

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.11.16
Scripture: Jeremiah
Luke

This morning we begin our 16th year together as pastor and congregation, and I have to tell you I am on fire about it! The boys are back in school (5th grade and 7th grade), my first major regatta is behind me and I'm more confident than ever about the ones that lie ahead, and my mind is back in the game of church.

I'm in the middle of reading three books I'm so psyched about I barely want to take a break from reading even for writing—*A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor, *The Joy of Being Wrong* by James Alison, and *Atheist Delusions* by David Bentley Hart. I'm also beginning a re-reading of a book whose audio version I finished a few days ago that was ridiculously good, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, and Bliss* also by David Bentley Hart.

His thesis could be summed up as the ancient psalm of this week's lection proclaims: "Fools say in their heart, 'There is no God.'" (I always love it when the lectionary readings fit so perfectly my current train of thought.) Not that *I* would say such a thing: I'm a pastor, after all, so I'm not in the practice of name-calling. But Hart is an academic, so name-calling is not necessarily out of bounds. Perhaps it's better to state it, though, in less personalized terms. Perhaps it's less antagonistic to say it thus: "It's folly to claim there is no God."

The spur for Mr. Hart's book, *The Experience of God*, is the so-called new atheists of popular thought, provocative reading, and airport bookstores. Right next to the books of popular piety, somewhere among the political memoirs of presidential candidates and political manifestos of television opinionators, there are the ones of popular "atheism." Just take your pick. Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens. Most—the atheism, the politics and opinion, and the piety—are about as deep as tumbleweed is rooted, so you can even buy them all and alternate in aligning yourself with each ideological camp, just changing it up as the days go by.

Mr. Hart, however, is nothing if not deep. We're going to go deep indeed in order to understand the logical absurdity of the new atheism.

To begin, we should understand the ground from which it grows.

The new atheism is based on the logical absurdity of materialism, physicalism, or naturalism, “the doctrine,” according to Mr. Hart, “that there is nothing apart from the physical order, and certainly nothing supernatural.”

But this is “an incorrigibly incoherent concept, and one that is ultimately indistinguishable from pure magical thinking. The very notion that nature is a closed system entirely sufficient to itself is plainly one that cannot be verified [not on the terms that this concept holds forth as the only reliable source of information, which is to say] deductively or empirically, from within the system of nature. It is, [therefore] a metaphysical (which is to say ‘extra-natural’) conclusion regarding the whole of reality, which neither reason nor experience [this book will show] legitimately warrants. It cannot even define itself within the boundaries of its own terms, because the total sufficiency of ‘natural’ explanations is not an identifiable natural phenomenon but only an arbitrary judgment.

“Naturalism, therefore, can never be anything more than a guiding prejudice, an established principle only in the sense that it must be indefensibly presumed for the sake of some larger view of reality... [Indeed,] if naturalism is true as a picture of reality, it’s necessarily false as a philosophical precept...[because] the one thing of which it can give no account, and which its most fundamental principles make it entirely impossible to explain at all, is nature’s very existence. For existence is most definitely not a natural phenomenon: it is logically prior to any physical cause whatsoever; and anyone who imagines that it is susceptible of a natural explanation simply has no grasp of what the question of existence really is.”

Well.

“...existence is most definitely not a natural phenomenon...” This is a tough concept to wrap your mind around—that existence is logically prior to any physical cause of existence. If it helps, then, consider that the creation story of the first chapter of Genesis has God naming light into existence before God gets around to creating the sun. There is the existence of a thing before there is the existence of the material cause of the thing—the final cause before there is the material cause or the formal cause. This is to say that the ancient teller of this story, apparently, understood and could then illustrate existence as a separate, and prior, thing to the physical cause or container for existence. (Hence, by the way, the truth of this

story—this story that is true not because of some historical accuracy credited to it, but because it points to the abiding truths and mysteries of existence, life, and the created order.)

As for what the question of existence really is, this will come in the three hundred pages that follow. For now, though, it's worth acknowledging why we've come to such a simplistic, even foolish, conversation as we have—and not foolish in the sense that Christ makes wise the foolish and foolish the wise, but foolish in the sense of self-important unseriousness, windbaggy, and nonsense; the sort of stuff we tolerate from certain politicians and journalists and clerics alike; the sort of stuff we're forced to tolerate when ideology passes for ideas and intellect and imagination, and when to be a human is taken to be an albeit highly sophisticated yet still programmable machine.

“There would not be so many slapdash popular atheist manifestoes,” Mr. Hart admits, “if there were not so many soft and inviting targets out there to provoke them: young earth creationists who believe that the two contradictory cosmogonic myths of the early chapters of Genesis are actually a single documentary account of an event that occurred a little over six millennia ago, and that there really was a Noah who built a giant ark to rescue a compendious menagerie from a universal deluge...and so forth. Here, certainly, the new atheism has opponents against which it is well matched.

