotheosis. Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level, (p. 196)

Rank was not a Christian believer nor is Becker. Neither of them espoused the answer of the Christian faith. Yet they saw that the lostness of the modern person is precisely that she has been robbed of faith in transcendence.

The one thing modern man cannot do is what Kierkegaard prescribed: The lonely leap into faith, the naive personal trust in some kind of transcendental support for one's life. (p. 200)

The characteristic of the modern mind is the banishment of mystery, of naive belief, of simple-minded hope. (p. 200)

Perhaps I could summarize Becker's view and Rank's by saying that they believe that the Judeo-Christian faith provides precisely the view of Reality which a human being needs to be happy but they also believe it is an illusion.

What they call illusion we hold to be the truth. God is and God is Who we need. The analysis of human nature and the scientific study of the human psyche confirm that to be human is to be frustrated and restless as long as one is turned in upon oneself or imprisoned within the structures and meanings of this world. There is something intrinsic in the human spirit that longs to leap beyond itself, to commit itself to a transcendent Reality - in a word - to God.

Israel's God provided a resting place for the soul. In Isaiah 57 God speaks of His coming in judgment on His people but that judgment here, as is always true, was in order to turn his people back to Him. The prophet knew there was no peace except in Him. God expresses His gracious way thus:

I cured him and gave him relief, and I brought him comfort in full measure, brought peace to those who mourned for him, ... peace for all men. ... But the wicked are like the troubled sea, a sea that cannot rest, whose troubled waters cast up mud and filth. There is no peace for the wicked, says the Lord. (Isaiah 57:19-21, NEB)

Wickedness in the Old Testament is unbelief. It is life lived on a purely human, secular plane. It is life without trust in God. Such a life says the Lord knows no peace.

We do need God - to be fully human, to know peace.

II. The Good News is that the God we need is the God Who is there for us. We have in the text from Isaiah a marvelous capsule summary of the biblical God. God speaks. He tells Who He is.

For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

There is a portrait of the God we need. We see in this statement both the otherness of God and His nearness.

God is the Wholly-Other.

That is a designation made popular by Karl Barth. He had been schooled in the classic Liberalism of the 19th Century. Christian faith had become pretty much a

man-centered affair. The Gospel was reduced to the limits of human reason. It was Barth who sounded the alarm and called the whole European continent back to the Otherness of God - the Godness of God; the One Who contradicts us.

He is a God beyond us. He is not like us only a little more so. He is other than we are. He is the Creator, we the creature. He is not of one being with us but the source and ground of our being.

God is the exalted One - high and lofty. God is the Infinite One, the Absolute, the Ultimate Power. God is the Eternal One - beyond the limits of our time and space. It would be difficult to find a more exalted conception of God.

Yet in the same breath we are told that He dwells with him who is of humble and contrite spirit. He dwells with the one who is crushed. And he draws near to revive.

He is thus not only the Wholly-Other, but He is the God Who is near.

He is the God Who in gracious condescension has come near to us to revive and redeem.

In the classic doctrine of God the theologians have spoken of God's transcendence and God's immanence. In so speaking they have sought to let God be God - to honor His Otherness, to recognize that He is beyond us. Yet, in faithfulness to Scripture, they have spoken of His drawing near, of His being with His people.

We must never lose that tension.

God is God and, as we have already seen from the analysis of the human psyche, nothing less can satisfy the human heart or provide a resting place for the human spirit. God is a mystery. He is not at our disposal. Could we fathom his depths He would not be God and we would be restless still, striving on to find that Ultimate One Who limits our existence and grounds our being.

Barth called the world back to the Otherness of God. The 19th Century had domesticated God and formed Him in the human image. About the same time another theologian, Rudolf Otto, wrote a book entitled *The Idea of the Holy*. In a forward to the English translation, Otto wrote,

This book ... makes a serious attempt to analyze all the more exactly the *feeling which remains where the concept fails*. ...

The English translator, John W. Harvey, in his Preface raised the question addressed in the work.

Is religious experience essentially just a state of mind, a feeling, whether of oppression or of exaltation, a sense of 'sin' or an assurance of 'salvation;' or is it not rather our apprehension of 'the divine,' meaning by that term at least something independent of the mental and emotional state of the moment of experience? (p. XIII)

Obviously Otto believed that in religious experience we apprehend the divine or God. But he recognized that God is not at our disposal. That a God within the limits of human reason is not God at all. Otto studied the history of religions and found a common thread. There was an apprehension of the divine which could only be described as a knowing beyond knowing.

... a unique kind of apprehension ... not to be reduced to ordinary intellectual or rational "knowing" with its terminology of notions and concepts, and yet - and this is the paradox of the matter - itself a genuine "knowing," the growing awareness of an object, deity. ... The primary fact is the confrontation of the human mind with a Something, whose character is only gradually learned, but which is from the first felt as a transcendent presence, 'the beyond,' even where it is also felt as 'the within' man.

There you have the text from Isaiah. Otto's classic study names that transcendent presence the Holy, but the word Holy carries with it such a strong, ethereal connotation that he needed another word to describe that residue of experience. He chose the word "numinous" from the Latin *numen*, the most general Latin word for supernatural divine power.

