

## ARE YOU THIRSTY?

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
March 20, 2022

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 63:1-8

You and I are a problem of sorts to a school of academics called evolutionary biologists. We are an anomaly. What we are doing this morning does not compute. If, as the evolutionary biologists believe, our deepest drives and instincts and motives have to do with survival and preservation, then our being here this morning doesn't make much sense. If the instinct to protect and preserve and survive is built deeply into our DNA over millions of years of evolution, then getting out of bed this morning, getting dressed up and making our way to church, doing something we literally do not have to do, and then making matters infinitely more complicated by reaching into our wallets and checkbooks and giving away resources with which we might preserve and protect our lives or at least amuse and entertain ourselves drives some scientists crazy. It makes no sense at all.

“O God, you are my God, I seek you,” the psalmist wrote.

My soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. . . .  
Your steadfast love is better than life.

There is something about us that seems to make no biological sense at all, something deep within us that not only does not compute, but that the most determined power in the world cannot eradicate or defeat. What is it? Where did it come from?

The question was raised and explored in a *New York Times Magazine* article some years ago, with the title “Why Do We Believe?” on the cover in big bold white letters against a black sky full of tiny swirling dots. What preacher could resist reading that article? I didn't. The article's subtitle was “Darwin's God: In the world of evolutionary biology, the question is not whether God exists but why we believe in [God]?” The article introduced me to a new academic discipline, evolutionary religious studies, which focuses on the question of why human beings believe.

There have been a number of popular books in recent years that argue that not only is there no God but that religion is a residue of primitive civilizations, an irrational, unhelpful, and dangerous aberration. Think, for example of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins or *God Is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens or *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett, or Sam Harris's book, *The End of Faith*.

The authors call themselves neo-atheists and based on scientific rationalism think we should be embarrassed to say we believe. Dawkins is particularly exercised by the religious education of children, which he calls a form of child abuse and recommends state intervention to protect children from their parents' beliefs.

One of the many critics of the books, Sam Schulman, editor of *The American* magazine, says that there is nothing new here, nothing that you didn't hear in your freshman dormitory. And he faults the scientists for not even acknowledging that the question of God and religious belief has engaged the minds of the very best thinkers in Western civilization all the way back to the ancient Greeks—people like John Milton, Isaac Newton, Dante and Albert Einstein.<sup>1</sup>

The problem for the scientist is that religious belief has “no obvious benefit for survival.” In fact, religion is regularly a costly thing. People give their resources, sacrifice even. Because they believe, people stand up and object to the authorities, make themselves unpopular, get arrested, go to jail. Because they believe, people sometimes do the unthinkable—lay down their lives.

The article concluded by posing the question “Are the nonbelievers right, and is religion at its core an empty undertaking, a misdirection, a vestigial artifact of a primitive mind? Or are the believers right, and does the fact that we have the mental capacity for discerning God, suggest that it was God who put it there? In short, are we hardwired to believe in God?”<sup>2</sup>

It is a fascinating question. The haunting Sixty-Third Psalm weighs in with the image of thirst, one of the most elemental of our needs. The Hebrews were a desert people. They knew and lived with arid dryness, in which thirst was a common experience and water to drink was the most precious life-giving, life-sustaining element. Metaphors of thirst, dryness, fainting were common and powerful. And so the psalmist uses those powerful images to make an important point about human beings—namely an elemental, basic need for God, yearning for God, longing for God, thirsting for God, as basic to us, as real in us, as our physical thirst and our need for water.

O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you; . . .  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

The prophet Isaiah picks up the theme in similar images:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

But then the prophet raises an interesting point:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

That is a question that has a contemporary ring to it. Why do you waste resources on that which does not sustain life and answer your deepest need?

In his book, *The Geography of God*, Michael Lindvall—who is the pastor emeritus of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City—cites British journalist Bernard Levin, who wrote, “Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire—and yet lead lives of quiet . . . desperation, understanding

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<sup>1</sup> *Context*, March 2007.

<sup>2</sup> “Why Do We Believe?”, *New York Times*, March 4, 2007.

nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them however much food and drink they pour into it; however many motor cars and television sets they stuff into it...it aches.”<sup>3</sup>...

The psalmist proposes that we are created with the capacity for belief and trust in God built into us, that thirst and need for God are as natural to us as our thirst and need for water.

A long time ago St. Augustine put it beautifully: “Thou hast made us for thyself...and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.”

Pascal said, “there is a God-shaped hole in every human heart.”

And C. S. Lewis, reflecting on the long, slow process by which he came to faith: “We have within us a life-long nostalgia, a longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off.”<sup>4</sup>

In the *Times* article about evolutionary biology and the new atheism, Justin Barrett was cited. He is an evolutionary biologist who also happens to be a Christian. He said, “Christian theology teaches that people were crafted by God to be in a loving relationship with him and with other people. Why wouldn’t God, then, design us in such a way as to find belief in divinity quite natural?”

You may be an anomaly by being here in church on this Sunday morning. But you came to the right place.

Here we gather around the idea, which we believe is God’s truth, that God has created the need for God, a thirst in us, that our need for God is a precious part of our humanity.

Here we gather around the truth for which we are all seeking, searching, looking, longing—for beauty, for meaning, for community, for love, thirsting for God.

Here we gather around the proposition that we believe is God’s truth: that Jesus Christ, his birth and life, his teaching and healing, his suffering and dying, is the living water to quench our God-given thirst.

“Ask,” he said, “and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.”

Thomas Merton, who thought so deeply and profoundly about the phenomenon of human spirituality, once said, “We cannot find God unless we know we need God.”

And so we come, to ask and search and knock, to express the thirst and need and longing for God that is in us.

And we come here weekly to claim the promise that in Jesus Christ our thirst is satisfied.

And so, if you are thirsty, if there is a hole in your heart, if there is an ache in your spirit, an empty space that refuses to be filled no matter how hard you try, you might consider the possibility that God created that space, that emptiness, that thirst in you to

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Lindvall, *The Geography of God: Exploring the Christian Journey* (Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Weavings*, July/August 2000.

make you human. You might stop the desperate effort to fill it, heal it, satisfy it yourself, and quietly invite Jesus Christ, the love of God incarnate, to come, to take up residence there, in your heart. It is a place in you and me and every one of us that God made—for him.

“O God, I seek you,” the ancient psalmist wrote, a prayer we might claim as our own this morning.

My soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. . . .  
Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.  
So I will bless you as long as I live.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we bend our knees and lift up our hearts, giving glory to God forever. Amen.