

The Humility of Divine Presence: A Sermon

Exodus 17: 1-7

Psalm 78

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32



Among other things, the Bible is a book of questions. The very first question in the Bible is the question the serpent asks of Eve, “Did God actually say, You shall not eat of any fruit of the garden?” (Gen. 3:1) And the first question God asks in the Bible is “Where are you?” followed by the questions “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen. 3:9, 11) More questions: “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49) “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) “Simon, son of John, Do you love me?” (John 21:15) What these questions all have in common is that they are not attempts to find out information, but are rhetorical. They are questions that aim for a response from the hearers.

In both the Old Testament and the gospel readings this morning we find accounts of an exchange of questions between two groups of people, and like the other questions I mentioned, these are rhetorical questions. They are not aimed at getting information, but in provoking a response from those being questioned. In the Exodus reading, Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt, and they find themselves in the desert without water. In response, they ask Moses: “Why did

you bring us up out of Egypt, to kills us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" At the end of the reading, the text states: "They tested the Lord by saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?" Moses responds to the situation with his own set of questions: He asks the people, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' " He then asks God, "What shall I do with this people?" (Exodus 17:2-4)

The gospel reading takes place at the end of Jesus' ministry, immediately following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by his driving the money changers out of the temple. The chief priests and the elders then ask Jesus a question, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matt. 21:23) Presumably these leaders are asking by what authority he cleared out the temple, but the text also mentions that Jesus had healed many blind and lame people who had come to him in the temple (v. 14). And, of course, Jesus' entire ministry had included healings, exorcisms, and miracles, so "these things" likely refers not only to Jesus' actions in the temple, but to all the signs that accompanied his ministry, as well as to his preaching and teaching. As did Moses, Jesus responds to the question with his own question, "The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?"(v. 25)

As readers of the Bible, we have a certain advantage to those who originally asked the questions of Moses and Jesus. Because we have the entire book of Exodus and the entire book of Matthew, we know the answer to the questions. At the beginning of Exodus, God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush and said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry . . . and I have come to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . ." (Exodus 3:7-8) At the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, toward the beginning of Matthew's gospel, a voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my

beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt. 3:17) So God did not lead the people of Israel into the desert so that they would die of thirst. The authority with which Jesus did the things he did is the authority of the voice that named him as the Father’s “beloved Son.”

As I mentioned above, these are rhetorical questions. None of them are about getting information. Both sets of questions—the question the Israelites asked Moses, and the question that the chief priests and the elders asked Jesus—are variations on the same question: “Is the Lord present among us or not?” Rhetorically, they are demands that, if God is with Moses, if God is with Jesus, then this presence needs to be made evident in a clear and unambiguous way.

In both cases, at least from the perspective of the questioners, the questions were justified. Moses had led the Israelites into the desert, and they were now without water. Being without water in a desert means thirst, and, within a few days, death. As leaders of the Jewish people, the scribes and pharisees had an obligation to test the genuineness of Jesus’ ministry. They were familiar with the passage in Deuteronomy 18:19 that reads, “But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.” At least one possible reading of the crucifixion of Jesus was that he died the death of a false prophet.

However, in spite of the apparent reasonableness of the questions, in both cases, there was sufficient evidence to have forestalled the question: In the previous chapters in Exodus, God had already brought the people out of Egypt; God had delivered them from the pursuing Egyptians at the Red Sea, in a similar story about lack of water, God had made bad water drinkable, and, finally, when there had been no food, God had provided a kind of bread called manna for the people to eat in the wilderness (Exodus 12-16). Had the God who had taken care

of the people so far suddenly deserted them? The Israelites who were worried about lack of water seemed to be suffering from a remarkably short memory.

Similarly, in the gospel story, some clue to the divine source of Jesus' authority to clear the temple should have been evident in his healings, his exorcisms, his bringing sight to the blind, and making the deaf to speak. How did Jesus respond to John the Baptist's own question, "Are you the one to come or shall we look for another?" "Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." (Matt. 11:3-6)

In both cases, the clues were certainly there. Why then the failure to recognize what should have been obvious? Certainly, we could argue that the problem is one of forgetfulness, and ungratefulness, but the problem is also one of ambiguity. In both the Exodus reading, and the gospel, God is present, but God is present in a way that is not unambiguously self-evident. Through Moses, God did lead Israel out of Egypt, but the lack of water in the desert could be interpreted to mean that they had been led into the desert to die of thirst. The ancient world was familiar with stories of fickle gods who were generous one moment and struck you dead the next. Jesus had done miraculous signs, but those signs could have been the signs of a false prophet.

