

The Difference of God and the Difference it Makes: A Sermon

Psalm 96.1-9(10-13)

Isaiah 45.1-7

1 Thess. 1.1-10

Mt. 22.15-22



Occasionally the lecture readings so clearly focus on a single topic that only a really clever preacher can find a way to preach on something else. This morning seems to be one of those occasions. If I were to summarize this morning's lectionary readings with a single title it would be "The Difference of God and the Difference It Makes." Since I'm not a really clever preacher, I intend to preach on that topic. What do the readings say about God, and what difference does it make?

To do that, however, I am going to begin with some background. Sometimes in order to understand a topic, it helps to contrast it with something else. And this morning's lectionary readings do that. They contrast faith in the one true God with its opposite – belief in false gods, or idolatry. The Psalm declares "All the gods of the people are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Ps. 96:5). In 1 Thessalonians Paul writes to his readers: "you turned to God from idols to serve

the living God" (1 Thes. 1:9).

Belief in many gods was a common characteristic of ancient cultures. Not so much today. You have to look far and wide to find a genuine polytheist or someone who worships actual physical idols in contemporary Western culture. There are still polytheists of a sort in Asia. Traditional Hindus and at least some Buddhists believe in "gods" (plural) rather than in one God. And there are still gods (plural) in a lot of traditional tribal religions. But the problem in contemporary Western culture is not a literal belief in many gods, but a lack of genuine belief in any god – what I would call "unbelief." This is not necessarily atheism, but it is a way of living in which belief in the one God has nothing to do with the way that people live their lives day in and day out.

I am old enough to have lived through several different variations of "unbelief." Before terrorists flew airplanes into the Twin Towers in New York City, something called "pluralism" was popular. Often associated with "New Age" Religion, and what is sometimes called "Therapeutic Moralistic Deism," pluralism can be summed up in the saying, "All roads lead to the same destination." Former Episcopal Presiding Bishop Kathrine Jefferts Shori put it this way: when Jesus says in John's gospel that he is the way, the truth, and the life, what that means is that Jesus is the way for Christians, not that Jesus is the way for everybody. The primary assumption of pluralism is that there is nothing unique about the Christian God.

The New Atheism appeared right after the fall of the Twin Towers. While pluralism might be willing to admit that there is at least some kind of God, the whole point of the New Atheism is to deny that any God exists. The New Atheists thrive on ridicule, combined with silly arguments that they think are really clever arguments. A standard New Atheist argument can be found in the claim that the only difference between the atheist and the Christian is that the atheist

believes in one less god than the Christian. The Christian does not believe in gods like Thor or Zeus, and neither does the atheist. It just happens that the atheist does not believe in the Christian god either. For the New Atheist, there is no difference between the God of the Bible and Thor or Zeus. The fundamental assumption of the New Atheist is that the Christian God is just one god among others, and believing in any of them is foolish.

A third form of contemporary unbelief is consumerist secularism, or what we could call "normal nihilism." In the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared that "God is dead," and he speculated about how society would respond to the nihilism that he believed was the logical conclusion of the death of God. What Nietzsche did not anticipate was the combination of unbelief and consumerism. Contemporary post-modern culture seems to have given up entirely on the optimism of the Enlightenment, but it has not despaired. Instead people go shopping. Why worry about whether there is any meaning or purpose to life as long as there is YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, the new iPhone, and another movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe? Normal nihilism is the assumption that we don't need God because we don't have time for God. We can buy lots of "stuff" to keep us distracted.

If there is any truth to the Christian notion of God, then all of the above are not so much false as simply mistaken. The three forms of contemporary unbelief have missed the point, but this morning's lectionary readings provide the point.

In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 45, we hear one of the classic texts of biblical monotheism: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no God" (Is. 45: 5). There is a fundamental difference between the God of the Bible, and the various gods of pagan polytheism or Eastern religions like Hinduism or Buddhism. The Biblical God is the Creator of everything that is. The Psalm from this morning's lectionary reads: "All the gods of the peoples are worthless

idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Ps. 96:5). In the reading from Isaiah, we hear: "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things." (Is. 45: 6-7).

Again, there is a fundamental difference between the One God who is the Creator and the "many gods" of polytheistic religions. No pagan gods can be genuine creators because polytheism always divides up the task of running things among different deities. Zeus and Thor are gods of thunder. Aphrodite is the goddess of love. Mars is the god of war, and Poseidon is the god of the sea. The pagan gods cannot create a universe because they are characters who live in a universe that is bigger than they are, and each one of them has their own limited task to keep it running. However, if there is one God and that God is the Creator of everything that is, then God is not "one more item" in the universe like Thor or Zeus. God is not "in" the universe at all because God accounts for the universe's very existence.

