

The Human Hunger For God

John 23: 1-10; Psalm 2; Acts 17: 22-28

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In his moving spiritual diary *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjold wrote,

God does not die on the day we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease being illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason.

I was reminded of that statement recently as I read Karen Armstrong's latest work *The Case for God*. "...a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason." Karen Armstrong points to the modern period as the time we lost the sense of "being illumined by the steady radiance" as Reason came to dominate the human endeavor. She is clear that human wellbeing depends on reason. It has brought the human family to its present state of accomplishment in arena after arena. She points to ancient cultures where reason, or the Greek word, *logos*, co-existed with myth or *mythos*. She writes:

In most premodern cultures, there were two recognized ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge. The Greeks called them *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential and neither was considered superior to the other; they were not in conflict but complementary. Each had its own sphere of competence, and it was considered unwise to mix the two. *Logos* ("reason") was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world. It had, therefore, to correspond accurately to external reality. People have always needed *logos* to make an efficient weapon, organize their societies, or plan an expedition. *Logos* was forward-looking, continually on the lookout for new ways of controlling the environment, improving old insights, or inventing something fresh. *Logos* was essential to the survival of our species. But it had its limitations: it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles. For that people turned to *mythos* or "myth."

Today we live in a society of scientific *logos*, and myth has fallen into disrepute. In popular parlance, a "myth" is something that is not true. But in the past, myth was not self-indulgent fantasy; rather, like *logos*, it helped people to live effectively in our confusing world, though in a

different way. Myths may have told stories about the gods, but they were really focused on the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of the human predicament that lay outside the remit of *logos*. (p. xi)

It was in the modern period with the stunning success of the scientific method, that myth, as the means of accessing the realm of mystery, was threatened and so many lost the experience of being illumined – that steady radiance the source of which is beyond all reason. Armstrong contends,

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time that historians call the early modern period, Western people began to develop an entirely new kind of civilization, governed by scientific rationality and based economically on technology and capital investment. *Logos* achieved such spectacular results that myth was discredited and the scientific method was thought to be the only reliable means of attaining truth. This would make religion difficult, if not impossible. As theologians began to adopt the criteria of science, the *mythos* of Christianity were interpreted as empirically, rationally, and historically verifiable and forced into a style of thinking that was alien to them. Philosophers and scientists could no longer see the point of ritual, and religious knowledge became theoretical rather than practical. We lost the art of interpreting the old tales of gods walking the earth, dead men striding out of tombs, or seas parting miraculously. We began to understand concepts such as faith, revelation, myth, mystery, and dogma in a way that would have been very surprising to our ancestors. In particular, the meaning of the word “belief” changed, so that a credulous acceptance of creedal doctrines became the prerequisite of faith, so much so that today we often speak of religious people as “believers,” as though accepting orthodox dogma “on faith” were their most important activity. (p. xv)

As would be expected, religious truth cast in the mold of empirical, rational, historically verifiable truth could not succeed because its “truth” was of another sort, the experience of a reality beyond the limits of reason – in Hammar skjold’s words – “a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason.” Thus rational religion bred modern atheism, Feuerbach, who saw God as a human projection, Marx who saw it as the opiate of the people, Freud who named it an illusion and the end of it, Nietzsche’s nihilism.

In the 1960’s there were some American theologians who proclaimed the death of God. Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton, Paul Van Buren among others wrote of the end of God such that the April 10, 1966, issue of *Time Magazine* appearing during Holy Week came out with a black cover announcing the death of God. Even at present, there is a militant and angry atheism proclaimed by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. But, while their books sell, God’s obituary is premature. There is a counter movement wherein the

experience of God is being experienced not at the end of a reasoned discourse but in the practice of the Presence of God. Again, Karen Armstrong:

Religion, therefore, was not primarily something that people thought but something they did. Its truth was acquired by practical action. It is no use imagining that you will be able to drive a car if you simply read the manual or study the rules of the road. You cannot learn to dance, paint, or cook by perusing texts or recipes. (p. xii)

It is this perspective Karen Armstrong brings to the whole purview of religious history. The insight, wisdom and comfort of good religions is not the result of believing certain ‘truths’ or creedal propositions but disciplined practice. She points to the musician lost in her music or the dancer inseparable from the dance – a satisfaction, she contends, that goes deeper than merely ‘feeling good.’ It can lead to ‘ekstasis’ – a ‘stepping outside’ the norm.

Religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart. This will be one of the major themes of this book. It is no use magisterially weighing up the teachings of religion to judge their truth or falsehood before embarking on a religious way of life. You will discover their truth – or lack of it – only if you translate these doctrines into ritual or ethical action. Like any skill, religion requires perseverance, hard work, and discipline. Some people will be better at it than others, some appallingly inept, and some will miss the point entirely. But those who do not apply themselves will get nowhere at all. Religious people find it hard to explain how their rituals and practices work, just as a skater may not be fully conscious of the physical laws that enable her to glide over the ice on a thin blade. (p. xiii)

Deep within us, I do believe, is a hunger for God, a yearning for the experience – again in the words of Hammar skjold, “being illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason.”

