

Where in the World is God?

From the series: Creation – God's Ecstasy

Scripture: Isaiah 46:1-17; John 14:1-20

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Reading From the Present:

In an excerpt from Barbara Brown Taylor's *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion*, she contrasts the classical image of God with a new vision which she brings to expression in such an eloquent and poetic fashion:

When I am dreaming quantum dreams, the picture I see is more like that web of relationships - an infinite web, flung across the vastness of space like a luminous net. It is made of energy, not thread. As I look, I can see light moving through it like a pulse moving through veins. I know the light is an illusion, since what I am seeing moves faster than light, but what I see out there is no different from what I feel inside. There is a living hum that might be coming from my neurons but might just as well be coming from the furnace of the stars. When I look up at them there is a small commotion in my bones, as the ashes of dead stars that house my marrow rise up like metal filings toward the magnet of their living kin.

Where is God in this picture? All over the place. Up there. Inside my skin and out. God is the web, the energy, the space, the light - not captured in them, as if any of those concepts were more real than what unites them, but revealed in that singular, vast net of relationship that animates everything that is.

As I suggested a moment ago, the reading from Isaiah, the 46th chapter, parodies the gods of Babylon. Babylon was in trouble and in that historical context, there were rumblings and the foundations were shaking. The people of Israel in captivity in Babylon had begun to doubt their own God and had begun to think that the gods of Babylon were, after all, God, because that God had won the battle. But now that God was on shaky ground because Babylon was besieged by Persia, and so the Hebrew prophet called the people of Israel to Judah to remember their God. It was in this context that the first chapter of Genesis was written, that poem of creation. The Hebrew prophets were arousing the people to

remember their God, and to remember their God as the God who spoke and called all things into being. With a bit of ridicule over against the Babylonian gods, that had to be loaded on beasts of burden and carried out of town for safety, the writer suggests that the eternal God, the God of Israel, was one who does not need to be carried or saved, but one who carries and saves.

In the rumbling of the foundations, such as a time like that, is a time to think about how we speak of God and where to find God in this world. I have been trying to do that in these last weeks, two series of sermons which really have melded into one series, as it were, "The Spiritual Life, Re-imagining Religion," and then "Creation as God's Ecstasy," but, really one series which was about how we speak of God in our day, how we image, how we envision God in a world whose world-view has become so drastically different than anything ever conceived of in the founding documents of our own religious faith, our own Judeo-Christian tradition. So, we have lived with those old stories and that old conceptuality, but as a matter of fact, the whole world has changed on us, the whole reality of which we are a part creates for us an entirely different picture.

In such a world, our world, where in the world is God? And how do I speak of God?

The first Sunday in October, philosopher- process theologian David Ray Griffin will be with us and I have been nicking away at this in order to prepare somewhat for him, for he has attempted to express God in terms of the reality of this world as we have come to know it through the natural sciences. His last book, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism*, is a title from which I quoted some weeks ago. Reenchantment of the world, seeing the world with the light and charm and mystery and grace, but without that classical supernatural, theistic conception of a God "out there" who occasionally tweaks the process or interrupts or intervenes. Rather, a God who is a part of the process. That's where the term process theology comes from, God is not apart from but a part of that very process, the creative center, the energy that moves through, and, as Barbara Brown Taylor in the piece I read suggests in such poetic fashion, the God who is everywhere, the infinite one who is in us and through us and around us.

But, how do we speak of that God? Let me say a word about the nature of a religious community such as we are. We are a cultural linguistic community. That means that we are a community that has a lot of relationships and interrelationships, and we have a language. We are a linguistic community so that there are certain words, there are certain symbols, there are certain images, there are certain actions, there are rituals, there are prayers, there are hymns, all of which are familiar and common to us, and when we hear those or speak those or sing those, something is triggered deeply within us and we know that we have been to church. Our emotions are stirred and we feel again connected. We are a cultural religious community.

If you want to go to the big picture, we are a part of the Christian community. But, then you could have Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Protestant, and those are all sub-sets of that large picture. As far as the Protestant Church is concerned, there are sub-sets again. If you were raised a fundamentalist, certain things will trigger for you. If you were raised in a liberal community, other things will trigger for you. The point is this: religion formed into community is a human creative construct. It didn't fall out of heaven. It is the result of some founding vision that found expression, finally, in a community that was knit together by certain language, ritual, action, attitudes, a way of being. And so, a religious community is a community which is bound together by those things that mark it out and that touch it deeply. One community to another will differ. Someone has said that the difficulty of moving from one denomination to another is that you don't get the inside jokes. That's really true. There are certain things that happen that make us feel, okay, "I'm home. This is my family."

