

# Who Is God?

sermon digest

July 1, 2012

Psalm 139:1-18; Acts 17:22-29

carolyn dipboye

The title and the subject of our sermon this morning reminds me of a cartoon I once saw. You may have seen it, too. It pictures a couple of men passing by a church and on the sign outside the church, the title of Sunday's sermon: "Does God Exist?" In the caption underneath the cartoon, one of the men jabs the other and asks, "Wouldn't it be interesting if he said 'No'?"

Given where we are this morning and our purpose in being here, I strongly suspect you anticipate that I am not going to come down on the negative side of the question. You probably suspect that I am going to have a positive word about God and God's place in our lives. And you are right. It is important, however, that we take the questions about God that are rolling around in our culture seriously. More, it is important that we take our own questions seriously. If we are honest, and it's good to be honest in church, each one of us will probably have to acknowledge that we have notes of uncertainty rambling about in our heads and more, in our hearts, concerning just what we believe about God. If we are honest, we probably will also acknowledge that when we find ourselves in the midst of learned, cultured people who snort at the gullibility and even hypocrisy of religious people, we find ourselves frustrated at the way they stereotype and dismiss all religious people and particularly all Christians as being alike; but we are also somewhat embarrassed and uncertain about just how we can answer their charges. Perhaps to put ourselves and those around us at ease, we rush to join the critique of *those other* religious people, who are certainly unlike us; and we throw in a few barbs against *those other* religious people, just to make clear we are not one of them. And in the process, we feel ourselves a traitor. In part because we do know ourselves as people of faith, and in part because we know some of those "simple" people being so harshly judged to be good, decent people whom we love.

We know that people of faith and particularly Christians in our society are going to have a heavy price to pay for the heavy-handed politics of the religious right over these last several decades, and we feel a definite anger and discomfort with the power games that have been unleashed among us where our political leaders feel compelled to protect the sensitivities of the religious right and cater to their issues. We also feel a sense of anger in knowing ourselves to be dismissed as people of faith as if our faith and the concerns into which our faith propels us somehow do not count. We find ourselves heavily challenged both to speak with insight and clarity to the issues and to represent with honesty and integrity a more open and inclusive faith.

Although it has its own cultural, historical peculiarities in our time, the challenge is not new. Speaking and acting with integrity, wrestling openly and honestly with the questions of faith are themselves a part of the struggle of faith—the wrestling match, if you will, of Jacob and of Israel and of those in Christ's church even to this day. Writing from his jail cell in Tegel Prison in Berlin in April 1944, almost exactly a year before being hanged by Hitler's Nazi thugs, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer admitted to just such a struggle.

I often shrink with religious people from speaking of God by name—because that Name somehow seems to me here not to ring true, and I strike myself as rather dishonest. . . . Religious people speak of God when human perception is (often just from laziness) at an end, or human resources fail. [*Letters and Papers*, 165].

Criticizing the "God of the gaps" mentality that uses God to fill in the gaps of human understanding, Bonhoeffer went on to say it seemed to him that we are always seeking "to make room for God."

I should like to speak of God not on the borders of life but at its centre, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore in man's suffering and death but in his life and prosperity. . . . God is the 'beyond' in the midst of our life. The Church stands not where human powers give out, on the borders, but in the centre of the village."

For decades, polls of the American public have consistently indicated very strong majorities, on the order of more than 90 percent, that they believe in God. Yet, as Marcus Borg points out, the strength of that belief seems to be somewhat lacking. God is obviously not the central passion of 90 percent of our population. Saying you believe in God without being passionate about God, Borg observes, "may not mean much." Or as the esteemed Rabbi Abraham Heschel put it, "God is of no importance unless God is of supreme importance." The question of religion, he insisted is "what we do with the presence of God"—how we live our lives so that they are an answer to God's question. [*Abraham Heschel, I Asked for Wonder*, 1 and xii].

**God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being.** So, who is your God? Is God at the center of life or out on the edges of life as one to whom you appeal for intervention when things get really

bad, just in case prayer really does work? There is a close association between who we are and how we make our decisions and who we see God to be. The central questions of Christian ethics, Christian decision-making and prioritizing are just these: Who is my God? And what then am I to do?

