

God and History: What's Happening?

Pentecost XXIV

Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25; I Corinthians 15:20-28

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

There is in your liturgy printed a reading from Carl Sagan, which I am not going to read in its entirety, but in a paragraph at the end, commenting on Planet Earth as it is seen from outer space, that little pale blue dot that we have all seen, Carl Sagan writes,

Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity - in all this vastness - there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us. It's been said that astronomy is a humbling, and I might add, a character-building experience. To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

The piece from Carl Sagan to which I referred is a statement that was sent to me immediately following the events of September 11, and I must admit they resonated with me more than the pronouncements of preachers and television evangelists in the immediate wake of that crisis. No help from outside. It's in our hands, and we are called to kindness and compassion. We see the symbol of that Planet Earth hanging in outer space, the image that has come to us from that picture taken from deep space in which we see the reality of that global community without any divisions or barriers, and we realize that we are on Planet Earth together. What Sagan says, he says as a scientist, as a great communicator of the mysteries of science, and also as one who has been rather outspoken in his denial of the traditional God that we image in the Church traditionally. And yet, what he says is not so different from what we have been saying here for some time, and that is that the God "out there," in control, sovereign of history who directs, governs, moves according to a pre-determined purpose, that that God is dead. That God doesn't really work for us anymore. Well, at least not for me and not for some of us. For all for whom it works, that's wonderful. As a matter of fact, what we know about the cosmic reality of which we are a part and the

historical development whose unfolding and in whose unfolding we have emerged, that God in control just doesn't seem compelling.

Oh, I know. In crisis times we flee to old securities. A couple of old securities to which this nation has fled in these recent weeks are patriotism and piety.

Patriotism -I won't ask you to raise your hands, but how many of you have flags on your cars or in your windows or in your shops? A rather natural and normal kind of response and reaction. After all, the flag stands for something precious and the flag is identified with this nation and we love this nation, and this nation has come under attack. And so, the flag is our effort to affirm our love and our devotion to this nation that has been so richly blessed and a source of such blessing to us all. But patriotism also has another side to it, another dimension, and I think some of that enters into our flying of the flag also. Namely, we are the United States of America and you really ought not to mess with us, and if you do, you'll get your due, you'll get yours. The flag is perhaps sometimes, on the part of some, at least, a sign of belligerence and determination not to succumb to those who would dare attack us.

And then there is piety, of course. The first week or two the pews of the churches across the nation were filled. Thank God people got over that in a hurry. But, still, a flight to the piety of the past, to the old securities, to the God in control.

Dear God, at a time like this, don't we long for, don't we wish for a God in control? A sovereign of the universe, the Lord of history, the one who is guiding it and directing it and who will bring it all to its consummation? Don't you realize that the greatest temptation to a preacher at a time like this is to secure you in that old security? That is a very normal and natural longing, as well. Deep down in the human being there is that desire for all to be well and for someone to be in charge and in control, the good and gracious God in charge, the omnipotent one, almighty God.

There are many who are exploiting that old traditional image of God to give a kind of security which, frankly, we can't give. It's not surprising that we should revert to that or flee to that. After all, our whole biblical tradition conditions us to look for that kind of a God.

There is that beautiful vision in Isaiah 65, a passage to which I return again and again, that beautiful picture of *shalom*, that picture where there is no infant mortality, where everyone lives to an old age, where one builds a house and lives in it and plants a garden and eats its produce, where one is able to benefit from the fruits of one's labor, a world in which lion and lamb lie down together and there is no hurting, no destroying in all God's holy mountain. It's a wonderful dream, reflective of something deep in the human heart, reflective of something that I think we all think should be or could be or maybe will be - that beautiful harmony throughout nature in history, *shalom*. Is it any wonder that we who have been nurtured in the biblical tradition would flee to a God like that in a time

of crisis? The God who is judge of all the earth brought Judah into its exile, but now, as the savior of the world will bring Judah back home and will create a new heaven and a new earth, making it all right. I want a God like that. I would love a God like that.

Or, Paul, who was nurtured on that same prophet but who had the encounter with Jesus Christ, the risen one, knocking him off his horse, that vision that Paul had that turned him around, that vision of the living Lord whom he believed would come shortly. In this great chapter on the resurrection Paul not only points to the resurrection, but in that paragraph I read he gives you the whole scheme as it is going to unfold very shortly - Jesus Christ risen from the dead, now ascended in heaven, ruling, putting all enemies and all adversaries down under his feet, and when he subdues all hostile powers, then he will take that kingdom and yield it up to the father and God will be God, all in all. Wonderful, wonderful drama. And Paul thought he was living on the very edge of history where it was about to transpire and, of course, 2000 years later, you can't take that same vision and still keep it alive. You just simply have to say Paul didn't understand where he was in the time line. And yet, you can appreciate what Paul was longing for, what turned him around, that which made him go to the ends of the earth proclaiming. It was a consummation, it was the resurrection over the last enemy, death. It was the subduing of all negative darkness. It was the overcoming of all evil. It was bringing to that moment when God would be all in all, maybe in different contours than Isaiah, but the same kind of thing.

