

The Celebration of Life and Death in Community

All Saints' Day Service

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-13; Romans 14: 1-9; John 14: 1-3

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Prepared text of sermon

Bonds of friendship and shared memories of rich experiences of gathering in inspiring worship services continue to beckon us to evenings like this, gatherings, as I playfully suggested this past Spring, might be called “The Church of the Holy Seasons” or “The Community of the Holy Seasons.” Here we are again celebrating a Holy Day in the church’s liturgical calendar – All Saints Day.

As I have indicated in a previous All Saints celebration, in my first incarnation as a Dutch Reformed Domine, I would be speaking about the Reformation of the 16th century when the Protestant movement was born, breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church. But I have undergone a major shift in my understanding and you with me – a shift not from the great central Reformation theme of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, but a shift in how the gracious God is celebrated in the Church’s worship.

This is “old hat” for you now. Nonetheless I keep gaining a deeper perspective on the change we experienced from the intellectual nature of classic Reformed worship to the sensual aesthetic liturgical drama of Catholic worship which, in large measure, we adopted.

As I was musing over this evening’s meditation, for some reason I recalled the book by Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* It was published in 1978. Prior to that Küng had published *On Being a Christian* (1976). It was a blockbuster on the continent – a most unusual occurrence since books of theology were not in great demand in Europe at the time. But Küng touched a nerve in post-Christian Europe. He prefaced his work thus:

“This book is written for all those who, for any reason at all, honestly and sincerely want to know what Christianity, what being a Christian, really means. It is written also for those who do not believe, but nevertheless seriously inquire; who did believe, but are not satisfied with their unbelief; who do believe, but feel insecure in their faith; who are at a loss, between belief and unbelief; who are skeptical, both about their convictions and

about their doubts. It is written then for Christians and atheists, Gnostics and agnostics, pietists and positivists, lukewarm and zealous Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox.

Even outside the churches, are there not many people who are not content to spend a whole lifetime approaching the fundamental questions of human existence with mere feelings, personal prejudices and apparently plausible explanations?

And are there not today also in all churches, many people who do not want to remain at the childhood stage in their faith, who expect more than a new exposition of the words of the Bible or a new denominational catechism, who can no longer find any final anchorage in infallible formulas of Scripture (Protestants), of Tradition (Orthodox), of the Magisterium (Catholics)?

These are all people who will not accept Christianity at a reduced price, who will not adopt outward conformism and a pretense of adoption in place of ecclesiastical traditionalism, but who are seeking a way to the uncurtailed truth of Christianity and Christian existence, unimpressed by ecclesiastical doctrinal constraints on the right or ideological whims on the left.

This is not to say that what is offered here is merely a new adaptation of a traditional profession of faith or even a miniature dogmatic theology with the answer to all old or new disputed questions; and it certainly is not an attempt to propagate a new Christianity.... The present work is simply an attempt by someone convinced of the cause of Christianity, without proselytizing zeal or theological lyricism, without stale scholasticism or modern theological Chinese, to produce a relevant and opportune introduction to being a Christian...

It is an attempt in the midst of an epoch-making upheaval of the Church's doctrine, morality and discipline, to discover what is permanent: what is different from other world religions and modern humanisms; and at the same time what is common to the separated Christian churches. The reader will rightly expect us to work out for him in his practice of Christianity, in a way that is both historically exact and yet up to date, in the light of the most recent scholarship and yet intelligibly, what is decisive and distinctive about the Christian program: what this program originally meant, before it was covered with the dust and debris of two thousand years, and what this program, brought to light again, can offer today by way of a meaningful, fulfilled life to each and every one. This is not another gospel, but the same ancient gospel rediscovered for today..."

Reading that preface again, I'm not surprised that it became a best seller. I used the book for a year-long study class. For me it was a marvelous review of my four years of study at Leiden with Professor Berkhof.

Amazing scholar that he is, Hans Küng came out two years later with another work, this one not 600 pages as *On Being a Christian* but rather 700 pages, titled *Does God Exist?* This text I also used for a year-long study class and it is this work that came to my mind as I was thinking about my meditation for this evening. You will be relieved to know that I'm not going to give you a review of *Does God Exist?* But it came to mind because of two other books I've been dealing with over the summer. If you have attended the Ganges gatherings you are aware that I have spoken about Karen Armstrong's latest work, *The Case for God*, and Barbara Bradley Hagerty's *Fingerprints of God*. They work well together and complement each other, Karen Armstrong's book dealing with the God question more academically covering the history of theology, while Barbara Hagerty records her own personal quest giving a review of the latest brain research into spiritual experience and abundant recording of the spiritual experiences of persons who have had mystical experiences or near-death experiences, persons, that is, whose lives have been touched by another dimension beyond our ordinary space-time world.