Enter Paul. Well schooled and possessed of an apparently brilliant mind, he did not shy away from the cultured despisers of religion. As a matter of fact, he sought them out. Athens was several centuries past its prime by the time Paul came along; yet it was still a thriving cultural marketplace with an impressive array of art, poetry, drama, philosophy and religion. Paul had already been dismissed in his initial foray into Athen's public square. He had been branded a "babbling . . . a proclaimer of foreign divinities," the latter charge possibly signifying illegal activity and thus a risk to his life and freedom. Those gathered for his initial presentation "took him and brought him" (as a prisoner?) to the Areopagus, an open-air gathering point where public debates were heard and judged. The exchange there is honest and open, bordering on something of a dialogue between scholarly peers. Paul introduces "the God who made the world and everything in it." Utilizing the words of one of Athens' beloved philosopher-poets, he proclaims the God in whom "we live and move and have our being." The mysterious, all-encompassing presence that Paul celebrates is, however, nothing new to one instilled with the faith of his ancestors. It calls to mind Moses' encounter with the great "I AM," Elijah's disarming experience in his cave hide-a-way of the God of sheer silence, Isaiah's dumbstruck awe in the Temple, and the psalmist's struggle to grasp the pervasive presence of a God whose thoughts outnumber the grains of sand on the beach. Mystery, awe and wonder are recurrent themes in the biblical story and are reflected even today in the continuing reticence of many Jews even to speak God's name. Far from an occasion for presumption and pride, encountering the God of Israel's faith is a call to deep reflection and continued growth. If we are not open, if we are not constantly growing in our understanding, our God, in the familiar words of J.B. Phillips, "is too small."

**God calls us to profound relationship.** More than a tip of the hat just in case there's something to this god thing, the faith exemplified in the Bible is deeply aware of God. It reveals a profound desire to know God and an awareness that God seeks to know us. Psalm 139 addresses God directly. Second person pronouns occur ten times in the first six verses; and the psalmist makes reference to himself thirteen times. It is about profound, thoroughgoing, loving, covenant relationship. It is about You (God) and me, the individual:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. . . . Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

It is true: we live in a time of change. But in this and in the shaking of the foundations of any and every generation, we have choices in how we will respond. Rabbi Arthur Waskow suggests three responses we might muster:

- We can ignore and deny the earthquake in which case we risk getting repeatedly hit and even hurt or killed by the falling objects.
- We can freeze in place and grab hold of some object that we hope is immovable to steady ourselves. In a social earthquake, that may mean gripping a memory (often distorted) of a stable, frozen, "immovable," past. Insisting on trying to live that way and knowing that we can't do it alone, we can try to coerce others into doing the same.
- We can learn to dance in an earthquake. We can move with reality. Assessing our prior assumptions and behaviors, we can transform them to speak effectively to the new day. It's hard to do, since the "dance floor" itself is shaking; but it's the most life-giving response.

Too often in times of flux and change, we go for the second option. We try to freeze the God who made the world and everything in it according to the preconceptions we have held in the past. The God who made and sustains the world, the God who bids us to a future of openness and discovery, the God of sacred presence in whom we live and move and have our being is the God who is up to the challenge of a new day. We can grow and change and our understanding and experience of God can grow and change and we can greet the day with calm.

So, who is your God? The God who quakes in the shadows in fear or the God who strides into the new

day? And who then are you?

Locked away in prison, seeing the handwriting on the wall that spoke of his approaching end, Dietrich Bonhoeffer struggled with his identity in a poem. "Who am I?" he asked. "Am I the confident, trusting fellow other people see step forward from his cell, or am I what I know myself to be?"

"Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
Struggling for breath . . . yearning for colors . . . thirsting for words of kindness . . .  
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?"

"Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!" --[*Letters and Papers*, 221].

"How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!" the psalmist prays. "How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them--they are more than the sand; I come to the end--I am still with you."

I come to the end--I am still with you. Thanks be to God!