

“No Fooling” GPPC 7-29-18
Psalm 14, Ephesians 3:14-21

Miami Herald columnist Leonard Pitts recently complained about people who, though they share many of his views about the great issues of the day, also dismiss his Christian faith. He said, “With oozing condescension, they lament that someone otherwise so smart and perceptive—i.e., someone who agrees with them on the issues—can’t let go of faith.”

Interestingly enough, the biblical writers don’t really entertain the question of whether there *is* a God or not. Oh, there’s a God alright. But who is this God? What is this God like? Does this God have expectations for humanity? If so, what are those expectations? Is this a friendly God? Or is this an angry God? Or both? But the biblical writers aren’t really interested in the question of whether there is God, a supreme being who created all that is. In their view, that is a given.

Of course, in their own time, as in ours, there *were* some people who said, “There is no God.”

Jeff Paschal

The TV comic and talk show host Bill Maher can be insightful as well as wickedly and crudely funny. But like many of the prominent atheists of our time, he likes to scan the Internet and ridicule the most insane proponents of any faith, including the Christian faith, as if these folks were a fair representation of the whole. He says faith represents the lack of critical thinking and that “religion is a neurological disorder.” Love the humility and subtlety, Bill.

Of course, Maher is right in complaining about how we people of faith often do not live out our faith. Yes, we are hypocrites who talk about love and sing about love and then we are sometimes not very loving, and that includes all the pastors. And fundamentalist extremism in many religions often leads to oppression and violence. Duly noted, Bill.

But Maher, and the modern-day “cool kid” atheists with him, present us with only two choices—crazy, extremist fundamentalism on one side or “there is no God, this is all there is, tough luck, baby,” atheism on the other.

Jeff Paschal

There's another option. There is a thinking faith that does not require us to leave our brain at the sanctuary door to be retrieved after worship is over, but it also leaves room for modesty, mystery, and wonder. And that's what we Presbyterians embrace, a faith that depends upon a thoughtful and scholarly reading of the Bible and a careful assessment of the world around us.

According to the Psalmist, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good."

Wow! This guy makes Eeyore sound like an optimist. What's going on? One biblical scholar says, "The overall attitude seems to reflect a personal lament, possibly composed during the decadent reign of Manasseh (2 Kings 21:1-18; 698-642 B.C.)." (Carroll Stuhlmueller, writing in *The Harper's Bible Commentary*, 439.) During the reign of this corrupt king, it feels as though the moral center has dissolved and people have lost all sense of doing what is right.

And in the Psalmist's view, what has led to this is not so much what is stated aloud but what is actually in the people's heart. "Fools say

Jeff Paschal

in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” It’s not that these people don’t believe there is a God. They do. The problem is that in their hearts they may believe that God is somehow impotent, unable to respond to what they say and do. Secretly they may imagine that God is sort of an absent-minded landlord whose tenants may run amok destroying the furniture and planet and other people while they’re at it. And God won’t notice.

The Psalmist has a name for the people whose careless attitudes about God are in turn creating their own damaging words and actions. He calls them “fools.” The Hebrew word means someone who is “senseless” and “who has no perception of ethical and religious claims,” someone who is “ignoble, disgraceful...” “irreligious and churlish.” (The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon) A fool abandons all restraint and treats other people with contempt. A fool may be overtly scornful of God. Or a fool may indeed claim to believe in God, but in fact consistently speaks and acts as though God did not exist or that God were powerless. A fool may be a believer in name, but an atheist in living.

Jeff Paschal

And the Psalmist is so disappointed that he looks around and says, “They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.” And we Christians answer, “Yep. Everybody is a sinner. And apart from God and God’s grace we’re a damned mess.”

But where is God in this whole debacle? The Psalmist says, “The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.” “Hmm. Any prudent people down there? Anybody who actually seeks after me?” Nope. Nobody.

