

As Intimate As Breathing

From the series: Credo

Acts 2:1-4; John 14:15-20 Text: John 14:17

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

On this Pentecost, I want to say that God is as intimate as your breathing; that is, God is in you and you are in God, and that is good news. You don't have to look elsewhere, "out there," "up there," you don't have to wonder. You can be assured - God is in you and God will be with you always.

I don't watch television. I should, because it is a good connector to contemporary culture and one who preaches as I do ought to get his nose out of the theology books once in a while and see what people are thinking about. But, I understand that the dramatic series, "West Wing," in its finale, had some serious theology about it. Or, so the reporter in the *Grand Rapids Press* said in yesterday's edition, and, as I read that, I recognized that I probably had missed something to which I should have been attuned.

The "West Wing" drama series is a fictionalized White House setting with a President, Jed Bartlett, who is apparently a very religious, deeply Christian man, and he is having one of those days, one of those days which we all have once in a while, although for a President, I suppose there are a few more dimensions to it. Hostages have been taken at the embassy in Haiti, a tropical storm is bearing down on Washington D.C., he's on his way to the funeral of his secretary who was killed in an accident, hit by a drunken driver, he has just revealed that he has Multiple Sclerosis after eight years of denying it. It's just not a good day for the President. He goes to the National Cathedral for the funeral and after the funeral, he asks that the doors be sealed because this man who was seriously Christian has some things to say to God. He becomes very much like one of those Old Testament prophets who rails against heaven. He cries out against God. All of these actions that are going on, he says to God, "Are those the actions of a caring God? Of a just God? Of a benevolent God? A wise God? Well, to hell with your punishments! I've served you, I've proclaimed your word and done your work and now to hell with your punishments, to hell with you!" He curses God.

Because it is the season's finale and that is not a nice way to end a season, the secretary who has been killed appears in angelic form to say to him, "Come now.

You know God doesn't cause cars to crash." And he begins to remember all the work there is yet to be done and, like the Old Testament prophets, he gets up and gets back at it. The journalist calls it "Serious Theology on Prime Time TV."

Well, true. The railing against God - as I said, that has good, particularly Old Testament precedent. The shaking of the fist at heaven, the outpouring of an anguished heart or an angry heart - who has not been there? Who has not done it? And God can take it, as it were. I mean, it is not a problem with God, but it is a way that we humans react in the midst of our misery and our tragedy. There seems to be something almost endemic in us that, in the midst of that kind of crisis, causes us to cry out, shake our fist at heaven, to plead, cajole, whatever.

And yet, that is an image of God that really won't wash anymore. Our knowledge and our human experience today tell us that that ancient conception of a God "out there" who is running the universe won't work anymore. I think the emotional response probably written into our genetic code - probably out of the early dawn of what it was to be human, confronted with the mysteries and the tragedies that are a part of the human scene - still find utterance in that kind of call and prime time TV 2001. And yet, I have to say that presentation on "West Wing" is very much of the biblical view, isn't it? It is a supernaturalistic view of things. There is this realm, this world, this universe, and there is another where God dwells. There is the ongoing drama of nature and there is one above nature who controls nature and intrudes into nature.

On this Pentecost Sunday we would have to say in the Gospel of John, Jesus is the word made flesh who comes from the father and who returns to the father and who promises, "I will not leave you orphaned, I will come to you, I will send another advocate or spirit to be with you."

So, "West Wing" is not only consonant with something that is intuitive in the human being, but also reflected in the biblical story. Too bad we can't believe it anymore. Because it is really counter to everything we know about the way things work, about our world, the cosmic drama, about the human being.

There was something comforting about it, something "up there" in control. Somebody pulling the strings, working the gears, interrupting the process on occasion. But, I suppose the angel visitant at the end of the drama on "West Wing" which not only gave the season finale a softer touch and a bit of hope, a little sentimentalism and a little romanticism (don't we all love angels?) was also an admission, once we think about it, we know better. God doesn't cause cars to crash. We're on our own.

There was a time, because I was nurtured in that biblical story, as were all of you, when I thought in terms of a natural realm and a supernatural realm, but I know now that that just doesn't work, that the God, whatever God may be, will be experienced and known in that total phenomenon of which we are a part called nature. And in terms of that ancient cosmology, I now must move to that which

we understand, and that is that there was a moment, some 15 billion years ago when all of matter and energy was concentrated into one infinitely small point. I can't understand that. I'm only telling you what I have heard. But, I think that is the best scientific understanding of things today, that everything that is, this total universal system, all of the galaxies, all of the stars and the planets, the earth, the trees, the oceans, the mountains, and you and I are all the consequence of that which was all in a point in a moment. And that explosion in that infinite time past is still expanding so that this drama of which we are a part is underway. Someone has said if you would compress those 15 billion years into one year, the appearance of the human being would be in the last minute or two. I can't take that in. But, when I think about God in cosmos, God and human being, then it seems to me that that scientific picture is a picture which would indicate that the whole of reality must somehow or other be permeated by that divine presence, that sacred, that holy, call it God if you will. Not out beyond it somewhere, but within it. *God as intimate as breathing.*

Even though the Bible is solidly supernatural and the day of Pentecost is an invasion from beyond, nonetheless, there are little hints in the biblical story itself. For the word becomes flesh and dwells among us so that God is in the human celebrated at Christmas. And Pentecost is a celebration of the presence of the Spirit of God and the breath of God within us, and John's Gospel you well know, "I am in the father and the father in me, and you in me." How do you intellectually understand that mysterious language? Isn't it a stammering attempt to hint at the fact that God is not "out there," but in here?

You know, Graduates, if I were in your spot, if I had your youthful energy, your razor-sharp minds and all of your years, you know what I'd do? I wouldn't go to seminary. There is hardly a seminary alive that isn't still teaching that old biblical, supernaturalistic understanding of God. If I were you and I wanted to pursue God passionately, I would become an astronomer, a physicist. I'd study cosmology, because for years I have known and always said I should write a dissertation on the fact, which can be traced, of a shift in cosmological understanding, the nature of the universe. A shift there is reflected eventually in a shift in theological understanding. It can be traced down through the eons of the Christian story - change the conception of the universe, of the cosmos, of nature, and eventually, well, it takes the Church a long time, but eventually what we come to know impacts how we image what we believe.

And so, let me tell you the good news - God is not against you. And to be spiritual is not to swim against the tide. But, rather, it is to move with the grain of the universe, for what is coming to expression, what is emerging in this drama of billions of years is Spirit. Think of it. An explosion 15 billion years ago, the cooling of that soupy chaos, the coming into formation of the stars and galaxies, eventually life, conscious life, conscious life that - here we are, reflecting on it all! It's amazing! How many generations before us could have some vista of 15 billion years of a drama that is still occurring as we speak, and within us?

And then, this conscious life developing a spiritual dimension, a dimension of spirit, breath, which is the enlivening of the whole by the God who is not "out there" somewhere grinding the gears of the universe, but the God who is to be sensed in the stillness, in our very breathing. God present to us, in us. Thank God.

Someone has said it so beautifully, speaking of you, "Offspring of the stars, children of earth, we are great mothering nature's soul-space. Her heart and vocal cords, and her willingness if we consent to it, to be spirited, to be the vessel of the holy one."

God is not "out there." God is in here, and you are a vessel of the holy one, full of spirit and our task together is to make this world civil, decent, full of love and grace. God, as intimate as breathing.