

HOPE THAT GOD IS NEARBY

Isaiah 7:10-16

Dr. J. Howard Olds
December 23, 2007

I made a discovery some time ago on the word processor that I want to share with you. The difference between the phrase 'God is nowhere' and 'God is now here' is one tap on the space bar.

FOR SOME PEOPLE, GOD IS NOWHERE. HE IS NON-EXISTENT.

Atheist Richard Dawkins writes, "God is a delusion. I suspect there are a lot of people out there who have been brought up in religion, are unhappy in it, don't believe it, and wish they could leave it, but just don't know that leaving is an option. Being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about. On the contrary, it is something to be proud of. It nearly always indicates a healthy mind." It's a free world; people have the right to their own religion or their rejection of it all.

Ivan was not that kind of atheist. When I met him on the back seat of church one Sunday he said he came to church because he had nowhere else to go. His wife had filed for divorce. His teenage son was a drug addict. He hadn't been inside a church for 14 years because he no longer believed in God. But that day he came to church anyway. That day I was glad the church is still a rescue shop for sinners. We got him some treatment for his alcoholism, helped him learn to live without his wife, and talked endlessly about the God in whom he no longer believed. When my mother was dying, Ivan called to see if he could help in any way. I asked him to pray for me. After a long pause on the phone, he said he would. That day the God who was nowhere became the God who is now here.

GOD IS OUT OF REACH.

Deism is a philosophy which affirms that God exists, even created the universe, but is content to let it run on its own. God is wholly transcendent. He does not interfere with human life or the laws of nature. God does not reveal himself through inspired or revealed text, or supernatural means. God is unknowable and untouchable. God is like a clockmaker. He wound the whole thing up and is happy to let it run.

Deists believe, but they don't believe in a personal god. The world is full of deists. It may be the most popular unspoken belief in America.

Not everybody is happy with a distant God. The psalmists asked "*Why, O Lord, do you stand off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*" People in the valley ask questions like that.

Maybe the silence of God can be explained by the noisiness of the world. Silence is scary for most of us. Let a TV broadcast go silent for a few seconds and panic sets in from the station to the living room. A few months ago, I stopped in the middle of my sermon for one minute. What I thought would be calming proved to be alarming. E-mails came. "Don't ever do that again," pleaded one church member. "You nearly scared us to death."

If God is silent, maybe it's because we are too noisy. We value:
Information over reflection
Communication over contemplation

We are better talkers than we are listeners. In our babbling, God seems to be nowhere. Maybe if we stopped, He would be now here.

GOD IS LOST IN THE CLUTTER.

Did you hear about the man who found a shiny new dime on the sidewalk one day? He got so excited that he devoted the next 40 years looking for what others had lost. During that time he accumulated 11 pennies, a few more dimes and quarters, several thousand buttons, pins, screws, nails, and a permanently bent back and an ugly disposition. In the meantime, he lost sight of the sun, the moon, and the stars. He never noticed the beauty of flowers, smiles of children, songs of birds, or the flowering of trees. He was content to keep looking down.

If God moves from nowhere to now here, some of us will have to step off our race tracks and roller coasters long enough to see.

GOD IS NOW HERE.

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel. Immanuel—God is with us.

GOD IS BESIDE US.

If you are a person, you want to know and to be known. If you are a parent, nothing will keep you from your children. God is a person—He is with us to know and to be known. We are His children—He came to seek and save His own.

So, God is throwing testimonies at us like fireworks, each one exploding to say ‘God is, God is, God is now here.’

God is a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.
God is a carpenter, working in Nazareth, sharing common toil.
God is a healer, concerned with the sick.
God is a teacher, explaining the kingdom of heaven.
God is a savior, giving his life for his own.

When Jesus was going away, he said to his disciples, *Let not your heart be troubled, neither let them be afraid. I go to prepare a place for you. And I will ask the Father and He will send you another Counselor to be with you forever.* That Counselor is the Paraclete, the one called alongside another to fortify us in the battles of life.

GOD IS INSIDE US.

Paul said, *“Christ in you is your hope of glory.”* God is big enough to rule this mighty universe, but small enough to live within your heart. What is your hope for glory? A hit song? To win the lottery? Success in business? A retirement home in Florida?

What if it were to know Christ, and radiate his holy presence? What if it were all of Him in all of me?

Meister Eckhart said, “If the birth of Christ fails to take place in me, what avails it? Everything lies in this, that it should take place in me.”

Thomas Merton said, “The fact is that if you descend into the depths of your own spirit and arrive somewhere near the center of what you are, you are confronted with the inescapable truth that at the very root of your existence, you are in constant, immediate, inescapable contact with the infinite power of God.”

Wouldn't you like to break down the eternal distance and establish an internal friendship with the Divine?

GOD IS BEFORE US.

A cartoon depicts the board of a certain company taking a critical vote in the board room. After the vote, the chairman announces, “It's unanimous—we don't know what to do.”

I introduce you to my friend, the sparrow [a child's stuffed toy bird that chirps]. A friend sent him to me after I told the story about sparrows trying to break into my room at Vanderbilt Hospital when I was isolated with a stem cell transplant. I let my grandchildren play with him but they are under strict orders to protect him always. This little bird is a constant reminder that “If God's eye is on the sparrow, I know he watches over me.” Of that I am certain. On that promise, I stake my life.

Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that God is with us regardless of how it turns out.

St. Patrick's Prayer

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
I bind unto myself the name,
The strong name of the Trinity.

Amen.

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