It's really a silly thing when, 2000 years later, a series of books called *Left Behind* takes that thing literally and plays it out as though it is about to happen in the future. Ridiculous. But, I can understand what was in Paul's mind and heart. For me, rather than *Left Behind*, I'll take Harry Potter. Because Harry *Potter* deals with magic and mystery, and there is something in us that believes that there is more going on than meets the eye.

If you want a couple of concise statements about what is going on in history, Jacques Monod, the Noble-winning biologist, in his classic *Chance and Necessity*, says if he accepts this negative message in its full significance, "man must at last wake out of his millennial dreams and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that, like a gypsy, he lives in the boundary of an alien world, a world that is deaf to his music and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his suffering and to his crimes." Wow!

And Erich Fromm writes in *Man For Himself*. "There is only one solution to his problem - to face the truth, to acknowledge his fundamental aloneness in the universe, indifferent to his fate, to recognize that there is no power transcending him which can solve his problem for him." Sort of like Sagan saying no outside help available.

At his inaugural at Cambridge University, G. N. Clark wrote, "There is no secret and no plan in history to be discovered. I do not believe that any future

consummation could make sense of all the irrationalities of preceding ages if it could not explain them, still less could it justify them."

Well, just three voices of contemporary scholarship in the light of the tradition of faith of which we are a part which would leave us on our own. And to be left on our own in a time like this is a scary business. There is no wonder that we unfurl the flag. There's no wonder that we pray fervently to almighty God.

And yet, there is Harry Potter, and there are the fairy tales that we all love, and what do we love about a fairy tale? Certainly it has its darkness, its demons, its shadow side. But, the fairy tale also always comes out right. Eventually, the good prevails and the light prevails.

We love a fairy tale. I think we love a fairy tale because there's something intuitively in us that believes that the fairy tale is true. There is something in us that refuses to believe that there is nothing more, that there is simply this cosmic reality unfolding without mind or purpose or direction. There may not be someone grinding the gears of the universe up there. I think Sagan is right. There is no help out there, but there may be something in here. There may be something enlivening the process, the whole creative unfolding. There may be that which moves toward light and life. But, it may not win. It may not prevail. And yet, it will not finally be destroyed.

I think that really is the story of Easter. As you think about this, we would so love an omnipotent God. We would so love that God Almighty. We so much want God to be in control and in charge, and yet the very God that we profess, revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, was revealed in the vulnerability of a child, and we will celebrate it here in a few weeks. The clue we have of the nature of God is a God who is incarnate in a child, who was embodied in a human being, a human being who with grace and love and compassion makes his way, speaking truth to power until finally he is crucified, and, as he is crucified, he says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The God we want is a God who is in control. The God who is revealed to us if we could believe it is the God who is revealed in the vulnerability of love. The only persuasion is the persuasion of love. There is no coercion. There is no God Almighty. There is no omnipotent one. There is no one out there to pull the strings and move it around. What do we pray? What do we mean? What do we ask for when we say "God bless America?"

It is time for us, of course, to be saying "God bless the world," but to know that that prayer is seriously offered as a commitment to be the embodiment of kindness and compassion and care, because there is no help that will come from the outside. There is only that persistent Spirit, that persistent deity that pervades, with which reality is pregnant, that calls us again and again and again to life and to love, and if need be, to sacrifice and to yielding up life.

We don't really believe the Gospel. We would hardly dare live according to the Gospel. It would be a dangerous thing if Jesus were in charge. I don't know if I would dare vote for him. Because everything would have to be different.

I don't know about what we're doing in Afghanistan. I don't know about the military action. I really don't. Very early this morning they were talking about bin Laden on the videotape saying he had nuclear weapons. I'm not wise enough to know what we are to do in this kind of a situation, but I know this and you know it too, military might will not solve this crisis. We cannot bomb enough in order to bring out a good result.

It's no use praying to Almighty God, for the God within us who would move us to kindness and compassion, to civility and human decency, and to a transformed earth - that is the only God we have, and the only power that God has is the power of love. It's a pretty risky business, good friends. It is the temptation of a preacher to make you secure in the arms of almighty God, but it is the task of the prophet to tell you that God would move through you to be the arms that would secure the world

Something is going on. More than meets the eye. Thank God.