Sometimes that yearning comes at the crisis moments of our lives. In another “God book” which I highly recommend, Barbara Bradley Hagerty’s *Fingerprints of God*, she makes that point. She is NPR’s religion correspondent and, in that capacity, but also to come to an understanding of her own religious/spiritual experience, she did an exhaustive research project on human religious experience. In the opening pages she asks,

Is there a certain set of circumstances, a certain personality type, a certain cocktail of internal and external stress, that erupts in a spiritual experience? ...while an encounter with God can happen anywhere, anytime, my research and my own life story tell me that brokenness is the best predictor of spiritual experience. (p. 12)

I'm not certain that is the case with the majority of those who witness to the experience of God, but there is no doubt that when we are driven to the extremity of life experiences, the ultimate questions seem to emerge – ultimate questions of “why?,” questions of meaning and purpose.

Perhaps the classic biblical story reflecting such agonizing questioning is the drama of Job – not a historical person but a poetic drama that brings forth powerfully the question of suffering, suffering in Job's case of one who lived righteously. The purpose of the story in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures is to refute the conventional thinking that one who suffers has brought it on through his or her sinfulness. Our Scripture reading from Job 23 has that powerful cry,

Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!

Job's friends, the famous “miserable comforters,” beg him to confess his sin that he may be forgiven and healed but Job will not be intimidated. He has lived righteously. He has lived faithfully. He is suffering terribly and he has not a clue why that should be. Rather he would take his case before God, But that is the problem. God is not at one's disposal

I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me.

But he remains in the pain of his suffering with no bright flash of revelation. Yet, wrestling with God, he will not give in to hopeless despair.

If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

But then the tenacity of trust breaks through.

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.

My intention is not to deal with the issue of this biblical writing – the mystery of suffering, suffering of the righteous. Rather I use it as an instance of that piercing cry, “Oh, that I knew where I might find God!” Whatever the particular circumstances, do we not all at some time or other find that longing in our hearts and minds?

Sometimes the cry for God comes out of the horror and darkness we create as evidenced in the horrors of history. I know of no darkness so dark as that portrayed by the Jewish Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel who chronicled his

experience in the Nazi concentration camp where he and his family were incarcerated. He titles it simply *Night*. He watched his mother and sister torn from him to become fuel for the gas ovens. He watched the wispy smoke of the oven stacks curl in the blue sky, knowing it was the residue of his own flesh and blood. He watched his father die slowly over weeks and months. He saw a child hung on a gallows in the concentration camp along with two men.

The child had been tortured for a number of weeks in order to force him to reveal the names of those that might have been engaged in some revolt against the camp authority. The child would not mention one name and was therefore condemned to die. And so, as the custom was, the whole camp of prisoners was lined up in front of the gallows and the two men and the child in the middle. The three necks were placed at the same moment into nooses.

‘Long live liberty!’ cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

‘Where is God? Where is He?’ someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

‘Bare your heads!’ yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.

‘Cover your heads!’

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive, their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light the child was still alive...

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not glazed.

Behind me I heard the same man asking: ‘Where is God now?’

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

‘Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows...’

That night the soup tasted like corpses.

For the young Wiesel, God died that day. Yet somehow that deeply formed Jewish faith recovered. He has written, “I have not lost faith in God. I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I’ve been closer to him for that reason.” And similarly he writes,

And I became religious, even more so. The question to me was a double question. How come that I really became religious, more deeply than before? And the second one, how come I didn’t lose my sanity? I never divorced God. I couldn’t. I’m too Jewish...But I said to myself, ‘I do believe in God.’ But I have the right to protest against His ways. I have the right to be angry. And so, I do it a lot, very often, and I wouldn’t change a word of my discourse to God, my appeals to God, against God. Because I came to a

certain formulation saying a Jew or a man can be, can be religious or can come from a religious background, with God or against God but not without God. So I cannot live without God. (*First Person Singular*)

Oh, that I knew where I might find God!, the ancient cry; with God or against God but not without God – Wiesel's summary. A mystery indeed and one that defies our rational faculties to explain. What really can human reason, rational enquiry, do in the face of the horror of the Holocaust or in face of awful human loss as in the Job drama? Through the long human journey in all of the vicissitudes of human experience, faith has been lost, trust broken, anger expressed and protest made. Yet God will not go away; the human hunger will not be denied, the human cry persists: Oh, that I knew where I might find God!

It is not always in a situation of awful darkness. Psalm 42 opens with a marvelous image:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

It seems the poet may have been in a situation of exile – separated from the faith community, from the temple, from the great festival celebrations and he misses it all terribly. He talks to himself

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
And why are you disquieted within me?

And he tries to rally his spirit

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
My help and my God.

One shaped and formed in deep religious experience, the sacred mediated in sacred space, sacred symbol, and faithful telling of the sacred story finds, cut off from that, a very great loss and hunger and a thirst

As the deer longs for flowing streams,
So my soul longs for you, O God.

