

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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On Needing the Unnecessary God
Psalm 46.1,10,11; John 4.21.24
Russ Dean, January 4, 2009



“I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.”¹ So said Galileo Galilei, the 17th century Italian mathematician and physicist who has been called the Father of Modern Science. Such a conviction, an imperative to *love God with all your mind* (Mark 12.30), is the impetus for today’s sermon, which is not an exegesis of either of the texts I have chosen. Nor are my remarks what you may expect to hear from a Baptist pulpit (if you happen to be visiting with us today.) This church has a long-held commitment to what it has daringly called an “open pulpit,” by which it not only tolerates, but actively encourages its pastors to speak their minds freely. (It can be a dangerous policy!) With those as qualifying remarks, I speak to you today from my heart. This may best be regarded something of an autobiographical sermon, reflective of the current state of a journey of faith which is largely predicated upon a firm commitment to two distinct but related disciplines of study. I will return to these commitments in a moment.

It was October 31st 1992 when Pope John Paul II finally officially spoke on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church to vindicate... Galileo – who had dared to believe that Copernicus’s heretical idea was actually no heresy after all, but was a fact the church should learn to live with: the earth is not the center of the universe. Imagine that! For championing a heliocentric theology (sun-centered), Galileo was ordered to stand trial for heresy in 1633, and to spend the rest of his life under house arrest because he would not recant his view. I intend no swipe at the Catholic Church to say 350 years is quite too long to come around to the truth! My remark is intended as a critique of dogmatic religion of any persuasion – that is, Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox practice, or any brand of any other religion, which finds it necessary to close its eyes to empirical truth, in order to defensively adhere to its creeds.

¹ This is one of those quotations that has made it into my files over the years. I have no further citation.

How many times has the Church adamantly defended its so-called “truth,” even with great injustice perpetrated in its service, only to have to return, hat in hand, at some much-belated hour to apologize to the world, again? How many times? We who are the followers of one who is called *The Way, the Life, the Truth*²... must never be afraid of truth, however at odds a new revelation may seem with current belief. George Bernard Shaw said, “All great truths begin as blasphemies.”³

I am ashamed of much of our religious history, littered as it is with its slavish defenses of “eternal dogmas” – which only turned out to be some prejudice or fear or myopia (short-sightedness) ensconced in ecclesial authority and held over the people as a divine bludgeon. If God is, then God will always be, and every new glimpse of reality will only serve to enhance our understanding of the divine. It is no mistake that nearly every encounter with the divine recorded in scripture begins with those simple words: *Fear not...*⁴

The first commitment in my journey of faith is an indelible, undeniable, unavoidable belief in God. Yes, I believe. I believe because my parents taught me to believe. I believe because my church and my school and my mentors and my friends all along my path have nurtured that belief. I believe because my own experience keeps pointing to something which is beyond. Because every commitment I hold as true and every sentiment I feel deep within, every thought I think and every move I make seems to me to brim with the possibility of a great mystery beyond, yet somehow in our midst. As Frank Tupper taught me, I believe in God, because I believe in Jesus. Because in his life, in his death, and in his resurrection, I find a God who is worthy of my life’s devotion, a God of sacrificial love, a God who is beyond every conceivable possibility, and always offering new life. And, finally, I believe because I hope.⁵

² John 14.6 actually says, “I am the way, the truth, the life...” I have reversed the order of the final two nouns for emphasis.

³ Again, I have no specific citation.

⁴ Though many references might be cited, since we have just completed the Christmas season, I offer only the well-known announcement from the angel to those *shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night... Do not be afraid!* Luke 2.8-10.

⁵ Belief is a complex commitment. In this paragraph I have tried to be honest about my reasons for belief, and to acknowledge that believing in God has been, given my particular life, largely culturally conditioned. A Baptist

I believe in God.

