

October 8, 1972
Jeremiah 10:10-16 (N.E.)
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THE BEYOND THAT IS BEYOND

I have a great sympathy for those people whose lives are confined to the large city and who seldom, if ever, leave that arena of bright lights and contaminated air. They are able to see the stars occasionally but they never see them in all their magnificent glory as they are to be seen in sparsely populated areas where there are few interfering distractions and the air is crisp and clear.

Nothing is more likely to cause most men to contemplate the infinity of the universe and the great mind which lies behind its order and beauty than the sight of thousands of stars on a clear, cold night. Perhaps it is a sign of old age and senility for a man to talk to himself, but on such glorious nights I have often found myself engaging in a private dialogue which goes something like this:

Question: What is out there beyond the farthest star?
Answer: God is there.
Question: How does all of this beauty and order come to be?
Answer: An omnipotent and omniscient Creator put it there.
Question: What is beyond the smallest object seen by the electron microscope?
Answer: God is there also.
Question: What do men say that God is?
Answer: He is, in the words of Pascal, a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Or as someone else put it, "He is so large the human mind cannot comprehend him, but so small he can dwell within the human heart."
Question: What do I say that God is?
Answer: He is the Beyond that is beyond, but He is also the Beyond that is within.

Certainly many of you have had similar conversations as you have confronted God in nature. Here is where thinking man always confronts God first--as Creator. Here is where the Hebrew people first confronted God.

Study carefully the early Biblical records concerning the theology of the Hebrews and you will discover that God was not the personal God of Jesus Christ, but a nature God, a God of force and power who revealed himself through the thunder and lightning, through great natural catastrophes, and who spoke to men from the tops of mountains and out of the wind and fire. This is the God of Jeremiah who wrote, "The earth quakes under his wrath, nations cannot endure his fury."

This may in a sense seem like a form of blasphemy to some, but I have always felt that the American Indians had a better concept of God than many of the early Hebrews. They referred to God as the "Great Spirit". That has always appealed to me as a very proper appellation for Him who created all that is, the God who is both beyond all that we can think or ask, and yet the God who is "closer to us than breathing and nearer than hands and feet".

II

Today we are attempting what is, in one sense, the impossible. We are trying to describe, define, delineate, the all-creative Spirit of the universe, knowing full well at the outset that it cannot be done.

A few years ago an English bishop by the name of Robinson wrote a controversial book in which he talked about this problem. He entitled his book, "Honest To God", and I must say there was much in that book that appealed to me.

Bishop Robinson objected to our out-dated custom inherited from pre-scientific times of referring to God or to heaven as being "up there". As soon as one says of God, "He is up there", or "out there someplace", or anything similar, he is saying less than the truth. God cannot be fixed in space or time. He is the essence of space and time. Wherever there is anything at all, there God is. He is the all-pervading spirit of the entire universe, and should it be discovered that we live not in a universe but in a multiverse, His spirit pervades that also.

Men today, in this regard, are little different than the Hebrews of 5,000 years ago. They attempt to conceive of God in terms of what their little minds can understand. Being limited, material creatures we like to conceive of God as a limited, physical being-- "the man upstairs", the "celestial Santa Claus", and all the other anthropomorphic creations of popular poetry and sentimental ballads. Such a God is no better than an idol carved out of a piece of wood. He is too small. He is not the God of Jesus Christ. Seeking to be on such familiar terms with God makes of God a contemptible, little idol rather than the exalted creator and ruler of all the universe.

III

Need I say to you that I know next to nothing about God? How can I? How can the greatest spiritual genius who ever lived know much about God? How can the finite comprehend the infinite? At the best we can only have small insights; tiny revelations and a miniscule understanding of Him who "put the stars in their places and named them one by one."