Why is it so easy to miss God's presence in the ambiguity of our lives? How is it that we can have those times in our life when we experience God's closeness, or God's deliverance, or answers to prayer, only to find ourselves asking just a little bit later, "Is the Lord among us or not?" People respond to ambiguity with fear. I suspect that often we do not have trouble believing in God so much as we fear that God cannot be trusted. We find it easier to believe that God is to be feared than that God is to be loved. The Israelites had plenty of

reasons to believe in the God who had led them out of Egypt, but when they found themselves without water in the desert, their fear of dying of thirst led them to question: "Is the Lord among us or not?" The religious leaders of Jesus' day had seen the kinds of works that Jesus did, and should have been able to connect the dots. The question they asked, "By what authority do you do these things?" points to a kind of insecurity. John's gospel tells us they feared that the Romans would "take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:49) They were not so much concerned about Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God as the possibility that another king, a Roman emperor, might take away everything they had. Jesus goes on to say in Matthew's gospel that the tax collectors and prostitutes believed John the Baptist when the religious leaders did not (Matt. 21:31-32) . Who had the most to lose if John the Baptist was a prophet? And who had nothing to lose?

But if ambiguity leads to fear, why is God not more clear if he wants to make himself known? We can find a clue in this morning's reading from Philippians: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." (Phil. 2:5-7) Several times in this passage, Paul uses some variation of the word "humility," and, paradoxically, he applies the words "humility" and "humble" to the God who has become human in Christ. Paul says that we should pattern our own actions on those of Christ, ". . . in humility count[ing] others more significant than ourselves." Paul says that although Christ was "in the form of God," he took on the form of a servant." Christ "humbled himself, . . . making himself nothing." (v. 3, 6)

When we think of the attributes of God, we think of all the "omnis": words like "omnipotence," "omniscience," "omnipresence." When we think of God, we think of someone who

can do absolutely anything. We do not automatically think of humility when we think about God, but, there it is. If we take the incarnation of God in Christ seriously, then we have to take seriously that God is humble, that in becoming a human being, the Creator of the universe became a servant, and allowed himself to be crucified by his own creatures. As Paul says, Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, "even death on a cross" (v. 8). And it is in this humility that God's unlimited power is most truly expressed. This morning's collect has it right: "O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen." The answer to the fear of divine absence is the humility of divine presence in the cross.

This divine humility means that when God comes to us, he does not force his reality on us, and he comes to us in a way that can be missed. When God delivered Israel from Egypt, he brought them into a desert that was a real desert, and deserts do not have a lot of water. For the Israelites in the desert, the desert was not obviously a place where God was. It was a threatening place. When God took on the form of a human being, he became a first century Galilean peasant who said of himself, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matt. 8:20) For the Jewish leaders, an upstart from a backwater like Galilee was an unlikely claimant to divine authority, and his supposed authority was a cause of fear, a threat to their security and the security of their nation. It is always possible to interpret the divine presence as divine absence.

It seems then that the ambiguity of the divine presence demands a response from us. When God's people interpret God's presence as absence to ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?," it is a question that rebounds on the questioner. So Moses

responds to the Israelites with his own question: "Why do you test the Lord?" (Exodus 17:2) Jesus turns the question on the religious leaders of his people: "Was John's baptism from heaven or from man?" (Matthew 12:24) The rebound question turns the question from a question about God's presence to a question about the questioner. As God asked Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9) As Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15)

But the humility of the divine presence also means that the divine answer that responds to the question by challenging the questioner is not the last word. When God questions us, it is not a Zen koan like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" that has no answer. God does provide a definitive answer to our question, "Is the Lord among us or not?". In the Old Testament, God answered his people by bringing water out of the rock, even though they doubted, and eventually he brought Israel into the land he had promised to Moses when he appeared in the burning bush. Some, however, ended up staying in the desert. Matthew tells us the final answer to the fear that lay behind the question of the scribes and priests about Jesus' authority. When the women who were Jesus' followers came to his empty tomb looking for the body of the crucified Jesus, they were met by angels who told them: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen." (Matt. 28:5) "Do not be afraid!" Why? Because "not here" does not mean "absent," or "missing," but "alive," not "dead." "Is the Lord among us or not?" Matthew's gospel provides us with the definitive answer to this question in the last verse of his gospel, when the risen Jesus tells his followers: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20)

Like the ancient Israelites, we may find ourselves in a desert, and may find ourselves asking the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" We can ask that question as did the Israelites in the desert who questioned Moses, or as the

religious leaders who demanded of Jesus that he provide his credentials. But we can also ask the question like the prostitutes and tax collectors who believed John, or like the women followers of Jesus who came to the empty tomb. How we ask that question will suggest the question that may be asked of us in return.

