

RESERVES OF REVERENCE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, March 23, 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“The Lord Hath yet More Truth and Light to Break Forth from His Holy Word”

My sermon this morning is a bit radical; it’s also a bit complex. I’m trying to straighten it out, but Sunday keeps rolling around before I’m done. I’d like to start, if you would turn toward the beginning of the hymnal, on a two-page spread about 18 pages in. This spread describes in brief an important story that is part of the beginning of Congregationalism, of which this church is a part.

The left-hand page shows the ship Mayflower at the top. Below it is a marvelous quote from Edward Winslow: “When the ship was ready to carry us away, they that stayed at Leyden feasted us that were to goe.” So the Puritans, some leaving and some staying, were fed up with the way religion was done in England. According to Winslow, relating in 1620 just a tiny portion of that event when they were getting ready to leave, “We refreshed ourselves after our teares, with singing of Psalmes, making joyful melody in our hearts, as well as with the voice, there being many of the Congregation very expert in Musick; and indeed it was the sweetest melody that ever mine eares heard.”

On the right-hand side of the spread, under the title *Hymns of Truth and Light*, is a famous quote from John Robinson, who was the Pilgrim’s pastor at the church, where I think about two-thirds of the members had decided to leave for the New World. Robinson was not well so he was not one of the ones to go. As a matter of fact, he didn’t live much longer; he died of pneumonia in 1621 or thereabout. But in his sermon as the Pilgrims departed, he uttered this famous line: “The Lord hath yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy word.”

That’s what this sermon is about. – hope. I’d like to ask you to compare that 1620 quote from Robinson with the following one from Jeff Schweitzer. Here’s where the complexity comes in because this is a quote within a quote. Schweitzer is a science blogger. He’s got a bit of an attitude, and I find him a little difficult to put up with. But then I go to my therapy session and feel better afterward. He’s a White House senior policy advisor on science, and he had been writing about the awe and wonders of nature. He’s also one of those types who pretty much wish that religion would go away. He doesn’t give religion the time of day, really.

Religion Hangs on as a Transitional State

So I'm quoting Schweitzer and then he quotes Carl Sagan. The former gives you a feeling for his attitude in the following quote: "Becoming comfortable with the unknown is a process, and we're not done. Religion hangs on as a transitional state between a primitive mind seeking to explain the mysterious and a more enlightened insight that nature's grandeur is even more awesome in the absence of any guiding hand." Now he views religion as primitive. We're not quite done with it because science hasn't replaced it yet!

Then Schweitzer quotes Sagan from 1994: "A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge." I found that view from Sagan to be arresting!

To repeat, "A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge." Well, I think that is starting to happen right now. These things take hundreds of years. They don't suddenly appear overnight. They don't occur in the course of a generation. But it happens.

Five Fallacies About God

Last week I attended one of the classes this church holds for members and friends. A teaching presented in the class was a list of Five Fallacies About God that people generally believe, or at least they have believed such fallacies and are starting to harbor doubts about them. Thinking of the Five Fallacies About God, it resonated with me because I certainly believed in them for a long time in my younger days.

Here they are:

1. Somehow or other God wants and needs certain things. For example, God wants us to worship in a particular way. God wants us, or maybe even needs us, to obey. To be good children of God, they must obey; to be good servants, they must also obey. Paul used that language over and over again. The Lord knows that I am a faithful servant, or even a slave. So number one is that God wants or needs something.
2. Number two follows immediately. God can fail to get it. Why? Because the servant, the disobedient children, screw up a lot. So if the Lord needs something, the Lord can fail to get it.
3. Because of that, God has separated humanity from God's self, creating a theological gulf. We have a holy and righteous God, but we have sinful humanity, and the scriptures describing this gulf are legion. This separation is bridged by Christ, but it exists nevertheless. However, the desire of the Supreme

Being for certain things, wanting certain things, needing certain things, and to be served, obeyed, worshipped – that desire has never gone away.

4. God still requires devotion to his/her needs and requires that of us, even from our separated positions.
5. It's not good if we don't adhere to the Almighty's needs, resulting in punishment, banishment. A dissolution of our reality or health. Everybody has a different view on what the punishment is, but it's bad if we don't follow through.

Stupid Cretans Transition to Living in God

I was raised in the way of the Five Fallacies. That was the religion I was born into, and it's all across our globe in one form or another. Not at all exclusive to Christianity, but it's out there. That God has these desires means we don't do a good job of meeting them. As a result, there's a separation from our Creator. We still have this responsibility, even if we don't meet it, and the consequences are dire if we don't.