Hagerty's accounts confirm the major thesis of Karen Armstrong that God cannot be found at the end of a syllogism or complex rational deliberation but only in the practice of the presence of God, that is in the actual engagement in spiritual exercise, in community worship, in liturgy, ritual and sacrament, in personal devotion and meditation.

Karen Armstrong contends this was always understood until the modern period beginning in the 17th century with the rise of the natural sciences and the scientific method of empirical research. Previously, human reason had coexisted with mythical thinking – in Greek, *logos* and *mythos* – and together enabled humankind to negotiate the human journey. Both had their place; both had their function. She explains,

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." Myths...were really focused on the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of the human predicament that lay outside the remit of *logos*. (p. xi)

I review this because with Armstrong and Hagerty so much on my mind, the work of Hans Küng flashed in my mind for it is in his *Does God Exist?* that I was prepared to embrace and affirm the two recent works. As stated above, Armstrong points to the modern period as the time of putting the existence of God in question. Küng documents that claim opening with a section entitled "Reason or Faith" in which he weaves the development of modern atheism. A

section, “The New Understanding of God,” is followed by a section entitled “The Challenge of Atheism.” It is this section that came to mind in my musings. The subdivisions paint a clear path:

- I. God – a projection of man? Ludwig Feuerbach
- II. God – a consolation serving vested interests? Karl Marx
- III. God – an infantile illusion? Sigmund Freud

The next division is entitled “Nihilism – Consequence of Atheism.”

And there you have it! Küng's road map to Nihilism was burned into my brain and the structure of Küng's work jumped out at me. In discussing it with a colleague, the image of a capital V came into my mind. Beginning at the top of the left leg, I put Feuerbach because, while he did not initiate the modern discussion of God, he was a major contributor with his idea of God as a human projection – “Consciousness of God is self-consciousness; knowledge of God is self-knowledge.” (L. Feuerbach, *Wesen des Christentums*, p. 51, English translation, p. 12). There exists no objective counterpart to our thoughts of God; theology has become anthropology.

That fundamental move was assumed to be true by those who followed him – Marx and Freud – and the end of that left leg of the V, ending at the vortex is Nietzsche and Nihilism.

Nihilism, the term comes from the Latin *nihil*, nothing. Without dealing with this at any depth, I only point to the general idea associated with nihilism, namely, that life is without objective meaning, purpose or intrinsic value. Nihilism takes various forms – moral nihilism – morality does not exist as something inherent to objective reality; existential nihilism – life has no intrinsic meaning or value, is without purpose or significance. No more need be said as already it is obvious that such pessimism, affirming only emptiness, meaninglessness, and nothingness is the conclusion of the movement of modern atheism.

Nietzsche was a towering figure – brilliant and sensitive. He was not pleased where the project of atheism took him. His famous cry, “God is dead” and “we killed him” was not a triumphant acclamation but a despairing realization that now “everything is permissible” because the whole foundation of Western culture had been undermined.

Having reached the bottom of the downward movement of modern atheism in Nietzsche's nihilism, Hans Küng seeks for a way to move up the right leg of the V. How can one move beyond the abyss of atheism's end in nihilism toward purpose, meaning, value grounded in reality? Küng begins building in a major division, “Yes to Reality – Alternative to Nihilism.” He contends there are fundamental alternatives:

We can say yes or no to uncertain reality. Such a fundamental decision and fundamental approach always involves a risk...Reality itself does not extort a Yes or No, a positive or a negative fundamental attitude...should I, then, surrender myself to what is not obvious, demonstrable, calculable?

This is really a matter of trust or mistrust, in which I stake myself without security or guarantee. We may paraphrase the verb “to trust” in a variety of ways: either I believe reality sustains me and I trust it – or not; either I commit myself in principle to reality and rely on it – or not; either I regard reality therefore as trustworthy and reliable – or not; either I express my trust in reality – or not.

