

GOD IS NEAR, YET SO FAR

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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Where is God? Where do you picture God right now, God's location? Not, how do you picture God? That's another question. Nor, what is God doing? That's another question. This sermon is about God's location. It is not just an academic question. It is not just a question to engage the brain cells in an interesting activity. It is a crucial question for humankind. Job in his misery--in the midst of enduring the death of his family, the loss of his crops, the slaughter of his animals, and the boils on his skin--cried out, "O, that I knew where I might find God!" Where is God?

Yes, God is everywhere, but everywhere is quite nebulous. I can't quite picture "everywhere." God is spirit like the air, yes, but still we humans tend to focalize God, localize God, image God. For relationship purposes, it is difficult to relate to "everywhere." How do you have a relationship with "everywhere?" How do you have a relationship with "air?" And where you localize God has a critical bearing on how you relate to God, on how you look at yourself, and how you live your life. Let's first look at some historic answers.

First, God is transcendent, located outside of human experience, far greater than humans can understand. We see a development. In the primitive, early pages of Genesis, we see God talking with Adam and Eve, like a human. By the Middle Ages, God was seen as transcendent, omnipotent, disassociated from human sin, separate from evil humankind, and so far removed from humans that angels intercede, saints intercede on behalf of humans. (See note below.) The world view at this time was static with hierarchies. God was seen at the top, sinful humans at the bottom, with church, saints, priests, in between. The humans worked their way up. Martin Luther's discovery, which led to the Protestant Reformation, was that humans did not have to work their way up, or pay their way up, but that Christ was the only intermediary necessary. However, Luther's world-view was still static, with God transcendent.

The transcendent view of God provides the basis for worship. In fact, our sanctuary is designed with a transcendent God in mind. Our building points us upward, inspiring in us awe as we reach out to a God who is beyond our human existence.

The danger of locating God outside the human experience is to relegate God to heaven, separate, removed, distinct, uninvolved in what happens day by day. In his book, God, Man and Archie Bunker, Spencer Marsh writes,

It is Archie Bunker who claims to believe in God, and Mike who is the so-called atheist, but Mike has the warmth and sensitivity which really proves the existence of God in the human heart. Archie, the so-called believer in God, is violent, self-centered, bigoted, dishonest, dehumanizing. God can only exist "out there" for Archie. There is no room or place for God to exist in such a life.

Locating God outside, as transcendent, may result in a life lived without God, relating to a God removed from the struggles and ethical decisions we all face.

Note: At this point, there occurred a brilliant flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by a tremendous clap of thunder!

A second location for God is within--the immanent view of God. Using the verse, "The kingdom of God is within you," these believers find God within their hearts, within their experience, within an individual and not in any corporate sense. This location for God demands self-understanding. Getting to know yourself, answering the question, "Who am I?" is of paramount importance. Prayer in this approach is not the addressing of a transcendent God, but is meditation, getting in touch with one's resources and spiritual strength. Getting in touch with one's real self which is part of the universal spirit is the goal.

The danger of locating God within oneself is the temptation to self-centeredness, isolation, and withdrawal from life. A brochure from Harvard Divinity School quoted, "The longer I live, the more tired I get of myself and the more excited I get about God." A life of looking at one's navel or self-examination can get boring!

A third location for God is in other people. This is called Incarnation Theology. God is incarnate in people; that is, God chooses to reveal himself in and through other people. The supreme revelation was in Jesus Christ where God became incarnate in the human Jesus. It is believed, therefore, that God is known as people around us allow God to work in and through them. A little of God is seen in everyone we meet. You can receive knowledge of ultimate meaning from everyone you meet. Therefore, to find God is to be socially active, engaging in conversation, developing relationships with people, working on projects with people, taking seriously Jesus' model prayer, OUR Father, not MY Father.

As our rectangular sanctuary expresses the worship of a transcendent God, sanctuaries expressing the worship of an incarnate God are built in the round. Worshippers sit in a circle so they can see one another, relate to one another, with the altar in the center of the room, dramatizing that God is in their midst, the focal point of their worship and relational experience.

The danger of the incarnation approach is that you can easily get worn out trying to find God in everyone! There are times where solitude is quite appropriate. There are times in which it is necessary to go into the wilderness to commune with God. Even Jesus wearied of people and went off by himself to pray.

No doubt you realize my position by now: namely, all of the above are true. God is transcendent, beyond our human experience. God is immanent, within us. God is incarnate, revealed in the lives of other people. A relevant Christianity has held all of these locations in balance...to take any one to extreme is to tread into dangerous waters. My personal location for God takes all of these into consideration, but localizes God ahead of us.

A fourth location for God, then, is ahead. God is ahead of us, pulling us into the future, pulling us into new territory, new ground, pulling us into the kingdom of God, the New Age. Much of the time we resist, dig in our heels, protest, "I don't want to go!" but God persists. I remember scenes from the movie, The Gospel According to Matthew, in which Jesus is depicted as not sitting on a hillside teaching his disciples, but walking in front of them, several paces ahead, moving to the next village, the next healing, the next miracle, talking over his shoulder to the disciples who struggle valiantly trying to keep up and take it all in. I see Jesus ahead of us, over his shoulder saying, "Come on, guys, hurry up...We've got lots to do...Get outside yourself...Lose yourself in the cause. Get your life straightened out. Come on, First United Methodist Church, get off your 'duff!' Shake a leg! Come on, world, put away those nuclear toys and grow up!"

Perhaps the best solution for your problems, tensions, identity crises, lies in commitment to Christ, following Christ into new ground, getting involved with other people, getting outside yourself into relationships, getting outside yourself in causes for justice, feeding the hungry, working for world peace. There is a time for self-understanding, but there is also a time to act.

God is ahead of us, just beyond; near, yet so far. A. Gilmore in God is Beyond writes:

It is of the very nature of God to be beyond, always calling us forward. If God were not like that, sooner or later somebody would have God within one's grasp and one never can. This is the mistake of the person who takes the Bible and says, "If you have this straight, you have God;" or, of the person who says, "If you say your prayers properly, you will find God;" or, of the person who says, "If the Word is faithfully preached and the bread and wine properly consecrated, you have God"... But when you find a love that goes beyond anything you might expect or imagine, when you find a noble ideal that surprises you, where you have what the poet describes as immortal longings--the things you can't fathom, the problems that defy explanation, the person or the situation that defies analysis--that is the place to stand in awe and wonder.

God is ahead of us, beyond us in mystery, beyond understanding.

God is far, yet sometimes so near. God often breaks into our experience, comes crashing in, calling us forward, calling us to follow into the unknown. As developed in apocalyptic theology, like the bridegroom arriving unexpectedly, God breaks in. This makes life exciting. We live in anticipation. We live expectantly, waiting, welcoming the unexpected. Some do not relate to God in this manner and are uncomfortable. They want God always to be the same. They want their lives unchanged. They want every day the same. They don't like change. They don't like surprises. They want life dependable, and are very unsettled when life is not predictable and dependable. But, God breaks in. Look on change and surprises as opportunities to find God and to follow God. The universe is not static as in the the transcendent view; the universe is dynamic, moving, and God is there, leading, calling, pulling, urging.

Where is God? God is out there, beyond. God is in here, inside you and in other people. But, primarily, God is ahead, calling you forward into the Kingdom of God, the new life. Vaya con dios! Go with God!

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