The answer to the question “Is the Lord among us or not?” is that the ambiguity of God’s presence does not mean that God is absent. It does mean that God is humble. God comes to us in the form of a crucified and risen Savior and his word to us is “Do not be afraid.” (Matt. 28:10)

Answers to New Atheist Questions: Part 1 – Epistemology

A reader named “Dale” left the following comment in response to my sermon: “CallerID From the Source of the Universe”:

There are two main forces in the universe. Order and chaos. Religion perceives order as good and chaos as evil. These forces have always existed in matter. It is religion that has labeled them as such. Some texts of the Bible have been in existence since 1500 BC. There have been billions of creatures that have been borne, lived, and died before the Bible came along to interpret meaning. It is the nature of matter to be the way it is. It is what it is. Being matter I must die. I go out of existence. That is difficult to accept. I had no existence before I was borne. Faith tells me that there is a transcendence existence beyond matter. Hope comes into play here to treat the anxiety of death. Call it a

psychological prop that keeps us sane. Here I can assent to faith or decline to do so. If faith, the promise of glory. Decline, hell or nothing. What is my choice. Glory sounds attractive. Organized religion plays on this dilemma. This is what atheists object to when they challenge believers in this psychological game of meaning.

I thought Dale's comment was worth responding to at some length.



Thank you for writing, Dale. Your points are worth addressing, and I will do so at some length.

First, I want to point out that, in my sermon, I deliberately avoided addressing questions of the origins of evil or suffering, and instead focused on the question of what Christian faith asserts about what it is that God does about the existence of evil and suffering. I also avoided distinguishing between what philosophers call "natural evil" (earthquakes, birth defects) and moral evil (violence, murder, betrayal, theft). I did this for several reasons. First, as a preacher in a church that uses a lectionary, I had to preach from the lectionary texts for the day, and, second, unlike a lecture, a sermon is restricted to what the speaker can say in twenty minutes or so. A more adequate attempt to address the problem would necessarily deal with the origin of evil as well the distinction between natural occurrences (like earthquakes) that threaten human well-being (and are therefore discerned as "evil"), and events that have human causes and are designated as "evil" for moral reasons. The former are more properly "tragedy" than "evil," while the latter are more properly designated as "evil." If you lost your wallet, there would be

a genuine loss to which you might respond with "tough luck" (minor tragedy), but you would not generally consider the loss "evil." On the other hand, if I attempted to steal your wallet, then you would likely consider my actions "evil" even if I failed, and you would justifiably be angry with me, even if I actually had done you no harm.

More important than these distinctions, I think, is the question of response to evil, and, as I pointed out, it is one that I have yet to see any of the New Atheists address (or rather even acknowledge) with any sophistication. To the extent that the New Atheists ignore the fundamental Christian claim that God deals with evil in a particular manner, their criticism simply fails to hit its target. I note that your own comment did not address this central point either, but rather focuses on questions about the nature of the universe (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology), specifically questions having to do with "natural evil," and how we might know whether a given natural event is an evil. So I will address those questions.. Your comment covers a lot of territory and addresses several issues, so it needs to be broken down piece by piece.

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You begin by making two assertions, the first, having to do with ontology or being, the second with epistemology or theory of knowledge. Claims about what we know and how we know, and claims about being (what is the case) are different kinds of claims and need to be assessed separately.

In order to address your first claim about ontology, it is necessary to begin with the second, about epistemology. I summarize your epistemological claims as follows:

1) Order and chaos are inherent to the structure of the universe. In themselves, they are neither good, nor evil, but simply are what they are (in itself a claim about ontology – I will address this later).

2) “Religion” has designated order as “good,” and “chaos” as evil, but these designates correspond to nothing real in the structure of the universe. They are [psychological] projections, based upon fear and unfounded hope, and are thus illusory (more on this later, as well).

