

Proper 19 C, 16 Pentecost, 12 Sept. 2010 Bob Partlow

In her sermon last week Ruth explained her sermon preparation process and how she starts by trying to make a connection among all four assigned lessons. It should not surprise you that she has a minor addiction to crossword puzzles! I am different. I like to read the Propers a week in advance and let them “cook” and “simmer” while I cogitate. Eventually something in my life or in the events of the world strikes a chord and I start to write. This week was different. On Monday I read the appointed Psalm 14, where first verse states “*The fool has said in his heart there is no God*”. My reaction was “fasten your seat belts folks; this is where we are going! And then on Tuesday the pre-publication publicity for Stephen Hawking’s new book, co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow starts to appear. The publicity claims that Hawking’s book, *The Grand Design* answers the question “Why is there something instead of nothing” without invoking the necessity of the existence of God. Hawkins says he can explain why there is something instead of nothing without postulating the reality of a creator God! Two challenges to the existence of God...this is definitely where we are going, make sure your belts are tightened!

Well believe me, Stephen Hawking is no fool. But, I have a problem; one of my favorite challenges to people who doubt the existence of God has always been to ask then “Why is there something instead of nothing”. It is just as logical to me that there be nothing as that there be the creation in which we exist. I have not finished the book, but if Hawkins is right, that one need not invoke the existence of God to understand the reality of creation, then I have to adjust my thinking; my theology. But not abandon it....I constantly adjust my theology but I never abandon my faith. This is the journey of my life....we will discuss life as journey in today’s “*Living the Question*” class. When I have fully digested the book I still expect to be able to stand at the end of the sermon and affirm the Nicene Creed... “*I believe*

in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth". But I may understand that in a new and deeper way.... I expect that my faith will be strengthened and deepened not weakened by wrestling with a possible new understanding of the physical world. Is that not what struggle does to us? Is that not the reason we go to the gym?

I would return briefly to Psalm 14. The two reasons postulated for questioning the reality of God are not the same. The one the Psalmist calls a "fool" for saying there is no God, does not deny the reality of God because of science or reason but because of the world he experiences. If I were a Jew who stood and watched loved ones led into gas chambers and crematoriums during WWII or a Muslim who experienced the senseless slaughter in the Balkan conflicts, or a Tutsi or Hutu exposed to the genocide of Uganda...or if I had a loved one in the World Trade Centers on 9-11....I might say in my heart there is no God. This is all our failure not God's. We have a sacred responsibility as a community of faith to make St. Matthew's a place where all people can encounter and be encountered by God. But we also have a responsibility to stand against war, injustice and suffering. This is our proper response to 9-11. I encourage your serious consideration of the Episcopal Public Policy Network invitation that is in your bulletin. The fool is the one who does not respond to human suffering and instead blames God..

Hawking's book really just continues the age old religion vs. science conversation. It is a necessary conversation that I do not expect to end soon. Starting in Modernity the conversation was cheapened by the unique Western Civilization belief that for something to be true it had to be historical.....this is fundamentalism. Thanks be to God, that narrow concept of truth is ending with the emergence of the post modern world. But, the discussion between religion and science must continue because both theology and science continue to change. Ptolemy articulated an understanding of the universe that held that the

earth was at the center and motionless...it was consistent with the Bible. Later, Copernicus and Galileo got into trouble with the church with their new model that had a motionless Sun at the center of the universe with the planets in rotation around it..That model did not agree with the theology of the time.....now with the observation of astronomer Hubbel and the Big Bang theory we believe (at least for now) that the whole thing is expanding and thus everything is moving. Today, I don't think much serious theology or science holds with either a flat earth or a three tiered universe either. Yet, in a few minutes we all will be invited to stand and affirm the Nicene Creed in which we express a belief that Jesus came down from heaven and ascended back into heaven. Are we schizophrenic? No, these are just different realms. So science and theology continue to change and so the conversation between the two must continue. Join the conversation, don't fight it!

I think the more important conversation is really between faith or belief and reason, not between science and theology. We live in the tension between faith and reason..for most of us it is a continual tension. It is illustrated by the wonderful passage in Mark 9 when the father of a sick child cries out to Jesus "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief". Do you ever harbor both belief and doubt at the same time? You are not alone. Could it be that faith and doubt emanate from different places within us? Head and heart?

Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1100's wrestled with this dilemma and came to the realization that belief comes before understanding. He famously said "I do not understand so that I might believe, but it is in believing that I come to understand". This is sometimes paraphrased as "faith seeking understanding". Think of it as head, the seat of reason and heart the seat of faith. I cannot fully understand the things of God until I come to faith. I come to faith and then spend the rest of my life trying to understand that faith. Faith comes first. If we try to come to faith through our understanding, we

will never get there. The spiritual life journey is one of faith seeking understanding. Blasé Paschal the 15th century French mathematician and scientist put it another way: *“The heart has reasons that reason can never understand”*. At face value faith is often not reasonable. In the Gospel lesson today Jesus tells the story of the one lost sheep and asks the question, what shepherd would not leave the 49 and go seek out the dumb one that was lost? The reasonable answer is that no one in their right mind would put the 49 at risk just to search for the one! No, we cannot reason our way to faith. In reality, God’s love for us all is unreasonable.

So how does one find faith or belief? I don’t think I have a final answer to that. I think it is a little like the story about the Yankee who went to Charleston SC on business. He stopped at a diner for breakfast and sat at the counter. The waitress said “Darlin’ what can I get you?”. He ordered coffee, OJ, two eggs over, bacon and dry toast. She brought him his coffee and juice and in a minute or two more brought the eggs, bacon, toast and an order of Grits. The Yankee said, excuse me mam, but I didn’t order grits. The waitress just smiled and said “Honey, grits is like grace, it just comes”.

By the grace of God, faith just seems to just come, like grits. God finds us, we don’t find God. I would never dare to limit the ways that God can find people. God found me through Jesus Christ...but God can find others however he (or if you prefer she) decides. I can tell of you of two ways that I have encountered God. One is by being in the company of others who are seeking and being sought by God. Hearing of others experiences, struggles, and joys strengthens me. I have been visiting a man from Johns Memorial in Farmville who is in the Johns Cancer center at Johnson-Willis with advanced lung cancer. The man exudes faith, grace, hope and courage. You can not be an unbeliever in his presence. The main purpose of any church is to be such a place where people can safely take the risk to find and be found by God.

The second recommendation I have is to look for the God within through intentional meditation, contemplation and quiet centering prayer. If God is anywhere, God is right within you. Many parishes have regular guided meditation groups. Perhaps someone would like to learn how to lead one here? Martin Laird, the author of this book *Into The Silent Land* which I have mentioned before is going to be at St. Stephens in Richmond on October 16 ..there is no better guide to learning to look within for God.

Personally, I give God abundant thanks for my doubts and ability to think critically, for this leads me deeper into the reality of God my creator and sustainer..