And it may be, not in an experience of darkness or an experience of lonely exile, but just a question arising out of our human awareness. Whence have we come, whether are we going, and what does it all mean? As Karen Armstrong notes, our rational deliberations are not helpful when we are dealing with the ultimate questions of our human existence. And we must feel our feelings; we cannot think our way around them. When we have exhausted all rational knowledge of our human situation, we realize that there is another dimension of which we are aware but which we cannot penetrate with a reasoned analysis.

I read the passage from Acts 17, St Paul in Athens. Passionate new convert that he was, convinced the eternal God had now been finally revealed in the human face of Jesus and that history's drama would soon be brought to consummation, he was distressed by the multitude of statues dedicated to a plethora of gods and goddesses. I find it fascinating that in Athens, the greatest university city in the ancient world, there co-existed a great variety of religious practice. St. Paul even quotes from the ancient Greek poets. The divine intention, Paul declares, regarding the human family, is

That they would reach for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

As far back as we can probe, from the very beginning of the Human, men and women, tribes and peoples have been groping for God in whom we live and move and have our being.

Thank God we have moved beyond the era of Enlightenment, which, for all of its impressive achievements, allowed only that to be true that could pass the test of empirical verification.

The recent book *Fingerprints of God* by the NPR's religious correspondent, Barbara Bradley Hagerty, to which I referred earlier, is a fascinating study of persons who have had an experience of God, mystical or out of body – some experience of the inbreaking into our space and time world of another dimension. Introducing her research she writes,

I had come to suspect that there exists another type of spiritual reality just beyond the grasp of our human senses that occasionally, and often unexpectedly, pierces the veil of our physical world. (p. 2)

After exhaustive research, really asking all the tough questions, Hagerty entitles her last chapter "Paradigm Shift." She relates her experience at Cambridge University at a conference sponsored by the University and the Templeton Foundation. The questions addressed: Could God retain a place in the intelligent man's world? Or, in this scientific age: Had God been reduced to a superstitious belief lacking any rational bases? (p. 268)

I would point out that framing the question in that manner already fell into the Enlightenment Trap: a superstitious belief lacking any rational bases. After eight days of lectures Hagerty notes, God was losing. She writes,

I was witnessing a blitzkrieg of scientific materialism overrunning the quaint but untestable claims of God.

This irked, me, especially when I realized that God could not win under the rules of twenty-first-century science. This was not Ali versus Frazier. This was the World Wrestling Federation. The decks were stacked, the outcome certain, the smack-down inevitable. The rules of this game – the paradigm of modern science – revolve around certain core beliefs. One of them dictates that scientists can study only what they can measure: the physical world and observable behavior. Try to investigate something that cannot be precisely measured – such as a spiritual experience that transforms a person's life – well, that's cause for immediate disqualification.

Another rule is the mind-brain paradigm: everything we are, see, feel, do, or think is a physical state, the electrical and chemical activity in three pounds of tissue called the brain. Mind, consciousness – forget about the *soul* – must be reduced to matter. It is a closed loop, excluding any notion of God or a spiritual realm.

But on that rainy morning in Cambridge I witnessed something extraordinary, akin to Dorothy spotting the little bald man pulling the levers of the Wizard of Oz. For only a moment, the curtain pulled back and we saw the fight for what it was: two *belief systems* duking it out.

John Barrow, a brilliant Cambridge mathematician, was speed-walking us through the hypothesis of a “fine-tuned” universe that is exquisitely and astonishingly calibrated to allow for life. He explained the concept of “multiverses,” which posits that we live in one of 10,500 universes. Then he said, almost as an aside, “I’m quite happy with a traditional theistic view of the universe.”

He might as well have dropped an anvil on Richard Dawkin's foot. (p. 269)

After her intensive and extensive research, Hagerty asks, “Is there more than this?” She answers, “Yes, I believe there is, and the new science of spirituality buttresses my instinct. Science is showing that you and I are crafted with astonishing precision so that we can, on occasion, peer into a spiritual world and know God.” (p. 289) Her final sentence, “We have all about us the fingerprints of God.”

“Oh, that I knew where I might find God!” to the beautiful image of the lonely Psalmist, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God,” to Paul groping around Athens where generations left evidence of their groping for God “in whom we live and move and have our being,” there is a continuity of the quest and a continuous witness to the experience of God – a universal hunger, a universal testimony of being touched by grace, even when the encounter was in protest as with Job or Wiesel, or in weeping and waiting as with the Psalmist, or

after a revelatory bolt of light as with Paul, or the inbreaking of another dimension to one surprised by grace.

Karen Armstrong documents how the dominance of logos during the modern period brought on modern atheism and religious fundamentalism – two radical solutions in opposite directions. Thank God we have moved beyond those two alternatives. She points out repeatedly that religion is not primarily something people thought but something they did. Its truth is acquired in practical action.

That is why you gather here on the first day of the week. That is why in our own individual practice we pray, we meditate, we participate in liturgy and sacrament. We open our lives to the dimension beyond our grasp, beyond our capacity to penetrate but which now and again, here or there, illumines us with “the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason.”

References:

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