What’s causing this disorder? The Psalmist places blame here on human ignorance. Whether it is willful or not, he doesn’t say. But he asks, “Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord?” As one Bible expert says, “The psalmist traces both the sociological and theological problems of society to a lack of religious education. These persons ‘have no knowledge,’ they chew up ‘my people’ as they chew up bread, and they don’t pray (14:4).” (James Limburg, *Psalms*, 41-42.)

Jeff Paschal

Does any of this sound strangely familiar in a 21st century sort of way?

Is there any good news? Of course, but it starts out as bad.

“There they shall be in great terror,” says the Psalmist, “because God is with the company of the righteous.”

So apparently the Psalmist’s claim that there is nobody any good, everybody’s terrible, might be hyperbole. But there is plenty of evil running amok and God’s correction of that evil is not going to be pleasant. It’s going to be terrifying. That sounds harsh, doesn’t it? As though God were mean and enjoyed “getting” people.

But it doesn’t have to be read that way. Think of this way. If you’ve ever done something you knew was wrong, something you knew needed to be corrected, you also may have felt that fear at the beginning of a long journey to change. Repentance is often scary.

Or try another example. People who are suffering from the disease of alcoholism or drug addiction or some other addiction often don’t want to admit they have a problem and a disease, because it’s scary. They don’t want to go to AA or NA, because they know it will not be an easy

Jeff Paschal

journey to becoming a “recovering alcoholic” or a “recovering drug addict.” And though people in the group will help them, they will also hold them lovingly accountable. And it’s pretty hard to scam somebody in the group, because they’ve already been down that road and heard it all. Sometimes it’s scary to have to address something destructive in our lives.

Or maybe you’ve realized, after a long time, that you are on the wrong side of history when it comes to some important issues. And now, after all these years, you need to change. Scary, isn’t it? Hard, isn’t it? But how exciting it is to see when people do change, sometimes quickly, usually slowly and reluctantly, but they change. I’ve had to change. Sometimes it’s been scary and hard. And I’ve seen many of you change and grow. How wonderful.

And change and grow, we must, because, as the Psalmist puts it, “God is with the company of the righteous.” I don’t take that to mean that “the righteous” are people who are morally perfect. They aren’t and we aren’t. But I do believe this means God takes sides in this world. God consistently sides *against* people who are bullies and God consistently

Jeff Paschal

sides *with* people who are being mistreated. Consistently. And so must we as Christians.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize Winner Elie Wiesel said, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

And the Psalmist becomes more explicit about what is going on in his time. He says, “You would confound the plans of the poor, but the Lord is their refuge.” Foolish people of the time are picking on the poor. But God takes sides against the bullies and God is the refuge for the poor. Consistently. Consistently.

And the Psalmist says what God wills is a restoration of fairness and right human relationships, what he calls “deliverance” the restoration of “the fortunes of his people” so that the nation will rejoice and be glad.

Maybe all this sounds like just so much wishful thinking. But we are people who take the Bible and God seriously. We believe in God and we believe that the Bible, written by human beings inspired by God, is a

Jeff Paschal

source of knowledge and a resource for our daily living. So the Psalmist is a vehicle to inspire us and guide us.

The writer of Ephesians even prays for Christians “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” The image is that in spite of the storms raging around us or even in us we are like a mighty oak tree rooted and grounded in love.

And then the writer prays this prayer so beautiful and deep it seems contradictory. “I pray that you may have power to *comprehend*, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that *surpasses knowledge*, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Last Sunday, we heard Jesus talk about taking a break and then coming back to do God’s ministry. This Sunday we hear the writer of Ephesians tell us to dream bigger and do more than we can imagine through the power of God in us. After all, we are people of faith, aren’t we? After all, we are people who want to follow and who want to grow even if it is sometimes scary and hard, right? After all, in that following finally comes the restoration of relationship and rejoicing and gladness.

Jeff Paschal

This week let's do some reflecting. How are we claiming to believe in God with our lips but denying our faith with our words, actions, and policies? And what bigger dreams should we be dreaming and acting upon because of the power and love of Christ that is in us?

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” ©Jeff Paschal