We know the universe is vast. We know that order pervades every known part of it. We know there is always cause and effect. But when we put together everything we know about God's creation and about God Himself, we are no better informed than was Sir Isaac Newton, perhaps the greatest scientific genius of history, who after a lifetime of research reported, "I feel like I have been a small boy playing on an infinite beach who has been able to examine but one grain of sand." Even our vocabulary is too small, too limited, to enable us adequately to talk about God.

This morning therefore we have been discussing the naturalistic approach to God. What can we deduce about God the Creator from the universe in which we live and which He has created?

Let us admit that by itself the naturalistic or intellectual approach to God is terribly inadequate as we have already suggested. But no approach to God is adequate which ignores the intellect and man's reason.

Looking at all the evidence man has so far accumulated, certainly we must reasonably conclude that God is a valid inference. But, of course, as Dean Inge suggested, "It is hard to love a valid inference." It is hard to have fellowship with a valid inference. A valid inference does not offer us the comfort and strength we need for our daily lives.

And so we must look beyond science, beyond the intellect, beyond reason. We must look not only at the "beyond that is beyond", but to the "beyond that is within", and that we shall be talking about next Sunday.

IV

But now let me ask you a question. Are you seeking that God we have so inadequately and haltingly been speaking of this morning? Are you really seeking Him?

I don't mean, "Would you like to know Him if it was convenient?" I don't mean, "Would you like to know that a supreme being exists?" I mean, "Would you really like to know Him and live every moment of your life in his presence?"

If your answer is "Yes", ask yourself another question. Why would you like to know God? Do you seek him for the purpose of finding greater power, greater strength, better health, more understanding? All these are unworthy motives. These should not be the reasons that cause us to seek God, but they are the consequences of finding God. We should, according to Jesus and every other spiritual master, seek God for Himself alone. That is the only pure motive and the only one that will be efficacious in helping us to find him. Search for Him because He is a part of yourself and you can never be a whole person until you find Him. Search for Him and find Him because that is His will for you.

Life is filled of absurdities. A few days ago I happened to watch the tail-end of a professional football game. It was a vicious, bone-jarring contest in which both teams were obviously hitting the opposition with every ounce of their strength and ability. They were no doubt following the late Vince Lombardi's advice to hate the opponent. Suddenly there was a time out--probably to remove an injured player. And what do you think the band immediately began to play--"What the World Needs Now Is Love, Sweet Love".

That, as I say, is an absurd incongruity. But far more absurd is the person who lives in this life as if he were in charge of his own destiny, as if he were in a world that was created merely for his amusement and delight.

We are here for a reason. We were created with a purpose. We were bought with a price. The only way to discover and to understand what that life is all about and how it should be lived so as to fulfill its divine destiny is to seek with all one's mind, heart, soul and strength the Beyond that is beyond, the God who is above all that we can think or ask.

The other day I received a letter from a young mother living in New England. She grew up in this church, is a very intelligent person and is diligently seeking a meaningful faith. She wrote to thank me for some material I had sent her and enclosed her favorite prayer, a portion of which I now share with you:

Dear Lord,

I do not pray to a vague oblong blur. Nor do I bring my prayers to a Grandfather-Santa-Claus type, who genially grants my momentary whim.

Lord, I pray to thee, creative Spirit who made this world, and who made every living cell within it. More, Lord, than this--for you have made all worlds that are, or ever will be. And if, in those other worlds there are also living cells, well, you made those, too.

Oh, the unmitigated gall of little me, that I should seek conversation with the God of interplanetary space!

But Lord, it is you who have made this conversation possible--and you who have made it necessary. You put within me a spark of divinity, a scrap of your own divine nature, that makes me feel restless and insecure--and lonesome--until I am with thee.

God of all worlds that are, what an incomprehensible wonder that you are even aware of me,

and that you know me and love me, Lord,
and that you seek me, even as I seek you.

That is a prayer to the Beyond that is beyond uttered by one who has discovered the Beyond that is within.

My friends, if you don't have that God in your life you have nothing. If you do have Him, you need nothing else.