

What Good Is God?

May 17, 2020

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I sat down yesterday morning to write this sermon, which I'd at least been trying to think and pray and wonder myself toward between the emails and Zoom meetings that fill up our days and seem to spill over into always right now. And I realized the Biblical commentaries were going to be no help at all this week. Which probably means I'm all wrong. But you've heard enough sermons to know the probability of this is depressingly high already. So what have we got to lose? Shall we step off the trail and into the forest on this one?

I mean, I'm interested in the Areopagus and in Paul's clever imitation of Socrates in his argument. I like that he approached the Athenians rhetorically through an alley door they'd left ajar in their religious system, using their altar to an unknown god to lure them into the big T Truth. But honestly, right about now, I have a lot less need for what's clever in my life than I do for what is real. And I think this story is about returning us and returning our religion to what is real. We have a way of wandering away from the real, both as a species and as individuals.

As I made my way to the table in our backyard with my books and laptop yesterday morning, I walked across one of our 2020 coronavirus home improvement projects. Do you have any of these? We'd landscaped the back yard last fall, and, at the brilliant Brett Norman's suggestion (who paid me nothing, by the way, for this valuable brand placement spot in this sermon), at Brett's suggestion, I had pulled up the old sidewalk that had been poured as a series of alternating trapezoids, for you geometry buffs. It was a bunch of triangles with one point clipped off, for the rest of us. I pulled each up section and spread them apart, leaving about six inches of ground between them. And last Saturday we finally got around to filling those spaces with little tufts of dwarf mondo grass.

Got the picture? It's very important to understanding Acts chapter 17.

Anyway, as I walked out back, I did what any sane person does from the time he or she is about five and hears that if you step on a crack it will break your mother's back. I, at the age of 53, and even as one whose lovely mother has been gone from us eight years now, stepped awkwardly but carefully onto the concrete and not once on the spaces in between.

The commentaries were no help, but I did research the etymology of "superstition." Its Latin roots are *super*, which means *above*, and *stare*, which means *to stand*. The experts don't really know how "to stand above" came to mean "an irrational faith in supernatural powers." But I do. Clearly someone was standing above a sidewalk and realized with great dread that his left foot was bisecting a crack.

It's not hard to reconstruct a plausible explanation for how superstitions arose in human beings over time. Something bad happens and we want to know why it did, to prevent it from happening again. That's self-preservation in its most basic form. Or we wonder if what seemed like a stroke of good luck might actually be repeatable. And talismans and scapegoats and gods to this and gods to that come to be.

But we rational, modern people recognize these feelings too, don't we? The drought drags on and a farmer who knows better remembers hitching his tractor to the soybean drill one Sunday when he

should have been in church. A batter taps the plate exactly three times and tugs on the left shoulder of her jersey because she slapped a triple after doing so one time. I daresay there's bound to be a particle physicist out there who puts on her favorite sweater when she's writing the research proposal she thinks might change the way scientists see.

Superstitions are common, and mostly harmless. In fact, I'd argue that they are closely tied to a defining human intuition that the real reason or the fuller reason for the way things are is just beyond the rim of our present understanding. We are made to wonder about what we don't yet know. So, maybe the driving force behind the creation of religions and the advance of science are actually the closest of kins. Which also may explain some of the knock down drag out fights they've had. Nobody can get under your skin like your closest sibling, right?

We may seem to be a long way from the Areopagus and St. Paul's famous speech. But his story lives within this larger story of human beings trying to make sense of their world. And Athens was filled with the artifacts of one culture's best guesses. Critics of religion are absolutely right to say that we started inventing gods to explain things we didn't understand. And then we built altars or idols as means to please our imagined gods of fertility or fruitful harvests or softball games or whatever we were straining to control.

Which means that Paul's argument is not good news, or even news at all, if he's just upset that the Greeks worship too many gods or that they overlooked the one god that's real. If Paul was showing them how to appease the god of Israel by believing Jesus had been raised from the dead, well, that's the same old religion in sleek new packaging. It's still about how we get God or the gods to treat us well.

But that's not the only reason to search for God. And it never has been.

Paul actually told of a different kind of search and a different kind of God altogether. A God "who is not served by human hands, as though he needed anything." A God, not who demands, but a God whose nature is to give life and breath to the world. The One in whom we "live and move and have our being."

You see, humans haven't only reached out for God to explain why things happen, or to make them happen differently. From the beginning we have also had a sense that beneath or within or before all that is, there is not just emptiness or chaos. But something holy. Something sacred or true or beautiful or real or whatever ribbon of a word you want to tie onto this ancient hunch. Something that it seems more right to address as a someone. But someone that even a better pronoun barely grazes the cheek of.

Paul says to the Greeks that their own philosophers and poets had told them the very same thing. That all human beings, and that all of reality comes from a single source. And that whoever and wherever we are, this source is as near to us as our own breath, if we can just be still long enough to realize, or maybe quiet enough to hear, that it holds us.

In the center of ourselves we know we don't need a god who will give us what we ask for if we ask just right. We rarely know what we truly need. Maybe because what we do need first... what I need first is to turn an ear toward the background note that our lives usually hum along too noisily and too fast for us to hear. The One who is that note. Toward the One, in whom we live. The One in whom we move. The One in whom we have the miracle of our being at all.