Whatever way this fundamental decision goes, whatever kind of fundamental attitude is adopted, it is inescapable. Man is free. But he is not free to be free: “You must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed,” said Pascal. Jean Paul Sartre says that man is “condemned” to freedom, while others say that he is “called” to freedom.... in the long run it is impossible to remain undecided in regard to reality.... And not to choose is itself a choice.... In this vote of confidence, abstention means refusal of trust, a vote for mistrust. (p. 438f)

It is beyond the purpose of this meditation to develop Küng’s presentation of fundamental trust which he affirms “means that a person, in principle, says Yes to the uncertain reality of himself and the world, making himself open to reality and able to maintain this attitude consistently in practice.” (p. 445) But I set it forth to point out that for Küng this is the pivot point from which he will build the whole structure of trust in Reality, in God, and in his case, the Christian God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Why do I stress this starting point for the building of a structure of trust in God? Precisely because this is the only option for us human beings whose whole existence has come under the scope of critical rationality that seeks empirical verification, scientific proof for all claims regarding reality. It is beyond my purpose to show, as does Küng, that there is a “faith dimension,” an “intuitive hunch” and model building even for those engaged in the respective scientific areas of research. It is enough for me to make the point as strongly as I can that Küng’s alternatives point to our human situation: either I express my trust in reality – or not.

For me, the critical factor here is Küng’s extensive, intensive examination of “the God Question” which has emerged in the modern period as Karen Armstrong points out in *The Case for God*. She declares it; Küng documents it. She contends it is only in the practice of the presence of God – in meditation, liturgy, ritual, prayer – that God is revealed to us. And such practice emanates from a fundamental trust, not from a reasoned proof for the existence of God, let alone a God to be trusted, worshiped, and loved.

As I reflect back on my own journey, which was lived out very publicly in your presence, I realize how intensely I struggled to reason as far as reason would take me – no doubt, often to your despair. I remember well the comment someone made not so many years ago – “Why all his questions? At his age shouldn’t he have answers rather than questions?” I was never content to rest on “the tradition teaches,” or “the church teaches,” or, “the Bible says.” And because we never took the faith structure on authority but probed as honestly and diligently as humanly possible, I am ready to own that my whole life project is founded on a wager that carries risk: a fundamental trust in Reality, in God, the God I see revealed in the face of Jesus Christ – not the only revelation of God but my window to the Sacred, the Holy, the Mystery that is God.

I know you do not demand such strenuous effort on my part; it is an inner demand to which I respond. But I know I could as well simply declare the biblical word which is our storybook. So often I turn to the poet who penned Ecclesiastes, one of the wisdom writings of the Hebrew Scriptures. The writer is so human in his wonderings, in his questions. For everything there is a season – a time we are born and a time we die, but he wonders – is that all there is?

St Paul was sure there was more – for, in dealing with a practical issue regarding differing views of religious practice in the 14th chapter of Romans, he declares what for him was the ultimate truth, the last word as it were –

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

(Romans 14: 7-9)

And then again from the Gospel of John, words purportedly from Jesus himself though I doubt that – it matters not. The fact is they found expression because of the impact of Jesus in life and death and presence beyond death made on the early Christian community –

...I go to prepare a place for you...and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

(John 14:3)

That is the biblical message – the wondering of the Hebrew poet, the assured declaration of the convert to Jesus Christ, St. Paul, the comforting assurance of the Gospel. It is in our being shaped by such scriptural affirmations that confidence is built and spiritual formation results in confident living and dying, living and dying marked by fundamental trust.

A recent book to which I have referred of late that has impressed me deeply is entitled *Fingerprints of God* by Barbara Bradley Hagerty. I am impressed with her work because she does intensive research and asks all the tough questions that a sceptic might raise. Her own witness as to what put her on the trail of research into the God question is,

...I could not keep the questions at bay. Is there another reality that occasionally breaks into our world and bends the laws of nature? Is there a being or intelligence who weaves together the living universe...? In the end, my questions boiled down to five words: Is there more than this? (p. 6)

And after her long trail of exposure to all kinds of human experience that claimed some brush with the beyond in our midst, Hagerty concludes,

I end with the question that launched my journey: Is there more than this? 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. The language of our genes, the chemistry of our bodies, and the wiring of our brain – these are the handiwork of One who longs to be known. And rather than dispel the spiritual, science is cracking it open for all to see. (p. 284)

Her final sentence:

We have all about us the fingerprints of God. (p. 285)

A different kind of investigation than the rigorous philosophical theological overview of Hans Küng, but very significant as a contemporary witness to the fact that the God Question does not die away and even the latest science and technology is called in service of the quest.

The December 31, 1999, issue of *The Economist* magazine ended as did every issue with a page marked “Obituary” – each issue taking note of the death of some prominent figure. This particular issue, called “millennium Issue” had as its subject God. A painting on the page, an artist’s rendering of God, had written beneath it in bold letters, “After a lengthy career, the Almighty recently passed into history. Or did he?”

