

THE NEARNESS AND FARNESS OF GOD

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Isaiah 6:1-8

Romans 8:12-17

Barbara Ehrenreich, the social commentator and author, has written about the modern tendency to domesticate the awesome. She gives the example of how when centuries of technological striving finally allowed us to see the surface of Mars up close, we found rocks named Yogi, Scooby Doo and Barnacle Bill. Ehrenreich speculates that “someone high up in NASA must have issued a firm directive: ‘Keep it cuddly, guys. We don’t want Mars to seem like, you know, outer space.’ [You also see it in our talk about God. If you] watch [some of the popular] televangelists, [she points out,] you’ll be introduced to an affable deity eager to be enlisted as your personal genie. ... At least the ancient Hebrews had the good sense to make [God] unnamable and unseeable except in the flames of a burning bush—a permanent Mystery.”¹

In the sixth chapter of Isaiah there is an account of one man’s stunning experience of the reality of God. It was no empty sound drifting in the wind for Isaiah. It was an overwhelming and shattering experience which turned his whole life around. The images he uses to describe it—thrones, seraphim with six wings, foundations shaking, smoke, and burning coals—are far removed from our world, except perhaps as video games or movie special effects, but if we take a second look at this vision which the prophet experienced in the temple, we can see that he is saying at least two things which are essential to any understanding of the reality of God: God is far off, unapproachable, mysterious, uncontrollable; and yet, amazingly, this same unapproachable and mysterious God draws near and touches us. The throne, the seraphim with six wings, the shaking of the foundations of the temple, the smoke, the ceaseless calling out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts”—all this is the experience of the unapproachable, mysterious, uncontrollable, infinitely distant God. But the seraphim flying down to touch the prophet’s lips with a burning coal—that is God drawing near to touch and make whole. Like a child born in a stable. Like a dying man throwing his arms against a cross on a Friday afternoon.

Many churches observe Trinity Sunday as a day for celebrating the God we have come to know as “Father, Son and Holy Ghost” or, if you prefer, “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.” But some scholars have argued that in the doctrine of the Trinity we are actually trying to say not three things about God, but two: that God is far off, beyond us, absolute and unapproachable; and at the same time that God in his beyond-ness draws near to us in the incarnate Christ, and in the presence of the Holy Spirit. These two, the farness and the nearness, are always held together in tension if we are to have any

¹ Barbara Ehrenreich in *Time* (August 25, 1997), quoted in *Christianity Today*, October 26, 1998, 88.

understanding or experience of the God the Bible talks about, just as they are held in tension in Isaiah's vision.

But we are forever breaking that tension. At the time of the Reformation, it was God's farness that had gotten out of all proportion. So Luther agonized over how he could possibly find peace or acceptance by this holy, unapproachable, mysterious, and even angry God. Luther's momentous rediscovery of justification by grace through faith leaves us with an unpalatable and forbidding phrase, but it simply says that the awful and majestic and unapproachable God draws near to us in Christ, offering peace and forgiveness and love and hope through no efforts of our own.

Today the problem is exactly reversed. We have taken the nearness of God and so embraced it as to all but suffocate God's farness. Isaiah's cry in the presence of the High and Holy One, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips," is all but incomprehensible to most of us today. We say instead, "Lord, I do the best I can, you know that." Or, "Somebody upstairs must like me." We like to think we are buddies with Jesus. Add to that our inordinate appetite for God's blessings: God bless our home and nation and schools and luncheons and church services and even our sports teams. You know, it's become routine after professional football games for players—bruised and bloody at the end of the game—to join hands on the 50-yard line and give thanks to Jesus for the opportunity to represent him on the grand stage of the National Football League.² We expect God to sprinkle blessings of our everyday activities like a great salt-shaker seasoning life's stew.

The symptoms are evident, too, in the way we worship. Instead of an experience of awe and wonder and mystery and glory, most churches these days advertise an experience of friendliness. The language we use, the music we sing, the clothes we wear—everything is more informal now than it was a few decades ago, even in churches, like Union Church, that are considered "traditional" in our worship style! I understand the reasons. I'm not arguing that we should turn back the clock. But it's worth recognizing that this pronounced shift toward greater familiarity has its perils. For in the formality of the old forms the church expressed a sense of distance and even awe when we gathered in the presence of the High and Holy and Unapproachable One. "Amazing grace" is no longer so amazing if we casually assume God is our good buddy, in the business, after all, of reassuring and forgiving and blessing.

As in worship, so in life. So in our national life: "God bless America." "In God we trust." "One nation under God." Martin Marty writes: "God is so confidently controlled that the sense of distance between his purposes and [ours] disappears."³ Is it surprising that a lot of us are worried about the moral climate in our country today? If God is known only in his nearness, as reassuring, blessing, loving, forgiving, then God's awesome demands for integrity, honesty, justice, truth, righteousness dwindle away into a whimper. Love for the neighbor, which at rock bottom involves simple justice, respect for the integrity and freedom of others, becomes soft and sentimental. And love for the enemy is so far out as to be little more than a joke, not to be taken seriously.

² Tom Krattenmaker, "Going long for Jesus," *Salon.com*, May 10, 2006 (Online at <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/05/10/ministries/print.html>)

³ Martin Marty, *Varieties of Unbelief* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 170.