However, to believe in a Creator, it is not enough just to say that God accounts for the existence of the universe, as if God started things rolling with the big bang around 14 billion years ago, and occasionally steps in now and then to do something like perform a miracle. The Christian doctrine of creation is that God both creates and sustains the universe, and that if God were to cease creating even for a millisecond, the universe would blink out like a burnt out light bulb. The Christian doctrine of creation means that God is present to every aspect of his creation at every moment, and is guiding his creation to its eventual completion in what is called the eschaton, or the new creation. Historically, that is the Christian doctrine of providence, and we see it in the Isaiah passage when God says of the Persian Emperor Cyrus the Great: "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him . . . I will

go before you and level the exalted places . . . I call you by your name, though you do not know me. . . . I equip you though you do not know me" (Is. 45:1, 2, 4, 5). When Cyrus conquered the Babylonians, this allowed the people of Israel to return from exile to their own land. Cyrus had his own goals in conquering Babylon, but through the words of the prophet, we find out that God had intentions that Cyrus knew nothing about. God used Cyrus to accomplish that purpose even though Cyrus did not know it.

The ancient polytheistic religions could not have a doctrine of providence because there was no single god who was in charge of everything. What they believed in instead was something called fate, and fate controlled even the destiny of the gods. If your name is Oedipus, you're going to kill your father and marry your mother, and there is nothing you can do about it.

Modern people do not believe in fate, but they do believe in something called "progress." What is progress? Progress is basically the same thing as the pagan doctrine of fate, but with an optimistic post-Enlightenment spin. Progress is fate with a Harvard MBA. When you hear people talk about being on the "right" or "wrong side of history," that's the language of "progress."

But belief in progress is sheer superstition, just as much as the pagan belief in fate. If you don't believe that there is a personal Creator who exercises providence over creation, then history can have no right or wrong sides. And progress has one serious disadvantage over a belief in providence. Progress is impersonal, and so it cannot forgive. In a world in which progress rules, what happens to those who are on what is currently the "wrong side of history"? They must be forced to conform, or else to be eliminated.

So the first point to be drawn from this morning's lessons is that if the God of the Bible exists, then there is only one,

God is the Creator of everything that is, and history has a purpose and a direction.

The second point to be drawn from this morning's lessons is that if the God of the Bible exists, then God is with us. The New Testament goes beyond what the Old Testament says about God as Creator by saying that the God who has created the world has come among his creation by becoming a creature himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. 1 Thessalonians is probably the first letter written by Paul in the New Testament, in which case this morning's lectionary reading provides the first mention of the Trinity in all of Christian literature. Paul writes that God the Father has shown his love for the Thessalonians, who have come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Son whom God has raised from the dead, and who will deliver us from the "wrath to come," and that the gospel (or good news) has come to the Thessalonians in the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:3-4, 9-10).

Of course, Paul does not spell out his complete Christology and soteriology in these few verses, and we have to read all of Paul's letters to understand fully what it meant for Paul to speak of God's presence in Jesus, and of what Paul meant by salvation in Christ, and the gift of God's grace to the church in the presence of the Holy Spirit. I assume that since this is a seminary, you have a basic grasp of that material.

A popular song from the 1990's had the lyrics, "What if God was one of us, just a slob like one of us?" The basic point of what Paul says about Jesus Christ is that Jesus is God's personal presence among us. In Jesus, the God who created the universe became one of us. This is an audacious claim if you think about it. According to modern scientists, the edge of the observable universe is about 93 billion light years in diameter. The Milky Way, our own galaxy, contains somewhere around 100 thousand million stars, of which our sun is only one. The universe contains somewhere between 200 billion and 2 trillion galaxies, so there are far more suns in the universe

than there are grains of sands on all of the beaches of the world. The doctrine of the incarnation is that the Lord who "made the heavens," who created all of this, became one of us, a human being who lived on one planet orbiting around a single star in just one of the unfathomable number of galaxies in the universe.

And this is where contemporary unbelief simply misses the point. If Jesus Christ is God become a human being, then Jesus cannot be compared to other religious leaders or philosophers any more than the God who created the entire universe can be compared to gods like Zeus or Thor. Moses, Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Mohammed have in common that they were all sinners who needed salvation. And they are all dead. Jesus did not need salvation because he is the Savior. Unlike all of these other religious leaders, Jesus is not dead. Because Jesus is the Son of God incarnate, because God his Father raised him from the dead, Jesus is alive, and Jesus is God with us.

The third theme that appears in this morning's readings is that of "Election" or "Covenant." If the God of the Bible exists, then God has a people. In the Isaiah passage we read that God has chosen Cyrus to do his purposes "[f]or the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen" (Is. 45:4). In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes of the Thessalonians that they are "loved by God," and that God "has chosen you." The Thessalonians had "turned from idols to serve the living and true God," and so Paul writes that he "gives thanks" because of the "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" that existed among the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:2-4, 9).