The second commitment of my journey is a growing commitment to the truth of science. I will stop short of saying “I believe in science,” because “belief” is a word of faith, and science is about what we can see, not what we can believe. I am committed to the truth of science because... well, look up. [point to the chandeliers] Do you know that with the touch of one button, one person can electrify this entire room, and fill it with light!? Isn't that incredible? It took thousands of hours of experimentation and failure for Thomas Edison to show the truth of a theory he had, namely, that you can make light from electricity. It seemed crazy to begin with. No one would have believed it before his discovery in 1879⁶, but there it is, right in front of you... the truth of science. And I am committed to the truth of science because a few weeks ago, in celebration of his tenth birthday, Bennett and I walked into a steel cylinder that weighs several thousand pounds, and sat in comfort, completely un-amazed by the fact that that steel cylinder, which we call an airplane, raised itself on the wings of Bernoulli's principle, all the way to 30,000 feet above earth's surface, and took us all the way to Boston, Massachusetts, 859 miles... in less than four hours (including a layover in Baltimore!) There it was, right in front of us... the truth of science. And I am committed to the truth of science because this past week, during Christmas, Mary Ryan and Kate Howard sat among the Jacks family to celebrate the birth of a baby named Jesus. Some of you have followed their nine-month trial... born in March, they did not weigh three pounds between them... they had not one functioning lung among their four... and they were given less than a 5% chance of survival. Nine months later, because of countless hours of medical research, machines that breathe for us, medicines that fight disease for us, and doctors who can operate on the thread-sized intestines of two-pound human beings, Mary Ryan and Kate are thirteen-pound testimonials to the truth of science! There they were – right in front of us – the truth of science.

minister's son, raised in the South, in the 20th century, could hardly believe otherwise! Yet, not only my raising, but my own person experience, and my own intellectual search have contributed to my belief. (Which is now, mine, and not just my parents' or my culture's belief.) And, believing amounts to hope. I do believe in God, at least in part, because I hope there is God. *And hope will not disappoint us...* Romans 5.5.

⁶ My quick refresher course on the internet on Edison's most famous discovery led me to the Wikipedia reference which indicated that the incandescent bulb had actually been discovered 50 years before Edison, who simply refined and perfected the filament. The article did not cite the original inventor.

Yet at some point, the Church tends to draw its line in the sand. The current line for many is the so-called battle between creationism and evolution. I say “so-called” because that battle is over, folks. The lights are still burning! [point to chandeliers] And evolution is no more “just a theory” as some detractors claim, than is the theory of gravity. All the word “theory” means for scientists, is that so far, experimentally, gravity seems to be holding its own. It is theoretically possible for it to fail, but until it does, the theory of gravity will stand. And so, the theory of evolution is not just some fanciful trail of untruth postulated by some anti-religious geeky science-types in a classroom. The theory is the result of empirical (touchable, taste-able, tangible, measurable) evidence. In my view, until we are willing to turn out the lights, to deny the empirical truth of electricity, to take back our medications to the pharmacist and say “no thanks,” to return our donated organs, and to trust the survival of our children (as Christian Scientists do) only to the hand of God... until that day, our integrity will require that we accept science in all its forms – and to learn to live with God, with all its findings.

I believe in God.

I am committed to the truth of science – regardless where that empirical evidence takes us.

So... what do we do when science says God is no longer necessary? We have a few choices – because that is where we are. First, we could let such evidence destroy our faith, or let it make us deny that such a faith was ever real to begin with. We can let an empirical lack of proof disprove God (even though God never makes any claims to be empirical at all). Such is the fate of too many former believers. Science has taken their God.

The second, maybe most popular choice, is to take the position of the Church in many of its former battles, and to defensively strike back. To deny scientific truth and to engage in a winner-takes-all battle with the scientific establishment. The fundamentalism we are seeing, worldwide, is largely the result of just such a position. It is fearful. Defensive. Insecure. Back-ward looking. When did this last chapter of American fundamentalism begin? In response to the Scopes trial, which unfortunately put God

and Darwin on the stand in 1926, opposing each other. Fundamentalism is attractive because of the confidence that it purports... but it is nearly always wrong in nearly every regard. The future is forward. It always has been. Clinging to our past, and to our ideas built on this past, will never lead us to God.