The philosopher, George Santayana, made a profound statement when he wrote, "Ultimate insights (that is when I really see something, when I see through, when I really get it) have a tendency to undermine the orthodox approaches by which they have been reached."

Now, think with me for a moment. Don't go off drifting and dreaming. This is important. Peter told me the last ten minutes of this sermon are terribly important, and I said that's only because the first ten minutes are even more important. Santayana said ultimate insights, when you really see it, undermine the orthodox method by which you arrive there. When you climb up the ladder and suddenly the heavens open up, you don't need the ladder anymore, at least if you scrambled off onto the roof. There is no other way to get that vision than through the hard work of that orthodox process, catechisms and creeds and confessions and hymns and worship and prayer and Bible study and all of that. And then one day everything comes into focus and you see the storybook of the Bible, you see all of the confessionals, the catechisms, you see all of the rituals, the sacraments as the means that brought you finally to say, "Oh, I see! Wow!"

Santayana said to see that tends to undermine the orthodox way by which you came, because you recognize the relative nature of that way, you recognize that it was a humanly constructed way that finally brought you to see. He also says that when that happens to you, you pull the ladder up with you because you don't want to cheat anybody else. You pull that ladder up into your private little heaven into that grand vision because you have no right to deprive someone else of that same ladder, that same orthodox process.

Well, I have flown in the face of Santayana because I have kept the ladder in place and I have pointed you to that ladder and I have said that is a good and relative and provisional and transitional instrument. It is not ultimate. It is not absolute. It is the way by which we got at the point where we could see the big vision. I have done that because I believe, not to do that, is to be unfair to you because you are

bright enough and curious enough and you live in this world with your face ground into human experience deeply enough to where you have to know that the world-view with which you operate Monday through Saturday is a world-view, a reality, an understanding of all that is that needs to find a new way to say God.

Where in the world is God in this vast cosmos with its amazing story? How do you speak of God in a fifteen-billion-year process where God is the energy, where God is the creative interaction, where God is the creative Spirit moving in a stream of being that has been unfolding and continues to be unfolding? In that kind of conception, how do you speak of God? That is what we have been trying to do. When you come to see that your way is relative, when you see the big vision that undermines the orthodoxy by which you got there, then what happens often is people say, "Well, it's just an illusion." Freud said that. Religion is just an illusion and one becomes a purely secular person. That's one possibility.

But there is another possibility, and that is what we are about here, and that is with passion to seek to find fresh expression in order that this cosmos, of which we are a part and of which we know more and more, may be for us that stage where constantly, continually we experience the reality of God, where our spiritual life is in tune and resonates with the rest of the reality, the web of being into which we are woven. That is what I suggest to you is the grand possibility - to find a way to speak of God in light of everything else we know. Barbara Brown Taylor does that better than almost anybody I have found, in poetic fashion to point to the web of reality into which our lives are woven, we who are the children of the stars.

Let me remind you again of what I have been hammering away at - creation is the garment of God, this Infinite Mystery that overflows, and creation becomes the finite incarnation of the mystery, that source of life, that source of being that is beyond us, yet before which our lives are lived, that Infinite Mystery whose overflowing results in cosmic reality, that cosmic reality, Big Bang cooling, expansion, life, consciousness, human. Here we are, a part of that overflow of the Infinite Mystery, the finite incarnation of that Infinite Mystery.

In our own Christian faith, the classic center is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the beginning was the word, the word became flesh, no one has ever seen God, the only son in the bosom of the father, he has made God known. Jesus Christ the incarnation of the eternal God. The word in the beginning becoming flesh, revealing that Infinite Mystery. An incarnate finitude that reveals the Infinite Mystery. Then the Church went on to say that is once-for-all, the one supreme revelation.

Wrong. That one instance is paradigmatic. It is the model. Jesus is the exemplar of what is true everywhere. The whole creation and everything human is the reflection of that Infinite Mystery that has found concretion.

