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Ultimate Reality: Thinking Beyond God

Isaiah 40:21-22, 25-26, 28

January 30, 2005

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Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.... "To whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.... Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

Intro: Today's topic hit home this fall. A woman in our church shared with me a beautiful Christmas card from a family. I want to be sensitive, because some of you may have received it as well. Well, it wasn't exactly a "Christmas" card. It was a beautiful graphic with their children's picture on the front. Inside, all it said was the song – "Imagine," and the family's names. What a powerful testimony to their views of God. The John Lennon song is really the anthem of those who think beyond God. It's not a new song. It wasn't a new song in the '60s. It been in the works for about 500 years.

We must adjust our attitude... A study was done in England on why teens are leaving the church: "What turns us off?" 85% said "We don't like priests dressing up in robes." A report was produced "The Church of England has failed and we must change radically. We failed because we haven't taught a generation of young people the significance of clerical dress. We must help people understand the symbolism of clerical dress." ... Oops. It's OUR attitude: The world has to change, not us. It's an attitude I find in myself.

Most people don't want to attack the Christian faith, they just see it as irrelevant.

In our world, God's not dead, so much as He just isn't a "player." We've shoved Him aside.

Pulling back the curtain. The Great and Powerful OZ, it seems, is not so great and powerful after all. The last 5 centuries have pulled back the curtain on God. WE have loomed larger and God is only a little old man of small consequence. The curtain got pulled by a series of little tugs.

Today's history lesson begins with Descartes, a Christian mathematician and philosopher in the early 1600s. He set out to make a list of what people could know with absolute certainty. He took a view of radical skepticism. "Cogito, ergo sum" I think, therefore I am." And everything else is suspect... He raised issues about.. oh, well, everything! Including the Bible. Add to that The Scientific Revolution. Now, virtually all early scientists were deeply devoted Christians. But eventually the Bible was viewed with reservation. The world was demystified with purely natural explanations, and God seemed to be irrelevant. Enter Secularism which believes:

Then along came Darwin. Boom – he kicked God and the Bible out the door. He seemed to have convincing proof that all life had come without any guidance from God. He also seemed to disprove the Genesis account of creation with the notion of evolution. Boom – the Bible is wrong, and God is unnecessary.

(Of course, Darwin actually proved neither. Over 100 years later, the evolutionary model is still a shaky theory, in spite of being accepted as fact by virtually the entire scientific community. Evolution rests on two bits of evidence: a fossil record that shows species becoming gradually more complex, and evidence of small adaptations over time within specific species – like wing color, neck length, or beak size. But no one has ever come up with proof of a leap from one species to another – macroevolution. There’s still no explanation for complex features like eyes or wings, let alone an entire species. In millions of fossils there is no evidence of a transitional species.)

God is simply not a part of our daily world. He is not mentioned, included, or consulted. Business or leisure... God is out of place and out of line in today’s secular society.

Because God doesn’t fit in our “world of reality,”

1. **God is distant.** (Deism – God exists, but he just winds up the clock and lets it run down). He is not involved in the world in any meaningful way. Today these folks are those who believe in the “higher power,” or nominal Christians. “God is watching us From a Distance” could be *their* anthem.
2. **God is absent.** (What you see is what you get). These folks say “I no need for the hypothesis of God.” The bible is purely human. Today these are often well-educated folks with a scientific bent. The spiritual realm is baloney because there’s no measurable evidence of it. We could add the song “*We are living in a material world*” to “Imagine” pretty well.
3. **God is compartmentalized.** The 2-worlds approach: the public and the private.
 - a. **The public realm** is made up of hard facts – math, science, politics, and economics, governed by facts on which we all agree. God has no place here.
 - b. **The private realm** is governed by beliefs and values. This is where God is active and involved. Nothing can be known for sure; there are only opinions. God matters a lot to these folks, but he only holds sway on the inside. The culture seems to say “It’s perfectly fine to believe that stuff – we have freedom of conscious, people can believe what they like – but you really ought to keep it to yourself. The Bible is a handbook for personal well-being – filled with little devotional thoughts.
1. God is whittled down. He’s become “the little man behind the curtain.” He’s uninvolved in my life and world. More of a concept than a person. Or just the opposite: God is not Lord over the world, but lord of me and my small interior world. Or God’s just gone, but we don’t really need him anyway.
2. People replace God. We put ourselves in his place as an object of worship. It’s that self-focus we talked about last week.
3. The Bible is thrown overboard. It’s simply written off as a source of truth and wisdom. At best it’s seen as irrelevant. At worst, it’s seen as just plain wrong.
4. People of faith are not taken seriously. A result of living in a world that has written off God is that it also writes off those who take God seriously.
5. Religion is just another hobby, like building model airplanes: something quiet, private, trivial – not really a fit activity for intelligent public-minded adults.

God, what is your Reply?

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?

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Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.... Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

I think God would say "Relax! I don't need you defending me!" Whew. So instead let's claim God's faithfulness. Engage in proofs that anyone can grapple with. There is a place for evidence, but don't get ugly about it. You can stand back and unapologetically state the truth that GOD IS. He's real, and He has a claim on the world and each of us. But we must do so in a winsome and contagious way, even if it means loving our enemies! We announce the presence of the One presumed to be dead and gone. Speak his words of love, peace, faith, truth, hope, and even joy by our actions and our words and our listening!

Our response is first, check our attitude!