And he notes that we be sure, “...the rise of the Christian fundamentalist movement... [has been] largely the result of a cultural impoverishment, but it also followed from the triumph of a distinctly modern concept of what constitutes reliable knowledge; it was a strange misapplication of the rigorous but quite limited methods of modern empirical sciences to questions properly belonging to the realms of logic and of spiritual experience.”

This is to say that the “rise of the Christian fundamentalist movement was not a recovery of the Christianity of earlier centuries or of the apostolic church. It was a thoroughly modern phenomenon, a strange and somewhat poignantly pathetic attempt on the part of culturally deracinated Christians, raised without the intellectual or imaginative resources of a living religious civilization, to imitate the evidentiary methods of modern empirical science by taking the Bible as some sort of objective and impeccably consistent digest of historical data... [So] now the Bible [has come] to be seen as what it obviously is not: a collection of ‘inerrant’ oracles and historical reports, each true in the same way as every other, each subject to only one level of interpretation, and all perfectly in agreement with one another.”

If ever there were a set of readings to prove this point it's this morning's lectionary readings—five of them in all. The gospel text, the epistle text, the psalm, and the Old Testament text and the alternate, semi-continuous Old Testament text: these five all concern themselves with God's response to human waywardness, the Lord's response to human sin; and they all five have something quite different to say.

Jeremiah, as we heard, prophesied of God as having given up on his chosen people in favor of a new historical tide. No longer would God bestow on the people Israel and Judah God's favor. No longer would it be the case that the people would dwell in power and peace in this, their promised land. The people had, after all, ceased to know God and ceased to know how to do good. They had become foolish, even stupid, and they'd become skilled only in doing evil. Now, Babylon, which had long been a distant threat, would become a clear and present danger. The empire would invade, overthrow, wreck havoc, and lay waste. People would flee. Others would be taken into exile. The least of the nation would be left behind to wither and die. Thus the Lord had spoken, and therefore He would not relent and would not turn back.

This final point is interesting, though, because there are other biblical accounts of the Lord doing just that—relenting, turning back. Actually, there are a few such accounts that we might have read even this morning. The alternative, semi-continuous reading, after all, tells of the Lord saying to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it...”

But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, “O Lord, why does our wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ...Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people...” So the Lord changed his mind about the disaster he planned to bring on his people.

But, why? Why in one case did the Lord change his mind about bringing disaster on the people and in the other did he not relent, instead went ahead with his plan? Was the difference Moses? The right mediator, the righteous man in the right place at the right time:

was that the difference? If so, then what of the terrible bad fortune for the people seven hundred years later that, though Moses had that power, Jeremiah didn't?

(I'll give you a hint: Moses was likely a storied figure, while Jeremiah was an historic figure; and the golden calf was likely a mythic event while the invasion of Babylon into Canaan was a matter of historic fact. How then to make sense of this power but as a fall from grace?

Remember how people struggled to make theological sense of September 11th fifteen years ago—some sure that the attack was God's judgment against a wayward nation, others then demanding why God would use terrorism as a means for delivering such judgment, still others proclaiming that God wasn't *behind* the attack but was *amidst* it, suffering and dying just like all those people who died in the towers. These are still live questions today.)

But then there's this: Psalm 51 suggests another complication, this which we used as our call to worship. Psalm 51, which addresses the problem of an individual rather than a whole people struggling with guilt, then implies that confession of the guilty one plays some part in whether that guilty one is forgiven or condemned. This psalm of confession was perhaps a tough one to join in on. I know not everyone can helpfully and faithfully speak of themselves in such terms—as someone who's done evil in God's sight and therefore as someone whom God rightfully judges as guilty. But for those who can, what role does such humble confession play in receiving mercy? And, if it plays a role, what can we say, if anything, of those who cannot speak in such terms without really undoing themselves?

As for Paul, whom we'll take as having written the epistle to Timothy, which we also didn't hear, as a teacher writing toward the end of his career to his disciple, he claims to have received mercy though he was a man of violence, to have received mercy in spite of this because he acted in ignorance and unbelief. See, his unknowing was something of an excuse. But then the Lord came to him, even before he himself ever showed himself worthy of such outreach; and this is striking. It's as if the Lord could see in Paul's zeal a practical evil that could be set to work for good.

Transformation: the Lord could work transformation, and due in part because of his "utmost patience." But was this patience a new quality? Where had it been when he was dealing with the people Israel and when Babylon was creeping its way west? What of the power of transformation then? Had God withheld it? Had God offered it and the people

refused it? But what if their refusal was more un-recognition? What if the Lord had not made it clear enough, so that the people, like Paul, had acted in ignorance?

