

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Finding God: A Natural Revelation

Jeremiah 32.1-15; Luke 16.19-31

Russ Dean, September 26, 2004

On the website, “roadsideamerica.com – your online guide to offbeat attractions,”

I read the following:

In October of 1977, Maria Rubio was rolling up a burrito for her husband Eduardo's breakfast, when she noticed a thumb-sized configuration of skillet burns on the tortilla that resembled the face of Jesus. Needless to say, Eduardo went hungry that meal as Maria told family and neighbors of the miraculous event. It happened in the small town of Lake Arthur, New Mexico... (Directions to the home are included on the website.)

Despite the braying of scientists and skeptics, the Holy Tortilla quickly developed a solid fan base.¹ By 1979, over 35,000 people had visited, bringing flowers and photos of sick loved ones. Mrs. Rubio quit her job as a maid to attend full-time to the hastily constructed "Shrine of the Holy Tortilla" in her home...

In the wake of this first Tortilla visitation, all heaven broke loose. In November 1977 — a competing Miracle Tortilla appeared in the skillet of Phoenix housewife Ramona Barreras. It was the face of Jesus, this time accompanied by the letters K, J, C, and B, which Ramona believed stood for "King Jesus is Coming Back." According to the *Phoenix New Times* in 1997, the Barreras Miracle Tortilla "rests in a Plexiglas box in a kitchen drawer."

Spend a few minutes with a “google” search, and you, too, will find all sorts of amazing “signs of the times.” “Miracles” home page lists “apparitions of the Virgin Mary, healing water, weeping statues, crosses of light, circles of light” and “crop circles,”

¹ From this same article: “Cranky skeptics ascribe them to a human faculty for delusion called "pareidolia," a perception of pattern and meaning from natural randomness. At the same time, scientists believe humans are hardwired to recognize facial patterns, our hunkered fore-apes' need to quickly identify foe, friend or mate. We'll perceive a familiar face in an unfamiliar place, before seeing, say, a locomotive or a cotton gin.”

all attested world-wide, among their many evidences of a supernatural deity, appearing, intervening through dramatic revelations.

Several times a year there is a sighting of some sort that makes the national news. The last one I remember, though I can't recall the dateline, was a hubaloo caused in a large American city when the face of the Mother Mary mysteriously appeared in the façade of a glass high-rise office building. According to the report I heard, when the light of the sun shown just right onto the windows of that building, Mary's face appeared – and as word spread of this miraculous revelation, a messy traffic jam ensued, with hundreds of cars jamming the intersection for just a glimpse of the divine.

Why the hysteria over such things? What deep-seated need do these reactions reveal? 35,000 people visit the face of Jesus in a tortilla, many, no doubt, worshipping in that presence! (Pardon me while I cynicize a bit, but how is it that Mrs. Rubio recognized the face of Jesus in the first place? I wonder how much her tortilla miracle looked like the Jesus in that famous twentieth-century painting by Salmon – you know the one I'm talking about: it's the picture that hangs in some Sunday School class in every single church in America!? We've got at least one, here.)

You will excuse me, please, for I really am not a cynic. I do not intend to demean Mrs. Rubio or any of the 35,000 who traveled to her shrine in hopes of receiving their own little miracle from hers. But I find the world-wide clamor for supernatural phenomena to be somewhat amusing. I also find it greatly troubling. So I ask again, what need, what human longing -- and what fear is revealed by such human groping for sensational proof of the divine?

These phenomena have always been with us.² Perhaps our human species never will outgrow such a fascination, but in our skeptical, post-modern world, I believe that such continuing hysteria reveals a great angst among the people. It is an anxiety that wonders, jittering nervously just below the surface, if the title of Robert Putnam's famous book, "*Bowling Alone...*" might not refer to more than the disappearance of league sports in America, and might spell the end to more than just community among us. Let me be clear. I'm wondering aloud about a fear out there among the general populace (it might even be revealed within the walls of our own beloved building), that we might truly be alone in this cold, infinite universe, afterall?³

We are a scientific and technologically advanced people. People for whom many of the age-old proofs of God's action in the world no longer can hold weight. God does not send hurricanes to punish people – weather systems can be tracked and to some extent predicted, based on meteorological evidence. God does not send disease and cast plagues – the life and survival mechanisms of bacteria and viruses are well understood, even by people with only a rudimentary understanding of biology. God does not control the destiny of nations by engaging in warfare against other nations with them – human violence is human violence, no matter to whom the victor attributes the victory.⁴

² The Gospel writer, Luke, begins his sequel book, "The Acts of the Apostles," with the narrative of the ascension of Jesus. Following the ascension two men in white robes come to the disciples who are standing there, staring into space: "*Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*" This call to action, I believe, from the very first moments of the Church's life without Jesus' is given to counter the tendency to stand, paralyzed, staring into heaven, waiting on something dramatic to happen.

