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What Do We Talk About When We Talk About God?

Preachers have quite the pick of headlines to choose from this week. We might use this Sunday as an opportunity to reflect upon ecological stewardship, and how the *pneuma* (a word meaning both spirit and breath in the New Testament) we all depend upon is being compromised. Or maybe this is a Sunday to speak about the goodness and necessity of the law, for while there are times that laws must be challenged, there are other times that laws protect against malfeasance and naked self interest. Preachers might do well to speak on any number of matters this morning, but the story that caught my eye was one about the decline of religious practice among people living in the United States, and the rise of the so called “nones,” those who ascribe to no religious belief system whatsoever.¹

Specifically, what lingered about that story was the mention of a former Lutheran pastor who, after some 30 years of ministry, retired and then quickly concluded that he didn’t believe in God anymore. The crux, for him, was an earlier moment in his life, when he, along with three other people close to him, were all struggling with cancer. He and one other survived. The other two did not. It didn’t make sense, he said, that God would allow two to live, and two to die. Retiring freed him to be more honest with himself about his beliefs, and so he walked away from faith, from church, and from God.

Now, I begrudge no one their doubts. I begrudge no one the freedom simply to say, “this isn’t making sense to me anymore.” And I begrudge no one the liberty to change their mind, and to move their lives in a new direction, one that may not involve faith, or God. Faith is an interpretation, a construal of the world. To have active minds, to put our interpretive faculties to work, will mean that many of us will come to different conclusions about the nature of reality. I submit that one of the gifts of being human, and of having active minds, is the possibility of changing those minds over time. That’s what it means to grow and to evolve through the years, which is what seemed to happen to and for that minister.

Still, I’ll confess that I was bothered by the story. I was bothered because his faith seemed to have been toppled by what struck me as a fairly simplistic understanding of God, one that theological writers over the past 200 years or so have worked very hard to overcome. It seemed like a house built upon sand, to quote a famous parable, one that could easily be swept away when the storm came - and indeed it was. But then it struck me that if there are clergy whose faith can be toppled so easily, then that must be even more true of everyone else - which is one of, though not the only reason, for the growth of the “nones” throughout the U.S. In a nutshell, the assumption seems to be that God is controlling both the large and small details of human existence, which would then mean that God is responsible for both the good and the ill that unfolds in the world - cancer and its remission, at least for a few, but then everything else as well - natural disasters, genocides, the holocaust, and so on. It’s not hard to understand why people might wish to walk away from such a God. If that was all that was available, I’d walk away too. Thankfully that’s not the only option available.

¹ Jessica Grose, “Why Do People Lose Their Religion?”, *The New York Times*, June 7, 2023, online edition.

And so what I'd like to do this morning is to sketch just a few possibilities that theologians have put forth over the years, possibilities that have helped a good many people, including me, put their faith back together again when their childhood caricatures of God prove to be inadequate. What I'm offering today won't be airtight arguments, and what I say isn't necessarily meant to persuade you that any of these possibilities are right. I simply wish to suggest that, should you be curious, or should a crisis of faith force it upon you, other ways of construing God and faith do exist, ways that are both biblical and theologically nuanced. And so consider my offering this morning to be a kind of whirlwind tour through a few of the most helpful theological possibilities available to us.

Let me also add a disclaimer. It may be that your own understanding of God is just fine, and you don't need a minister, or a collection of theologians, tampering with your faith. If you're in that category, I simply beg your pardon, and ask for your indulgence. The last thing I wish to do is to take away from, or to damage, something that may be precious to you. But I do wish to suggest the wide array of possibilities that are available for people of faith and conscience, even if those possibilities remain only that - remote possibilities. At the very least, it seems worthwhile to know such things exist.

To get a sense for what many theologians in the modern period have proposed, I'd like us to begin with the passage from Acts that we heard earlier, where the Apostle Paul preaches his sermon in Athens. He begins by suggesting the commonalities between Christian conceptions of God and some features of Greek religion, but then he includes a marvelous little phrase about God. God, Paul says, is the one in whom "we live and move and have our being." Note what that phrase does - it shifts the location of God away from the sky, away from on high, somewhere in the clouds, bringing God down to earth. But also note another implication of that phrase: somehow, humanity is conceived as existing within God, almost as though we're a part of God, and God is a part of us. That possibility has proven to be fertile ground for two species of theologians: those influenced by existentialist thought in the 20th century, and those interested in ecological theologies. I'll say a word about both.