This is *complicated*, and only getting more so as history unfolds, as human inheritance of wisdom is only matched by human inheritance of confusion and cause for resentment and unrest. This is complicated, and the stakes are high.

As for the gospel text, it's the furthest one out yet concerning what the Lord is to do about human waywardness and sin. Jesus, allowing tax collectors and sinners to come near, hasn't given up on them, and yet requires nothing of them, and doesn't even profess to have the power to convert them or transform them. In fact, he turns the whole project upside down, with the righteous—the Pharisees—being cast into doubt while the ones who've long been understood as unworthy, even unredeemable, are allowed in, are brought closer.

The stories he then tells—about a lost sheep and about a lost coin—suggest that the potential for return and reunion and repentance are enough to bring joy to the Lord, whatever response the person or people then live out. Opening a way back to oneness, for that person, for this people: this is what the Lord shall do and because it is the Lord's purpose and pleasure so to do.

Okay. Got it?

Common wisdom among preachers is that you can't take on more than one scripture reading in a sermon—not *really*; and you certainly can't take on five. But I don't mean to answer questions this morning nearly as much as I mean to raise them. As we begin our 16th year together as pastor and congregation, I mean for us to wonder, what shall we do in the years coming, which might be as numerous as the years past? What are we doing together?

And it may seem an abstract thing, a frivolous thing, to spend so much time trying to figure out God. I mean, even if we're not to be so foolish as to claim there is no God, even if we're to succumb to reason and logic and to confess that of course there's a God, even in such a situation as this, don't we have more pressing issues to consider? Really, don't we have handfuls, even hundreds, of pressing issues to consider?

But here's the thing: if God is all that David Bentley Hart explains God to be—the final cause of all things, which is to say the source and end of all that is; indeed, absolute being in relationship to a world full of contingent beings—then trying to figure out God is of utmost importance, because it will allow for wisdom as we consider then our contingent lives. How to

live, to what to attend, what things matter and what things don't: these we can only decide wisely and well if we have a lived experience of and relationship with the absolute (good, truth, beauty, excellence, value, importance), this which we call God because, really, though no word will suffice, we do need a word, so why not this one?

We can't usefully and coherently judge the good amidst this contingent world and awash in our contingent lives without reference to and knowledge of the absolute good. Because we're always making decisions regarding how to spend our time—both on a grand scale and on a day-to-day, even moment-to-moment scale. I know I have, at any given moment, several demands laid on me, and my task is to figure out which to do now, which to do later, which never to do; I need to figure out priorities. This is, in truth, a theological task. Figuring out priorities is a theological task.

Yesterday, at a regatta in Springfield, Berkshire Rowing entered a lot of events—our juniors had four boats, our masters had three. All that amounts to a busy day. Racing, rigging and de-rigging, unloading and reloading the trailer, rooting for the racers, racing yourself, and in the midst of all this also, for me, being a mother.

Jack came to watch, reluctantly. (These things can be a little boring.) He wanted to tell me some things about the book he'd been reading, but I was working on riggers, which is more puzzling than I'd like to admit, so I couldn't do both. I couldn't listen to him with any attentiveness and also figure out which rigger goes where, which bolt should hold which arm of the rigger into which seam. And though being Jack's mother is by far more important than threading a bolt into a nut in the correct seam, at that moment working the tools had to take priority. This wasn't just about convenience. There was truth in this. If I didn't do the rigging, someone else would have to. If I did it wrong, someone else would suffer the consequence. I owed it to the others there not to slack off or flake out. I could listen to Jack about his book in two hours, on the drive home. Now, though, I had other priorities.

As it happens, that's what we're doing here: trying to figure out how to figure things out, trying to puzzle it through how to be contingent beings amidst a contingent world of competing demands and ensnaring pitfalls, seeking to know absolute being that we might better know ourselves how to be—as persons, as parents or siblings or friends to someone else, as a congregation, as Christians, as Americans, as humans, as creatures among untold numbers of creatures.

The Bible, as you might guess, is a big part of that project—how to read it, what to consider as we listen to it, how to expect it to speak and *to us*. That will be my task amidst this congregation. I will apply my mind to those stories and poems, histories and letters—these because tradition has deemed them authoritative and because they sustain the tradition in a particular way. I will do this faithfully and seriously, but with hope and in spirit of levity and play, such a spirit having proven itself to me in the years past to be the most fruitful way to approach and explore.

The Bible and its interpretation, however, won't be asked to stand alone in witness. There are also the Eucharist and prayer, singing and silence, conversation and fellowship, study and the practical work of sustaining the church. There is much to do, and therefore much to discern. If our aim is, as mine is, to participate in a resurrection—a resurrection back to life of a living religious civilization with intellectual and imaginative resources equal to the task—then there is much to do indeed.

Maybe our being be our doing, and our doing be our being.

Thanks be to God.