Frederick Buechner suggests that we cannot really stand to hear the full message of the Bible anymore, like the story of Noah and God's terrible despair over the human race:

We do not want to read it, [he says] or at least do not want to read it for what it actually says, and so make it instead into a fairy tale, which no one has to take seriously—just the way we make black jokes about disease and death so that we can laugh instead of weep at them; just the way we translate murder and lust into sixth-rate television melodramas, which is to reduce them to a size that anybody can cope with; just the way we take the nightmares of our age, the sinister, brutal forces that dwell in the human heart threatening always to overwhelm us, and present them as the Addams family or the monster dolls that we give, again, to children. *Gulliver's Travels* is too bitter about man, so we make it into an animated cartoon. *Moby Dick* is too bitter about God, so we make it into an adventure story for boys. Noah's ark is too something-or-other else, so it becomes a toy with a roof that comes off so you can take the little animals out.⁴

Is there then any way by which we can restore the tension between the unapproachable High and Holy One and the one who draws near? Any way to get out of this suffocating obsession with God's nearness?

Edward Steimle suggests we first have to soak ourselves in the primary realization that God is mystery, and from our human point of view unknowable. As another puts it: "When all is said and done, God is still *incognitus* [unknown] and *absconditus* [far off]. Only through the biblical revelation do we know of a God of grace and mercy, whom we worship in faith. For the Christian, this God is most meaningfully present to us in Jesus Christ. But God himself is unknowable...At most we can but hold an attitude of reverent agnosticism regarding his inner nature."⁵

That may very well be true. But can we actually experience the farness as well as the nearness anymore? For we cannot experience the nearness—can we?—unless we experience the farness! I think it does come sometimes in worship, and most especially when we receive the bread and cup and they touch our lips—like a burning coal. When the communion liturgy turns to the Sanctus, the song of Isaiah's seraphim, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory," I am frequently touched by an experience of the mystery of God, the High and Holy One, unapproachable in glory, bending down to touch me in love and reassurance and hope through bread and grape juice. The mystery both of God's farness and of God's nearness comes alive for me.

But outside of formal worship? Yes. I think it is still possible for you and for me to be aware of the farness of God, of his distance, of his unapproachableness, of his mystery. When we're alone perhaps. And the masks we wear most of the time drop off. And I wonder about me. And the future. Is there any future? Any real future? And I wonder about the senselessness of life, its brutalities, its terrors. *Deus absconditus*. God, if there is a God, far off. Inscrutable. Awareness of distance. Infinite distance. Or perhaps not physically alone. In a New York subway. Surrounded by hordes of people. Yet

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 35-36.

⁵ Carnegie S. Calian, "How to Go Through Seminary without Losing Your Faith," *The Christian Century*, February 2, 1973, 147.

nobody knows me. Nobody knows my name. Does anybody know me or my name? And what about those hordes of people? Millions of them in New York City, or infinitely more millions of them in India . . . China . . . Russia . . . Africa. Can there possibly be a God who knows them? Each one by name? Cares about each one by name? *Deus absconditus*. God far, far off. The stranger in his distance, in his beyond-ness.

Then, perhaps, the miracle. It is this stranger, unknown and unknowable, far off, distant, unapproachable, apparently uncaring much of the time, who draws near in Christ to touch my lips, your lips, with a burning coal.

Someone has suggested that “whenever the people of God have been caught up by an awareness of the awful holiness of God, or even the distance of God” it is the work of the Holy Spirit drawing near to remind us of the tension. “When we are taken up by the sense of the terrible other-ness of God, or let’s say the sense that God is far beyond us and beyond our control, then we have been visited by the Holy Spirit.”⁶

So the tension is retained. God in his nearness—when we are actually open to God in his nearness, incredibly reaching across a great chasm, a great gulf—makes us conscious of his otherness, of his distance. Then the name of Jesus indeed sounds sweet in our ears. Then “amazing grace” is, by God, amazing!

Only as Isaiah experienced *both* the mysterious, terrible otherness of God and the nearness of God was he enabled to hear the voice of God speaking directly to him: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

The authentic voice of God addressed to you, whether in demand—“Go love”—or in reassurance—“Come unto me you that labor and are heavy laden”—can be heard only as it is experienced as coming from both God far and God near. Any other voice, heard *only* as inordinate demand as with Luther in his early days, or heard *only* as suffocating comfort and reassurance as with many of us today, is spurious. It is a demonic distortion of the God who speaks to us in the Bible. Indeed it is an idol of our own devising.

Maybe, just maybe, as a crisis in the world of Isaiah—“the year that King Uzziah died”—cracked him open to the possibility of a vision of the High and Holy One, so today the crises in our world in recent years—the COVID pandemic, climate change, racial and ethnic animosity, rising income inequality, crime, natural disasters, hunger—may crack us open too to the possibility of an experience of God far off, unapproachable in his awesome and holy glory, *and* to the miracle of that same God bending down to touch our lips with a burning coal and make us whole.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever.
Amen.

⁶ Lee E. Snook, in *Renewal in the Pulpit*, ed. Edmund A. Steimle (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 183-183.