The first is best exemplified by Paul Tillich, one of the theologians who has been most influential to me. Following the lead of that passage in the book of Acts, Tillich argued that, properly understood, God wasn't a being at all. To imagine God in such a way is to make of God a being among other beings. Even if we conceived of God as the biggest being, the Supreme Being, that simply makes God one more object in the world, which would be a kind of idolatry. Instead, Tillich argued, following the book of Acts, that God is the "ground of being." So what does that mean? Well, theologians have been laboring to explain what Tillich meant for more than half a century now, but in essence, I think it's like the joke that David Foster Wallace shared in his commencement address at Kenyon College back in 2005. The joke is this: Two fish were swimming in the ocean, when a third fish greeted them. "Morning boys," the third fish said. "How's the water?" The first two fish don't respond, and they swim on. Then, one of them turns to the other and says, "What the hell is water?" Well, water to the fish is what being is to us. It's our surround. It's not only having a body, or of having a world, but is the condition that allows those things to be in the first place. It's the structure, if you will, that allows a human life to emerge at all, and then to thrive, with all that that entails - atoms, molecules, DNA, blood vessels, brain neurons, all of it. But then it's everything else in the universe besides. God as the ground of being is that which provides the conditions for life to exist at all.

But for Tillich, God as the ground of being is also that which gives us the existential courage to keep going even amidst the pervasive threat of non-being, which is to say, the threat

of death. It is that unspoken something that generates creativity within us, and that wills us to push back against any thing or force or person that might diminish our being in the world. None of this is easy to capture in language, and so Tillich always resorted to the arts to explain himself, usually the visual arts. But it's music that comes to mind whenever I try to understand Tillich, especially the music of African Americans. Whether in blues or jazz, gospel or hip hop, so much of the music constituting the African American experience has to do with what it means to affirm one's existence amidst the backdrop of non-being. Next week, we'll be privileged to encounter an art form emerging from Cuba - the rumba - that does exactly the same thing - it provides resources to affirm one's existence within a horizon of non-existence. So, God as the ground of being would be that life force within us all that enables us to strive for dignity, for well-being, for respect, for autonomy, and for community. For Tillich, as for the Apostle Paul in Acts, God is that in whom we live and move and have our being. God is the reality in which we all swim, giving us not only the conditions, but the will and the resources to continue to exist, even when the forces of the world are stacked against us.

That's one possibility. Here's another. It's also born from the same fertile ground laid out by the Apostle Paul, and by Paul Tillich as well. This second possibility is best exemplified in the work of Sallie McFague, and her book *The Body of God*, one of the best accounts of God for an understanding of ecology and the environment. In it, she argues that God is basically coextensive with the world, which is to say that God is the sum of all the matter, of all the creatures, of you, of me, of everything. It's a position that theologians call panentheism, which basically means that the earth itself, together with everything in it, is the body of God. It's not that the trees, or the creatures, are themselves deities, but that the life force that moves through everything, connecting us all, is, in fact, God. It's a mystical understanding of the world and of God, but it's also consistent with a lot of the best science available to us, which describes an interdependent web of life in which all living things are joined together. God, on this understanding, would be the web itself, the connective threads binding it all together. If that sounds far off from the Christianity you've come to know, consider the words of Jesus to the Pharisees, after they tried to silence the shouts of hosanna from Jesus's followers. "I tell you," Jesus says, "if they are silent even the rocks and the trees will cry out." Usually, we hear that as a form of hyperbole, but I think we might also hear it as a recognition that all living things somehow speak, and testify to their presence within the life of God.

One of the best places to see this kind of theology at work is in a recent novel that garnered a lot of attention recently from Richard Powers, called *The Overstory*. It depicts trees as sentient beings, with whom humans are able to communicate. In one long episode within the novel, a young couple ascends to the top of a giant sequoia tree, camping on a platform built in the sequoia's branches, as a means of preventing that tree from being harvested for lumber. Those two young people come to sense the ways in which their very being is connected to the life of that tree. And through that, they come to sense their own intimate connections not only with the tree, but with every living thing, which entails changing their lives dramatically. That basic, but hard earned, intuition of the interdependence of being, of the web of existence, becomes a divine horizon. And it is that sense of transcendence that a theologian like Sallie McFague has come to call God. It is to allow for the possibility that perhaps the earth is something like the body of God, a body that speaks to us, that seeks our attention, and that loves us, even if we do not always love God very well in return.