³ Putnam's book has nothing to do with such atheistic angst in the populace. (I know I confused at least one listener with the reference to his book.) My usage of the title was for the sake of the title alone.

⁴ The controversial Episcopal Bishop turned writer and speaker, John Shelby Spong, works out both the angst I reference in this sermon and the causes for the demise of theism in his books, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and *A New Christianity for a New World*.

In our advance and growth as a species many such superstitions have largely been put to rest. Thanks be to God. We are a healthier race without such conceptions of the divine.⁵ But as this “God” disappears from the scene is there a fear, even if only subconsciously assumed, that God has absconded altogether? Or that Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Feurbach were right when they declared that God is only a projection of our best hopes?

We are right to lose such superstitions. We must continue to challenge such notions, which are being preached in thousands of pulpits around the world, even as I speak. We are right to demand that Christians “grow up” into faith and maturity, allowing our Bibles and our notions of faith to be interpreted, even corrected, by quantum science and behavioral psychology. We are right to demand that our children progress in their knowledge and understanding of faith, just as they progress in their knowledge and understanding of mathematics and history and languages – a third grade belief system will not suffice in an adult world.⁶

I believe that we are right to challenge the superstition, much of which passes for “supernaturalism,” of claims of miraculous healing and divine intervention, of God “working for us.” Most of you experience such claims virtually every day through the convictions of co-workers and friends and family members. But I believe that we are

⁵ It is clear, given the rise of fundamentalism in the United States, that my concept of God is hardly the dominant view. In fact, I believe it will take many more decades for the concept of God as the supernatural “man upstairs” to be replaced in a general, public consciousness by a more dynamic, integrated view of God as the “heart of all that is” (see below). However, I believe that Bishop Spong is right when he asserts, “The evidence that God, understood theistically, is dying or is perhaps already dead is overwhelming” (*A New Christianity for a New World*, p.21).

⁶ This is, perhaps, a difficult thesis to defend, for many believers are, in fact, never challenged or required to move their faith beyond the level of their childhood Sunday School lessons (so that “third grade faith” seems to suffice). It is simply my conviction that the masses of jaded believers (those who grew up in the church but do not return in their adulthood), the masses of unconvinced non-believers, and the number of people whose faith falters in times of personal crises all point to a faith that is inadequate to the task of “adult living.”

right to push against the tide of popular piety and to challenge such sure convictions, because I believe in the end, in a world which knows better, claims of the interventions of a supernatural God at the bequest of mere and natural mortals, can only fail to convey the sure presence and absolute reality of the divine among us. (Repeat this sentence.)

I do not believe (I do not believe) that God is “out there,” to be manipulated by the right kind or the right amount of praying or posturing, to intervene on our behalf.⁷ To use the jargon of popular religion, I do not believe God, nor God’s work, is “supernatural” at all.⁸ This is not to say that I do not believe in God. And it is not a claim to which I despair. I believe we need not feel alone in the world with a non-supernatural God. Quite the opposite.

I believe that the reality of God is the heart of all that is.

I think that Paul was recognizing this claim when he borrowed a phrase from one of the pagan poets of his day to declare to a skeptical audience, “*in God we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17.28). I do not believe God is “out there” -- I believe that the reality of God is the heart of all that is. I think Paul was recognizing this claim when he affirmed the oneness of God for his church in Ephesus, “*God is above all and through all and in all*” (Ephesians 4.6). I do not believe God is “out there” -- I believe that the reality