In John 14, they say to Jesus, "Show us the father," and Jesus says, "Have I been with you so long you still don't get it? If you have seen me, you have seen the father." The Infinite Mystery incarnate in the face, the exegesis of the Infinite Mystery. And not only Jesus, but then in the human. This is where the whole process has come. We see it in Jesus, but we can make it universal, for that whole unfolding drama has come to the point where God is incarnate in the like of us, and experienced, then, in community. There's mystical language in that 14th chapter. "I in you, you in me, God in me, I in God." I don't understand that, but it seems to me the author was trying to say that the eternal intention became human, the Infinite Mystery became finite concretion and there - we see the Mystery, but we experience that we are the emanation of that Mystery. We are finitude in touch with that infinity. We, finite creatures, have a sense now of that Mystery.

God is in that process and the process continues to unwind, and I had to say to you last week the toughest thing a pastor can say, because a great motivation of your religious experience is to find safety when you are afraid and security when you are alarmed and comfort when you are grieved and answers when you have questions. I had to say to you it is a self-creating universe and it goes on. It is a pitiless universe. It is a pitiless universe. There is no one to tweak it so that it works out well for you. There is no one to keep it from raining on your parade. I'm sorry.

Does that mean, then, that you have to live without the experience of God? O my God, no! For the world is shot through with God. I suggested to you last week that, in your need, my arms will be the arms of God. In your grief, my tears will be God weeping with you. My forgiveness will be God's grace to you, and vice versa.

You may say, "Well that's just human. I want something more than human."

You can't have anything more than human because the human is divine. God has become incarnate in human flesh and when you feel human arms, when you see human tears, when you experience human grace, you are experiencing all of the God that you will ever have.

But, what about when you sit under a tree and contemplate a babbling brook? What about when you see lofty mountain grandeur? What about when you stand before the starry heavens or the setting sun?

O, of course, of course, because it's all shot through with God. It is the garment of God. It is the immediacy of God. In the whole realm of the natural world, there is nothing supernatural about it. It is the natural world with all of its wonder that is so wonderful, that is so pregnant with divinity which is the place where we live, where we can experience in human relationship, in community experience and alone, contemplating the evening star.

Dear God, do you see? It is not that I take something away from you. What I take away from you is a broken symbol system and you can have it back with a second naiveté, if you give it up first of all and then you experience God in the width and breadth and height and depth of the human experience. And to see that is to live with wonder.

In the *Grand Haven Tribune*, this sermon was entitled, "The Gift of Wonder," because that is what I thought I was going to call it when I was wondering about it. But it is the same thing. "Where in the World is God?" The gift of wonder is to know that God is shot through the whole of my experience, every moment freighted with eternity. There is no denial here. God is present even in the darkness.

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of *Tuesdays With Morrie*. Remember Mitch Albom's story about his old professor, Morrie Schwartz, who died with Lou Gehrig's disease by stages, who chronicled the gradual loss of his powers, the gradual draining away of his human existence? And before he died, Morrie had his own funeral. He had his own funeral with his own friends to celebrate his life. I said to my friend, Lenora Ridder, last night, "Wouldn't Bud have loved his funeral?" Why do we wait until a person is dead to celebrate life, human relationships, love, grace? Dear God, you see when I get a sense of that, if that's the way things are, well then I live with gratitude. Then I live with reverence before the wonder of it all. Then I live with humility, because then I know all is grace.

My Dad never let me use the word luck because he believed in the sovereign God whose providence ruled over all, so I could never as a kid be lucky. But, I'm lucky. I am lucky. And so are you. And there are a lot of people that aren't so lucky. This pitiless universe grinds on its way, friends. It wavers not to the left nor to the right. The River of Being unfolds inexorably. But, I've been so lucky. Maybe I can do something for somebody that has not been so lucky. And maybe I can live with all the vitality of that wonder that washes over me so that I can be a source of life and light. Ah - don't you sense it? Don't you sense the wonder of it, how big it is, how beautiful, how filled with limitless potential?

No, my religion is a human-created construct, it is relative, it is the ladder by which I have finally been able to say, "I see!" But then religion is so important in order for me to continue as a human being to live a spiritual life, knowing in my finitude that I am a part of the Infinite Mystery. That's really something. Really amazing. And that's really enough.

References:

Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion*. Cowley Publications, 2000.