Compare that for a moment with Acts 17: 28 in the text I just used for the Scripture reading. It seems to me it's one of the most ignored texts in the entire New Testament: "For in God we live and move and have our being." There's a reason I put it in the Bulletin every Sunday, and that is because it implies there is no separation, that we live our lives in God.

One of the funny little vignettes about this epigram is that it was originally written by a Third Century BC philosopher by the name of Epiclitus in a message to the Cretans. He was hitting them pretty hard because they were so foolish as not to believe in Zeus. How idiotic can you be, you stupid Cretans, for not believing in Zeus? (That's where the origin of the putdown "You stupid Cretan" comes from.)

"Heather, for Heaven's Sake, in Zeus You Live and Move and Have Your Being"

Because they were still waiting on it, Epiclitus writes, "Heather, for heaven's sake, in Zeus you live and move and have your being." It's plain as day. Then Paul quotes this exactly, except for changing the name from Zeus to God, and then Luke quotes Paul in the book of Acts. It's an old thought, not new at all, that we have our entire being within divinity. No separation. No bridge that needs to be crossed.

But then, as if that weren't enough, Paul follows up once more, and this is even more powerful. He follows that ignored verse Acts 17: 28 immediately afterward by saying, "For you [we] are indeed his offspring. You are children of God." For most of its time, Christianity has settled on the notion that Jesus is the son of God, but somehow that's different.

I plead with you: Can somebody tell me the difference between Jesus being the son of God and you and I being sons and daughters of God, indeed his offspring? As the text says, this isn't new; it has been extant for quite some time. Suddenly I am left with the notion of spending the rest of my days trying to figure out what that means because I haven't believed it for a long time.

The image of a tree came to mind recently. Everybody loves trees, but if you think of the trunk of a tree, then you've got the big branches, medium branches, little branches, twigs, and leaves. The trunk of a tree is, for me, this thought, that I am a child of God. Then the big branches all the way to the leaves are the magnificent consequences of that one poor thought.

Repent, You Lousy Sinners

Because I have been a believer most of my life, maybe in theory I'm a child of God, but not really. I'm a separated sinner. Am I really a child of God or not? Do I really live and move and have my being 100 percent within divinity, twenty-four seven or not? For me that is the trunk of my tree, and I'll be trying to deal with all the consequences of that for the rest of my life.

A bit further down in the passage from Acts 17: 28 is one of those things that ticks me off as a preacher. (I would use stronger language in a different setting.) It really makes me angry toward the end where the text says that "He [God] commands all people [all men] everywhere to repent." This is one of those situations in which God is so harsh. The words do not really say what they mean. The notion for command carries the sense of entreating, pleading, encouraging, and then repenting. In Hebrew, teshuva implies a primal image of repentance. It means to return in Hebrew, to change your mind in Greek.

The primal image of repentance is the Prodigal Son. The wayward child is finally changing his mind, turning around, and going back home. This passage says that God commands. This mean, judgmental God commands that all people must repent. You lousy sinners!

What the passage is really saying, instead of that rough, angry, judgmental language, is that God the parent is pleading the child to come home. Stop your dangerous wandering and return. Please come home. Can you feel the difference between the two? You live and move and have your being in divinity. You're a child of God. Stop the way you're thinking and return home. It's dangerous out there. Please.

Route 88 Leads to a Glorious BAM

Before I came to this church, for about eight months or so, I served as an interim pastor up in Oneonta at what's called the Red Door Church because it has a red door. Nice church, but for me one of the high points was the drive. Tracy and I would leave at about 6:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings, and it was an indescribably beautiful drive almost every Sunday.

I came to know Route 88 pretty well, and one thing I learned about the highway is that between here and Oneonta there are seven dips in the road and seven mountain tops in the hour-long

drive. On foggy mornings – I don't know if you were up by 6:30 this morning – but this morning would have qualified as a foggy day.

You drive down a dip in the road, and you're in fog, even to the point at which you have to turn on your headlights. Then you start climbing back up. This occurs seven times in that hour-long journey. It doesn't happen gently. It happens suddenly, but the cloud gets a little brighter and then suddenly – BAM! Full-blown sun right in your eyes. Glorious! Find the sunglasses fast. You drive in the sunlight for a while and then dip back down, take the sunglasses off, and drive in the fog for a time. This action repeats itself over and over for the whole drive.

That's what is happening to me spiritually and intellectually. I keep forgetting I'm a child of God. And I know enough about your personal lives that I understand you've forgotten as well. I don't remember that I live and move and have my being indivisibly, that I can't escape and don't want to. So I drive for a while in the fog and forget again. Then I remember and burst into the light.

“God hath yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy word.”

Amen.