I think there is a better way. The way forward for believers who are committed to *loving God with all their minds* (Mark 12.30) is to accept the findings of science in every regard – the electricity that makes us comfortable, and the disturbing findings that make us uncomfortable. There was a time when God was seen as essential to the universe, because science simply could not explain a universe without a creator. Now it can. One of the famous proofs of the existence of God postulated that the necessary chain of cause and effect, when taken far enough into our past, would have to lead to a first cause. And that cause had to be God. There was simply no other explanation. This makes sense to most of us. It certainly makes sense to me. It seems reasonable, rational... but mathematics, which is the language of science, has now demonstrated through physics, that this is not so. I can't explain this science to you, folks (I'm a pastor and not a physicist!), but you don't have to dig into any obscure scientific journal to find that this is accepted truth among cosmologists. This world didn't need a "first mover" to start moving.

Given my commitments, then, to God, and then to science... I've been wondering for some time about this Unnecessary God. Wondering if this is a subject I could preach on. After being admittedly rattled by the thought, though, it occurred to me that it's not really the necessary things in life that make life worth living, is it? Take breathing, for example. We can't do without it. It's necessary. But because of the advances of science, there are plenty of human beings today who are breathing, who can hardly be considered living. Certainly not living the *abundant life* that Jesus promises (John 10.10). Machines can breathe for us. Only God can fill that wind with a Spirit of life. Conversely, relationships are not, technically, necessary. Though John Dunn's truth is spiritually undeniable, "No man is an island," it is true, technically speaking, that we can survive all alone. Last week Amy and I watched, again, Tom Hanks' in his depressing movie, "Castaway." You can survive on a deserted island, all by yourself, eating nothing but coconuts, and biding your time. You can. But who wants to?

It seems to me that all the best things in life are really not necessary at all. Life is one thing... eternal life, *abundant living*, an entirely different matter altogether.⁷ So I'm willing to grant that God may not be necessary, as the physicists measure necessity, but such a truth makes me no less able to proclaim – it may, in fact, make me more interested in proclaiming the world's Need for this Unnecessary God. For, to breathing, God gives spirit. To rules, God gives relationships (that eventually nullify most of the rules!) To all the necessary laws of the universe, both natural and civic, God adds a touch of grace. Who among us could live without Grace? And who would want to?

The Roman Catholic theologian, Teilhard de Chardin, who was even more committed to science than I, because he actually understood most of it, once said that perhaps humanity needed to find God less in the Alpha, and more in the Omega.⁸ Less the necessary beginning point of life, and more the destination to which we are moving. Less the biological necessity, and more the spiritual grace – which is where our evolution will take us if we will allow the Spirit of God to move among us.⁹

⁷ Someone commented that the reference to “eternal life” was distracting to them. In the midst of this sermon, to be asked to think about the afterlife, heaven, took them, momentarily, down a different road. I responded, “So, who said anything about heaven, the afterlife?” Though the critique is probably right, and certainly understandable, “eternal life,” as I understand it (and I believe I can make a biblical case for this position) is equivalent to “abundant living” – it is the life that “God desires” for us, a life that begins now and (as our blessed hope), we believe continues even beyond this life. But the point is the living now, full, free, abundant. My friend, Dr. Bill Hull taught me that “eternal” need not mean “endless time,” or quantity of life (as we most often conceive of heaven, i.e. “forever”), but may very well indicate fullness in depth or quality of life. The Greek work *kairos*, which means “time” (but is distinct from the word *chronos*, which counts time, as in a chronograph, a clock), indicates that every moment holds the possibility of being an “eternal moment,” shot through with all the purpose and meaning of God. Every single moment.

⁸ This quotation comes to me in Robert Wright's book, *Nonzero*, as a quotation of a paraphrase from an unnamed source! “(One theologian has paraphrased Teilhard as believe that “God must become for us less Alpha than Omega.”) Wright, p.332.