At the heart, it's about incarnation, literally (in the flesh). (It worked for God. He sent Jesus "in the flesh" to be among us.) In a survey about finding faith today, 7 out of 10 people today said the most significant influence to coming to faith was the witness of those we trusted.

We must be trustworthy and vulnerable. Do they have to "see things our way" first, or be under our power or structure? Our can we build bridges with them?

1. We've privatized Christianity. But in engaging with the world, we must make our view of the Lord as big as possible.
2. If you have a big enough vision of Jesus as Lord of creation, and His Holy Spirit as active in all parts of the world, opening the door, and the Father's love whoever they are, you can be passionate about engaging 21st Century people.

Focus on the hearer: talk to them about themselves, Use the Bible as support rather than proof, Anticipate obstacles and doubts, Watch your language! Don't get all churchy on 'em. Ask probing questions. Explore their reasons for unbelief: People are atheists more out of convenience. Expose the implications of secularism: nothing matters. Present evidence for a design.

As I was looking up material for today, I came across a photograph in USA Today of what astronomers say is the perfect spiral galaxy. Taken with the help of a new telescope on the Big Island of Hawaii, the photo shows an amazing shot of a galaxy named NGC 628 – slightly smaller than our Milky Way (it contains only a paltry 100 billion stars) and, get this, 30 million light-years away. Funny, the whole point of the accompanying article was our great achievement of taking such a great photograph with our two-week old telescope. Aren't we great?... Seems like all the wrong pronouns! Granted, we have done well to photograph anything 30 million light-years away, but let's get the point straight: God's hand put every one of those stars in place. An appropriate caption for the photo would have been "Can you believe God made this with His own hands?"

There is also the picture of the Galaxy Cluster Abell 2218 (2 billion light years away from us). Why did God make the universe so big? Was it for other life forms, or was it because of the extravagance of God: Because he's that kind of a creative God? Today scientists are exploring the creative design theory: If I see evidence of a design, there must be a designer. Scientist/Philosopher Paul Davies quipped "In my opinion, science offers a surer path to God than religion."

Despite what people think, the God revealed by the Bible is not Frank Morgan, the actor who played the doddering old man who played the Wizard of OZ.

So here's what we proclaim:

1. **God's existence:** God is not a figment of our superstitious imaginations. He is real. *"In the beginning God,"* (Gen.1:1). Not "In the beginning man".
2. **God's glory** God animates this world and fills it with His glory and grandeur. *"The whole earth is full of His glory."* Is. 6:3. *"He has not left himself without testimony."* Acts 14:17. *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."* Romans 1:19-20.
3. **God's sovereignty:** God is the sovereign Lord of all, whether we acknowledge him or not. He has not been nudged aside from the center of the universe, only from the hearts of men and women. When we deny God, we place ourselves in opposition to the One who makes and sustains and orders the fortunes of all that is. *"Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.' The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath."* Psalm 2:1-5.
4. **God's claim on us.** We are not our own. We are his. *"Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his."* Psalm 100:3. We don't exist so that we could know God for our pleasure. We exist for God's pleasure. He tells me that I am His own.
5. **God's love.** God created us for the purpose of showering His love on us. Not a conditional love that some of us grew up with and were damaged by, but a love like no other. A loving God runs counter to the convictions of a secular world. The God we threw overboard by the world around us is generally either a curmudgeon too distracted to notice us or a dictator too aloof to care. Yet it's His love that springs off of nearly every page in the Bible as one of His central, defining qualities. *God is love.* 1 John 4:16. *His love endures forever.* Psalm 118:1.
6. **God's holiness.** That's his purity. Our rejection of God's rightful place in people's lives is an affront to his holiness. It is nothing but an act of rebellion. Denying God's rightful place is sin from which we get what we deserve. *"Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things."* Psalm 103:2-5
7. **Our spiritual nature.** We ARE spiritual beings – but spiritually impoverished and backwards, because we want for a right relationship with God. God has made provision for the nourishment of our souls by the forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation with himself through Christ. *"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions"* Ephesians 2:1-5.
8. **The authority of the Bible.** The Bible can be trusted as God's reliable and adequate word for us, our final authority on spiritual issues. Though it was written by humans, its authorship is also fully divine. Jesus saw it as indispensable, the very words from his Father. He based his ministry on it, answered his critics with it, and helped his hearers to trust it. Jesus said *"You are in error, because you don't know the Scriptures or the power of God."* Matthew 22:29. We are a church who looks with confidence at the Bible as our authority on all matters of faith and life.
9. **The plausibility of miracles.** Miracles in the Bible are not scientific impossibilities. Natural laws like gravity are merely the consistent ways God relates to his universe – His "habit" of sustaining all that exists. Every atom is held together at every moment not by nuclear forces of attraction but by God's hand. Miracles are nothing more than God acting in an uncustomary way. *"Nothing is impossible with God."* Luke 1:37.
10. **Science and the Bible.** Science has not disproved the Bible. Nor has it eliminated the place of God in the creation. As believers, we celebrate science for the miracle that it is! It's a whole new way God shows himself in his creation!

God's words speak as powerfully to today's brash secularism as they did to Job. *"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? One who set its footings, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?"* Job 38:4-7.

God didn't wind up the clock to let it run down. (Deism) God holds the universe moment by moment. And you and I are a tiny part of that. But this huge, powerful Creator God also loved us so much he came to earth, lived a simple life. Taught a little, healed, and helped, and was put to death. What kind of a God would do that? One that is crazy about you and willing to do anything to give you hope and a future.

That's the Ultimate Reality upon which we base all our lives...