Contemporary culture is more and more obsessed with issues of identity and belonging – the value of what is called "diversity." Unfortunately, competing identity groups have led not to community, but to alienation – of group fighting against group. This seems more and more to be the case since

the last presidential election, and attempts to engage in conversation seem to only result in more anger, more raised voices, and more people talking past one another. American culture is divided by race, by issues of sexuality and gender identity, by politics, by class, by education, by religion. Things are no better internationally, with decades of continuing war and unrest in the Middle East, with religious persecution in Asia and Africa, with the apparent collapse of what seemed to have been the promise of the European Union, and even with the very real possibility of nuclear war for the first time in decades.

In the midst of the collapse of community on a global level, the Bible's assertion that the solution to humanity's problems lies in God's selection of a special people seems almost ludicrous. But it would have seemed just as ludicrous when the prophet wrote to the Persian Emperor Cyrus that God had anointed him "for the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen" (Is. 45:4). At this point in history, Israel consisted of only a remnant of the tribe of Judah, the last remaining of the original twelve tribes of Israel that somehow had survived being exiled in Babylon. Yet today Cyrus and the Persian Empire no longer exist, but both the synagogue and the church do. Certainly it would have seemed ludicrous to the leading political and social leaders of the Roman Empire in the first century that Paul would have written to a backwater group in Thessalonica that they were loved and chosen by the God who had created the entire universe. Yet the Roman empire is long gone, and the church still exists, with millions of Christians still doing what the Thessalonians did, gathering for worship every Sunday, reading the Scriptures, baptizing new Christians into the community, and sharing in the broken bread of the Eucharist.

The message of the gospel is that since the God of the Bible exists, the alienation of divided communities is overcome because the God who created the entire universe is among us in

Jesus Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes of the Thessalonians that they had turned from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9). The solution to this mess of division not only in ancient cultures, but in today's Western secular cultures who do not think that they need God because they have their own idols of self-sufficiency, group identity, or consumerist "stuff" is that it is only by turning from those idols to serve the living and true God that they can experience genuine community.

And, of course, if God has a people, election can embrace even those who are not God's people. The church has a mission to those who are not God's people. The Psalmist calls on God's people to "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples" (Ps. 96:3). The Psalmist says that the gods of the people are worthless idols, but the same people who worship those idols are called to ascribe to God the glory due his name. It is by knowing and worshiping this God who has created the world, who has come among us in Jesus Christ, who has chosen the church to be his people, that a new community of reconciliation can be created.

What then is the mission of this people, of those of us who find ourselves in the church of Jesus Christ, this community who have been chosen, redeemed, and loved by the one God who made the entire universe?

First, we can put the culture's false idols in proper perspective. When Jesus was asked about whether it is permissible to pay taxes to the pagan emperor Caesar, he responded: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). Jesus acknowledged the idolatrous nature of Caesar's claim. Only God deserves our ultimate loyalty. At the same time, Jesus refused to let himself become entangled in a test to see if he would simply reject Caesar's authority. Jesus had faith in providence, not progress. As followers of Jesus, Christians do not have to worry about being on the "right side of history"

because we have placed our faith not in human idols, but in the God who controls history.

Because the God who created the entire universe has become incarnate in Jesus Christ, Christians look to Jesus to find the clues to the meaning and purpose of our lives, our futures, and of human history. As followers of Jesus, Christians do not follow one path among others. Instead, Christian discipleship means following the path of Jesus Christ through suffering and even death to resurrection. As Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians, this is the path that begins with the work of faith, leads to the labor of love, and concludes with the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1: 3). Following this path means gratitude to the Father who is our Creator and Redeemer and joy in the Holy Spirit. To quote the Psalm, it is the path of worship – to sing to the Lord a new song, to tell of his salvation, to ascribe to the Lord glory and strength, to worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness (Ps. 96: 1, 7, 9).

Finally, this is a path which is not to be followed alone. The God who created the universe, who has come among us in Jesus Christ has a people, and that people is his church, his *ecclesia* – those who have been called out by God. The mission of Jesus is a mission of reconciliation to enemies and strangers, and so the church should primarily be marked by forgiveness and charity for one another. Because Christians have turned from idols to serve the living God, we love one another.

But the path of following Jesus does not end with the church. God has chosen a people in order to give them a mission. The church has an invitation to those who do not yet know that there is one God who has created the universe, and has redeemed it in Jesus Christ. As God chose Cyrus in order to make it known from the East to the West that there is none beside the God who created the heavens and earth, so it is the mission of the church to extend God's invitation to

those who do not yet know that the one true God has created them and has come among them and reconciled them to himself in Jesus Christ. As the Psalmist writes: "Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all peoples! . . . For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Ps. 96:2, 5).