⁹ I believe God can take us beyond our biologically-driven evolution (perhaps this is the purpose of such an “unnecessary God”). Rather than simply following the dictates of our “selfish genes” (a phrase common to Darwinians), God calls us beyond the biological drive, to the accomplishments of self-less love, of self-giving, self-sacrifice, and partnership. At what point would any “selfish gene” call us to *love our enemy* (Matthew 5.44)... *to lay down [our] life for our friend* (John 15.13)?

The hope of the church is this. That all the little Jacob Barners we introduce to such a glorious adopted family will truly be allowed, even encouraged, to love God with all of their minds.¹⁰ And that the church will give Jacob a God who is big enough and grand enough and mysterious enough, that such a God cannot be chased out of any “bolt holes,” that Jacob’s God will need no refuge in which to hide.¹¹ That we will give Jacob a God who is creative enough to work with chance. Who is real enough to be found in randomness. Who is great enough and good enough to transcend any gaps, that even when science fills them all, and we should hope it will, there will still be cause to celebrate mystery, and to know it as the divine, among us. Jacob deserves to be given such a God. I’m willing to say, he (and we) Needs just such a God.

Richard Dawkins has been one of the most outspoken proponents of a godless universe. You find his skepticism printed in your bulletin. So I was amazed to hear a hint of theological possibility sneak out in a dialogue with Francis Collins, the pioneer of the human genome project, who has ruffled the feathers of some in the scientific world by maintaining rather traditional Christian views. “If there is a God,” the famous atheist says, “It’s going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than anything that any theologian of any religion has ever proposed.”¹² Dawkins is right. God is bigger and more incomprehensible than the world can ever imagine. But he is wrong to suggest that no theologian has ever before proposed this thought. That God is just that big, just that incomprehensible, is why the

¹⁰ There was a Parent/Child Dedication service for Jacob earlier in our worship.

¹¹ “Darwin chased God out of his old haunts in biology, and he scurried for safety down the rabbit hole of physics. The laws and constants of the universe, we were told, are too good to be true: a setup, carefully timed to allow the eventual evolution of life. It needed a good physicist to show us the fallacy, and Victor Stengel lucidly does so. The faithful won’t change their minds, of course (that is what faith means), but Victor Stengel drives a pack of energetic ferrets down the last major bolt hole and God is running out of refuges in which to hide.” Richard Dawkins, in a review of Victory Stengel’s, *God, The Failed Hypothesis*.

¹² “When we started out and we were talking about the origins of the universe and the physical constants, I provided what I thought were cogent arguments against a supernatural intelligent designer. But it does seem to me to be a worthy idea. Refutable – but nevertheless grand and big enough to be worthy of respect... [Traditional religious ideas] strike me as parochial. If there is a God, it’s going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than anything that any theologian of any religion has ever proposed.” Richard Dawkins, in a Time magazine debate with Francis Collins, “God vs. Science.”

Psalmist, even in his pre-scientific world-view, exhorted his hearers to... *Be still...* for in the mystery of the stillness, and maybe only there, you can... *know that I am God*. And it is why Jesus told the woman at the well that a time is coming (I am afraid we are still not there yet), but a time is coming when humanity will worship God, but neither on “*our mountain*” nor in “our Jerusalem.” Jesus wants us to know that the God who is *Spirit and Truth* will not be worshipped in the comforts of any geography or religious landscape that we can claim to control. The mystery of this world, which we name God, is beyond any location, will not be confined by any religious monopoly. When we learn to worship in Spirit and in Truth, we will know God as the *Spirit* within, which, alone, gives that abiding peace. We will know God as the *Spirit* without, which beckons us into relationship with one another. And we will know God as *Truth* which may be glimpsed, even in an empirical world, but never fully known.

People of God, for little Jacob, let us never be afraid of Truth. And let us learn to celebrate the Unnecessary God who will ever be beyond our control, but never fully beyond our reach.

May it be so!