'Numinous' feeling is, then, just this unique apprehension of a Something, whose character may at first seem to have little connection with our ordinary moral terms, but which later 'becomes charged' with the highest and deepest moral significance. (p. XVI)

'Numinous' and 'Numen' will, then, be words which bear no moral impact, but which stand for the specific non-rational religious apprehension and its objects, at all levels, from the first dim stirrings where religion can hardly yet be said to exist to the most exalted forms of spiritual experience, (p. XVII)

It was Otto's contention that in Christianity

The numinous elements, such as the sense of awe and reverence before infinite mystery and infinite majesty are yet combined and made one with the rational elements, assuring us that God is an all-righteous, all-provident, and all-loving Person, with Whom a man may enter into the most intimate relationship.

The paradox of Isaiah's text is maintained.

It is a real knowledge of, and real personal communion with, a Being whose nature is yet above knowledge, and transcends personality. (p. XVII)

One could not hope for a better commentary on the text than the explanation of the thesis of Rudolf Otto and his book did greatly impact theological development. The text itself is simply a condensation of the experience of Isaiah recorded in the sixth chapter of his prophecy where he entered the temple and saw the Lord "high and lifted up." He heard the angels sing the Sanctus, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts." The vision left him awestruck, smitten with his own unworthiness. But through the ministry of the angel he was cleansed and through the voice of God called and commissioned to service. In the midst of awe and wonder he was addressed, cleansed and given a task. The high and lofty One stooped to grace His servant.

III. The God Who is there for us is the God with a human face. If we leave Isaiah we find in the New Testament the same gracious God Whose glory is now revealed in the face of Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews was concerned for Jewish Christians who had responded to Jesus, received him as the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope. They left the Temple and recognized the provisionalness of the Law and ceremony of the Old Covenant and embraced the Gospel. But now they were experiencing persecution and they were living under pressure. How normal for them to wonder if they had made a mistake, if perhaps this was a judgment on their offering of allegiance to Jesus. This letter addresses that question showing that Jesus is indeed the fulfillment and the culmination of the whole Old Covenant system.

He warns them against drifting away or falling off in slackness and disobedience, as had that generation that was delivered from Egypt's bondage only to lose faith in the wilderness. He points them to the word of God that is, in this case, the message of God by which they have been addressed. It is, he claims,

... alive and active. It cuts more keenly than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the place where life and spirit, joints and marrow divide. It sifts the purposes and thoughts of the heart. There is nothing in creation that can hide from him; everything lies naked and exposed to the eyes of the One with whom we have to reckon. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

That is a call to faithfulness couched in a word of warning. The One with Whom we have to do is no marshmallow God, no passive deity or dumb idol. The words resonate with a seriousness that the thought of God calls forth.

In a word, the writer is saying that one's whole life and existence is an open secret before the eyes of the living God Who judges according to absolutes of truth, righteousness and justice. There is no game of charades with Him. In the

presence of one another we mask the deep intent and purposes of our hearts and even before our own minds we hardly dare face the truth of our personal ambiguity, faithlessness and meanness.

But He knows us - better than we know ourselves. What a frightening thought!

But no; it is not so. In the very next paragraph the God Who searches the heart is described in magnificent fashion as the gracious God Who has drawn near to us in Jesus and Who bids us come to Him through Jesus to find in his grace timely help.

Once again as in Isaiah 57:15, we have a marvelous juxtaposition -the Judge Who might be thought to instill fear and trembling is the God Whose seat is a throne of *grace*. To be sure, He is God; to be sure, He is pure light; to be sure, to be in His presence must inspire awe and wonder and certainly there is a proper reverence described in Scripture as the fear of God which must be part of any experience of His presence.

But "fear and trembling" are not the last word; the last word is grace. For the God with Whom we have to do is the God with a human face. Did not Jesus say,

If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. (John 14:9)

Did not Paul write,

For the same God who said, "Out of darkness let light shine," has caused his light to shine within us, to give the light of revelation - the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (II Corinthians 4:6)

Quite consistent with the whole witness of the New Testament our writer points us to Jesus who brings us to God.

Since therefore we have a great high priest ... Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to the religion we profess. For ours is not a high priest unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who because of his likeness to us, has been tested every way, only without sin. Let us therefore boldly approach the throne of our gracious God where we may receive mercy and in his grace find timely help. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

One could meditate on that gracious invitation for a long time and never fathom the mystery of love and depth of mercy there set forth. The Eternal God, the Infinite One, the Ultimate Power, the King of the Universe is full of mercy, ready to give grace in every time of need. The way is open; access is available at any moment. The invitation is come.

The God we need is the God Who is there for us - the God with a human face - the God we see in the face of Jesus - the God of grace without limit and mercy without measure.

That is the message - God, our ally is full of Grace. His anger is for a moment, the other side of His love in order to turn us and return us to Himself. His love is everlasting and His Grace will finally conquer us with gentle wooing and steady faithfulness.

But these are words, expressed in stammering fashion, attempting to express the inexpressible. When all this has been said, it must be said further that words cannot convict us. That is the Spirit's work. Yet we have this encouragement that, if with all our heart we truly seek him, we shall surely find him. The longing of our hearts is already the sign of His early work and those who thirst for God will be satisfied.

God is our Ally.

He is there for us.

Come to Him through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

References:

Ernest Becker. *The Denial of Death*. First published in 1973.

Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. Oxford University Press, 1958.