3) Unlike, “religion,” atheism recognizes the universe as it is. It does not project illusory categories (“good,” “evil”) on the universe (implied but not asserted).

In response: I would not say that it is “religion” that has labeled “order” and “chaos” as “good” and “evil.” Rather, it is human beings who have done so. Both Plato and Aristotle said that philosophy begins in wonder, and, although the various historical religions all in different ways do indeed attempt to address questions about the meaning of life, the problems of suffering and evil, the purpose and destiny of human beings, it seems to be a fundamental characteristic of human beings as such to want to know answers to questions like “Why are we here?,” “Where did we come from?,” “Why is there evil and suffering?,” “What is the fundamental problem?,” “What is the solution to the fundamental problem?,” “How should we live?” These are the fundamental questions addressed by both religion and philosophy, and atheists engage in this activity as much as do the “religious,” and the New Atheism is simply one of numerous examples in the history of thought to attempt to address these fundamental questions.

Human beings are thus fundamentally metaphysical in orientation, and metaphysics is an unavoidable human activity in the sense that human beings, whether religious or not, whether atheists or not, whether philosophers are not, will attempt to answer these questions. It may be true that some religious people have identified order with “goodness” and

chaos with "evil," but this is not fundamentally (or necessarily) a "religious" affirmation. Plato's philosophy makes something like the same affirmation, and Plato was not "religious," but a philosopher. There are religions (like Christianity) that would make the formulation differently. (I hope to address this later). At the same time, the heated rhetoric of atheists like Dawkins and Hitchens makes clear that they do not merely believe that there is "chaos" in the universe, but that the suffering that results from such chaos is a genuine evil, and this evil is a primary argument against the existence of God.

Human beings address these fundamental questions of the meaning and purpose of life and the world through symbols, narratives, and intellectual constructs that provide attempts to answer the fundamental questions. Contemporary philosophy and theology tends to refer to these epistemological constructs as "world-views" or "paradigms."

One of the reasons that contemporary philosophers and theologians tend to speak in terms of "paradigms" or "world-views" has been the collapse of epistemological "foundationalism," the epistemological position of which Descartes is the prime example. Foundationalism is the position that any claim to knowledge of truth that is not self-evident must itself be based on knowledge of basic foundational truths that are self-evident, such as one's own existence or the law of non-contradiction. Any "truths" not justified by self-evident foundations are to be doubted. Foundationalism has collapsed because of its internal incoherence. Philosophers have come to realize that there are insufficient self-evident principles on which to build a coherent system, and there is lack of agreement on what the self-evident principles are. The conclusions that supposedly follow from self-evident principles are themselves subject to doubt, and, again, there is no agreement on what those conclusions are. Consequently, foundationalism's principle of

methodological doubt leads inevitably to skepticism. Finally, the consequences that follow from self-evident principles lead to trivial results. Any belief that actually makes a difference in one's life and is worth committing oneself to is a belief that is inherently subject to being challenged. Finally, before one can reach the point of recognition of self-evident principles and the conclusions that necessarily follow from them, one always has first committed oneself to non-self-evident beliefs that in themselves can be doubted. The "working-knowledge" that ordinary human beings need to navigate the world is based on "trust" to commitments that can necessarily be doubted, and such trust is socially located in communities that exist prior to the point at which we are able to doubt. Thus, St. Augustine's dictum: "believe in order to understand" is true not only as a prescription for Christian theology, but as necessary advice for anyone to operate in the world. There is no knowledge without prior faith and commitment to things that we cannot prove. Everyone "walks by faith, and not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Foundationalism thus collapses of its own weight. It is the epistemological equivalent of attempting to lift oneself by one's boot straps.

Given the collapse of foundationalism, it follows that atheism, just like "religion," necessarily depends on certain prior faith commitments. Just like "religion," if atheism is going to make a reasonable case for its positions, it must do so by embracing the plausibility of an epistemological "paradigm." And it does so. Just like "religion," the New Atheists "tell a story"; they use symbols and intellectual constructs to make a case that "there is no god" in the exact same way that adherents of various religions or philosophies have used stories and symbols to argue for the plausibility of their own religious or philosophical commitments for thousands of years. It's just that the New Atheism tells a different story, and appeals to different symbols and stories to reach different conclusions. The most popular story told by the New Atheists is that of the progress of rational science and

autonomous individualism over against the intolerant restrictions of irrational religion. Scientific atheism is good because it leads to more progress, more freedom, and more tolerance, while religion is evil because it is founded on irrational superstition, and results in tyranny, intolerance, obscurantism, and violence.