⁷ This is, perhaps, the crux of my argument -- that in our lives of prayer (“where the rubber meets the road,” the “proving ground” of Christian conviction), far too many Christians conceive of God as distant and removed, and prayer as a tool for getting God to “work for me.” Such conceptions of God, and prayer, seem woefully un-realistic and understandably disappointing in their “results.” Thomas Moore speaks to my concern: “A billboard near an old house of mine displayed in six-foot type: PRAY. IT WORKS. I always thought this was the ultimate in American pragmatism. If it doesn’t work, do you stop praying? What does it mean to say that prayer works? You get what you want? Life gets better? My billboard would say: PRAY. IT MAY NOT WORK. Prayer is an alternative to working hard to get what you want. One discovers eventually that what you want is almost always what you don’t need. Pray -- period! Don’t expect anything. Or better, expect nothing. Prayer cleanses us of expectations and allows holy will, providence, and life itself an entry. What could be more worth the effort -- or the non-effort?” (Thomas Moore, Meditations, p. 69)

⁸ “I define the theistic God as ‘a being, supernatural in power, dwelling outside this world and invading this world periodically to accomplish the divine will.’” Spong, p.21-22.

of God is the heart of all that is. I think Paul was recognizing this claim when he boldly declared God's work in all things, good and bad, to the Roman church. My own translation says, "*God is the energy at work in all things, to bring about good*" (Romans 8.28). I do not believe God is "out there" -- I believe that the reality of God is the heart of all that is. I think Jesus was recognizing this claim when he told an anxious people not to look for "signs of the times," *For, behold, the kingdom of God is... within you* (Luke 17.21).⁹

Turning to our primary text for this morning, Fred Craddock comments:

The preacher will want to avoid taking the descriptions of the fates of the two men as providing revealed truths about the hereafter and divine answers to questions about the state of the dead. The story simply conveys popular beliefs of the time and is not given by Jesus or by Luke in response to interest in what happens to people immediately after death.¹⁰

If Craddock is right, and Jesus was not trying to tell us anything about what heaven and hell are literally like, what was his message? It is dangerous to presume to speak for anyone, perhaps especially Jesus, but I believe Jesus was trying to teach his disciples how and where and when to find God? And I believe this finding is not about the next life. I believe that Jesus still makes clear to *all who have ears to hear*,¹¹ that God's work and God's presence are not about "supernatural" revelations of epic proportions --for *even if someone rises from the dead* (Luke 16.31) those who cannot see will not believe. For people see what we want to see. We see what we need to see. We see what we are conditioned to see. We see what we are prepared to see. So dramatic

⁹ These four scripture texts were utilized in our worship service through an opening "Litany of Worship" and a closing "Meditation of Commitment."

¹⁰ Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, Year C, p.422.

¹¹ This refrain is a familiar exhortation of Jesus, found throughout the gospels.

visions are no guarantee of God. Those guarantees are with us, already, and even in the most ordinary of moments. The guarantees of God's presence are with us in the words and witness of those who have gone before us, *Moses and the prophets*, and the many more, ancient and contemporary, martyrs and saints and fellow strugglers along the journey. The guarantee of God is to be found in the faith of the one who foolishly buys property for future investment, while a besieging enemy destroys your country and carts away your people (Jeremiah 32.15). Such hope against hope, such faith against fear, such sight against a backdrop of near total blindness – these are the guarantees of God among us.

We need no flour tortillas, “miraculously” revealing the face of Jesus Christ to prove God's presence. What we need is simply more tortillas, delivered in the name of Jesus into the mouths of the poor. In that bread, and in the face of those who deliver them, the hungry will see all the proof of God that anyone ever needed. We need no statues weeping blood to prove God's activity among us. What we need is simply real, live people, crying real, live tears of compassion for those among us who are afraid and alone, for enemies battered by war, for friends embittered by personal chaos. In the eyes of those tears, neighbors will see all the proof of God that anyone ever needed. We need no supernatural deity, intervening on our behalf to heal and avenge and bless, for it is our audacious, particularly Christian claim, that in a man named Jesus, *God was reconciling the world* (2 Corinthians 5.19). Perhaps it is an even more audacious claim to accept Paul's challenge that with our own hands and hearts, healing and blessing and reconciling

is still the way God works.¹² The reality of God's love and presence in our world will never be farther removed than a simple human touch. It is the work of incarnation, and it continues today.

Who will reveal God to our world, today? Who will provide that needed reconciling touch? I think you just might be a natural!

May it be so!

PASTORAL PRAYER

As you came among us in Jesus
Living, Loving, Enlivening God,
Come among us today.
Still our beating hearts;
Calm our sensational need for spectacular proofs;
Fill our fears of loneliness
 With your presence
 In one another.
"Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done --
 On earth."¹³
Amen.

¹² "...that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." 2 Corinthians 5.19

¹³ From The Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6.10.