The third possibility I'd like to suggest to you is a combination of several different sources. This one grows out of my own observations in New Orleans, Cuba, Haiti, and

Colombia. It's related to what we'll be experiencing in our service next week, when Román Díaz brings his rumba ensemble here. It's also related to what those who travel to Africa later this year will witness. We'll call it the ritual-performance understanding of God. In each of the locations I just named, you don't have to look far to discover traditional rituals and ceremonies in which God, and the gods, are summoned to life. In those ceremonies, the divine presence becomes manifest in the following way: first a community comes together, a collection of ritual celebrants. It then requires the addition of drums, singing, food, dress, and visual art, all thrown together. It must all be done in a precise way, which will eventually allow the god, or the spirit, to flash suddenly into existence. Usually that happens when, in a moment of ecstasy, a single individual takes on the attributes of a particular deity. Sometimes it's called possession, but in essence, it's simply an individual who is offering a highly charged performance of the spirit. That manifestation of the divine is made possible by the ritual labor of all the people gathered there, who through their active participation, summon the god into existence for a time. Every time I've seen it happen, I've been struck by the ways those ceremonies might be a clue into another way of imagining our own religious life, including the life of God.

Here, we can get a little help from another of the theologians who has offered some illuminating possibilities for people of faith. In his book *The Weakness of God*, John D. Caputo argues, not unlike Tillich, that we might understand God as a becoming, rather than a being. For Caputo, God is an event, a happening, something that occurs within and among people whenever grace is discovered, whenever mercy is extended, whenever justice is performed, whenever joy is found. Whether we name it as such or not, God flashes into existence in such moments. On this account, when we pray to God, we're praying for the coming of the event that stirs in the name of God - the event that is healing, the event that is mercy, the event that is forgiveness, and so forth. When such things take place for us, that's when we tend to say, "ah, God was present in that moment."

Now let's run the two streams together - ritual performance on one hand, and Caputo's theology of the event on the other. Just as in a ritual ceremony, Caputo suggests that if God is to exist in the world in a meaningful way, if God is to live, if God is to be incarnate, then it is you and I that are responsible to bring God to life. And we do. We do it in the ceremonies and the liturgies we perform. But more importantly, we do it in the works of justice we engage in, we do it in the acts of mercy we offer to others, and we do it in the ministries of healing that we ourselves participate in. Like the ritual ceremonies of Cuba or Haiti, on this understanding of God, God comes to be in the world, God becomes, when we ourselves become filled with the spirit, what we call the Holy Spirit, and allow it to propel us toward things like grace, mercy, and justice.

If Tillich is best understood through the lens of art, and McFague is best understood through a moment of communion with the natural world, I think this final ritual-ceremonial understanding of God can be glimpsed in the forms of ministry that we practice in this place. When we show up at the New London Soup Kitchen, or the Homeless Hospitality Center, or here at the Food Pantry, we incarnate God. We bring God into the world. When we show up in Palestine, or Haiti, or Africa in a quest for human rights and a deeper communion with all of humanity, God somehow becomes manifest. When we engage in Sanctuary work, offering protection to a vulnerable population threatened with deportation, we are, in a way, ritually and ceremonially bringing God to life in an event. In truth, we depend upon this ritual-ceremonial understanding of God all the time.

It's time to quit. I've done my best to describe three possible variants that may allow people of faith to sidestep some of the troubles that seem to befall those who are asked to think critically about their faith for the first time. I don't necessarily wish to persuade you that any of them are right - I only wish you to know of their existence, and to know that, even if they don't persuade you, there are those who have found them compelling. Some of you have already found your way toward such visions - and there are many others besides. But even if such visions of God sound crazy, or unlikely, to you right now, I merely wish to hint that, should it ever be necessary, or should you ever find yourself in the position of that former minister, it's possible, if you choose, to put the pieces of faith back together again in a different way, one that is still faithful, one that is still coherent, even if it feels a little strange at first. You could become a "none," and the world would go on turning. But there are other options available, which may just help to preserve your sense of God's presence in the world, and in your life.