A decade later, Barbara Hagerty finds the fingerprints of God everywhere, not only in human experience but even in scientific research. The stories she tells of those who witness to an encounter with another dimension are not insignificant. As I was deciding on my meditation for this All Saints observance, I became aware of a Clint Eastwood movie just released entitled *Hereafter*. A review in the

October 18, 2010, *Newsweek* by David Ansen speaks of Eastwood's "squinting" at the afterlife (p. 50). He writes,

Clint Eastwood flirted with the supernatural in his allegorical Western *Pale Rider*, but nothing in his career prepares us for his haunting and haunted *Hereafter*, a bold, strange, problematic investigation into the nature of the afterlife. At 80, he continues to throw us curves, abandoning the safety of genre for an unconventionally structured story about mortality, loneliness, and the relationship between the living and the dead.

The movie has a triple thread – three personal stories are woven together finally in a very moving affirmation of Hagerty's conclusion that there is something more. In a portrayal that could well have been one of Hagerty's stories, in the reviewer's words:

Caught in the tsunami is the first of the three characters whose fates *Hereafter* follows, a French television host (Cecile De France) who dies in the storm and then miraculously comes back to life. But her glimpse of the beyond makes it impossible for her to reenter her old life as a Parisian celebrity; instead, she becomes obsessed with writing a book about the eerily similar after-death experiences others have endured, a pursuit that costs her credibility in the eyes of her sophisticated friends. As her unhappy publisher notes, it's a topic more suited to the American market.

The second strand is played by Matt Damon who has the gift (he calls it a curse) to communicate with the dead, a gift/curse from which he tries to escape. The third story tells of a young boy whose twin brother is killed in an accident – a loss from which he cannot recover until the medium puts him in touch with his brother who counsels him to move on with his life. This happens in London where the child recognizes him and "knows" too that the medium who purchases the book of the journalist has made a "connection" with her. It is all very quiet, sober and reverent. The reviewer comments, "What keeps us rapt are the mysterious and provocative questions *Hereafter* raises, questions that Eastwood and Morgan (screenplay author) know can't be definitively answered.

Clearly, at this point in his life, questions of mortality aren't far from Eastwood's mind, and you can feel his identification with these characters, whose encounters with death both separate them from the rest of the living and give them a sense of urgent purpose. Damon, with his understated but deeply felt performance, and the wonderfully versatile De France supply the movie's aching soul. And Eastwood keeps it honest. *Hereafter* confronts a topic that could have descended into mawkish, mystical hokum, but not in Eastwood's no-nonsense, uncynical hands. He looks at death, and beyond, with clear, open, inquisitive eyes.

Last evening Nancy and I viewed the film. I realize I take in something like that perhaps differently than most people. I've immersed myself in the God Question and "Is this all there is?" "Is there something more?" I think about little else. But I must say I was deeply moved by the movie. Barbara Hagerty's closing sentence would be a fitting summary of the film as well: "We have all about us the fingerprints of God."

We have become aware recently of the tragedy of the suicide of young persons bullied because of their sexual orientation. In response to such tragedy there has been launched on the Internet a project that addresses the issue and tries to give hope and confidence to young people caught in the despair of alienation and suffering. It is called the "It Gets Better" project.

Here we are again, another All Saints Day celebration. We celebrate life and death in community – the hymn "Borning Cry" was deliberately chosen you understand – The Good and Gracious God – there at our borning cry, there the day we were baptized watching our life unfold – childhood, adolescence, intimate relationship, middle age, and when evening gently closes in and we shut our weary eyes, I'll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise.

Not simply because the church teaches or the Bible says, not with arrogant dogmatism that masks insecurity, but with deep fundamental trust, I do believe this is not all there is. There is more to come. In no way do I imply thereby that life here and now is not good, a gift, a grace to be valued and savored. As a community we have come to love and live by Julian of Norwich's affirmation:

"All will be well, all will be well; all manner of things will be well."

The toast I learned from Duncan Littlefair – *To the wonder, miracle, glory and joy of life!* – is the way I've come to live my life. It is very good and, on this All Saints Eve, I suggest - it will get better!

References:

Karen Armstrong. *The Case for God*. Thorndike Press, 2009.

Barbara Bradley Haggerty. *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality*. Riverhead, 2009.

Hereafter. Director, Clint Eastwood; Producer, Steven Spielberg, 2010.

Hans Küng. *On Being a Christian*, 1976; *Does God Exist?*, 1978.