Such paradigms fail or succeed to the extent that they are both internally non-contradictory (consistency), and also can adequately account for and explain observed phenomena of the world around us (comprehensiveness). But they also have to have a certain aesthetic elegance, a "fittingness" that we find attractive, and "just makes sense." Paradigms that are internally inconsistent or clearly contrary to observed reality tend to collapse of their own weight, but particular paradigms can survive a great deal of both internal and external tension. For example, some Eastern religions claim that the observed physical phenomena of the world in which we live are *maya* or illusion, and that the fundamental goal of life is to escape from individual identity, which is, by implication, an illusion as well. Such a claim is, to say the least, in tension with what most Westerners would consider to be the self-evident reality of both one's own existence and the external world. (There have been Western exceptions, like the English philosopher George Berkeley, who argued for a philosophy in which matter did not exist.) However, Hinduism and Buddhism have survived for centuries in spite of fundamental affirmations that fly in the face of what most Westerners consider to be the self-evident nature of reality. At the same time, internal consistency and comprehensiveness are not alone able to preserve a paradigm. Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is the source of the contemporary use of the term "paradigm," and Kuhn's fundamental argument was that the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric scientific paradigm was not the result of either better internal consistency or comprehensiveness. Ptolemy's paradigm was as capable of accounting for the data as was

Copernicus's. What led to the eventual overthrow of geocentrism in favor of heliocentrism was a kind of "aesthetic" elegance that was more simple, and thus more appealing. Similarly, a case can be made that numerous philosophical or religious systems have enough internal consistency and external comprehensiveness not to be self-evidently incoherent. Religious or philosophical systems can survive for quite awhile despite lack of consistency or coherence, and some philosophies and religions disappear not because they are self-evidently false, but because they become old-fashioned or are simply overtaken by other paradigms.. One thinks of nineteenth century Absolute Idealism or twentieth century logical positivism as two such philosophies that were once in vogue, but now have simply fallen by the way side.

Epistemological paradigms can be as simple as the accounts of primitive mythologies (although most mythologies are not actually simple) or as sophisticated as philosophical and metaphysical constructs like those of Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel or Martin Heidegger. Epistemological paradigms are also associated with the higher religions: not only the so-called Western religions of Judaism and Christianity, but also Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism. Insofar as these intellectual constructs or paradigms are attempts to think within and out of particular religious traditions, they are theologies.

These paradigms can also be atheistic. For example, one thinks of Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Neitzche in the nineteenth century, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, in the twentieth, and, more recently, post-modern atheists like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, or Peter Singer. As such, the atheistic constructs are neither less nor more theoretical than the mythological, religious, or philosophical ones, and attempt to use exactly the same kinds of intellectual tools to address the same kinds of questions. They have no intrinsic superiority to the paradigms offered by theistic philosophical

systems, religions, or even primitive mythologies. They simply offer one intellectual construct among others in an attempt to answer basic worldview questions.

And, as paradigms, none of them are straightforward readings of what is "simply there." The atheistic assumption that nothing exists except matter is as much an intellectual construct (a paradigm) that attempts to make sense of reality as is the Buddhist claim that individual existence is an illusion and that the non-existing self is subject to rebirth until it escapes this illusion, or as the Christian claim that human beings have been created in the image of God, and are destined for eternal life.

So much for the epistemological claim. ("It is religion that has labeled them as such.") It is not "religion" that has "labeled them as such," but simply human beings with a desire to know, who engage in the process that Plato and Aristotle say begins in wonder. Some who engage in this process have commitments to some particular religion. Some do not. But the process is the same, whether engaged in by advocates of particular religions or advocates of none.

This does not imply that one "paradigm" is as valid as another, nor that there is no way to decide between paradigms, but it does eliminate the atheist presumption that "religion" is an implausible "interpretation" of reality – "It is religion that has labeled them as such" – while atheism is simply a recognition of what is self-evidently the case. Both offer competing paradigms, and there is no such thing as a straightforward reading of the way things just are. It may be the case that, as you write, "matter [simply] is what it is." But that is not simply and self-evidently true.

This leads to your metaphysical claims, which I hope to address later.