

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 24, 2009

Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

Ascension and the Time of In-Between

My son Sam came home this week after his first year in college. He brought with him not just several large duffel bags, his tennis rackets, textbooks, and a great heap of dirty laundry, but also a book that he has been reading: *God Is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens.¹ You may have heard of it -- it is one of several bestsellers on atheism attracting readers across the country. As you can imagine, within 24 hours of Sam's arrival, he and his father and I were engaged in a lively debate about atheism and religious faith. Can a Christian believe in evolution? Is religion to blame for most of the wars and violence in human history? Is religious faith nothing more than childish wish fulfillment? Is God man-made, just a construct of the human mind?

These are worthy questions to tackle, although it may relieve you to know that I am not going to take two hours and address them now. What I do want to say is that this morning seems a good time at least to mention the existence of such questions. Today is the last Sunday of the Easter season, the Sunday after the Ascension, and the disciples' vivid encounters with the Risen Christ have come to an end. For forty days after that first Easter morning, the disciples have had a series of startling, joy-filled, hands-on experiences in which they touched, and talked, and ate with Jesus, who was filled with and shining with a divine life that the New Testament calls "resurrection." And then the risen Jesus withdraws from the disciples' sight. He no longer dwells bodily on earth with his disciples, and they have not yet received the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, whose arrival we celebrate next week at Pentecost. This ten-day period between the Ascension and Pentecost is an in-between time. The old ways of knowing God in Christ have come to an end, and the new way has not yet come.

¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, NY: Twelve, Hachette Brooke Group/Warner, 2007.

This seems a good period to dedicate to atheists, agnostics, and seekers everywhere for whom not just Jesus has withdrawn from sight, but also many aspects of the Christian tradition, and maybe Christianity itself. The ten-day span between the Ascension and Pentecost is a gift for all of us -- including devout Christians -- who have come to a point in our lives when particular Christian doctrines or beliefs for one reason or another now seem opaque, confusing, remote, or completely unintelligible. A religious conviction that we once held dear; a way of imagining God that once made sense to us; an approach to prayer that we once found meaningful -- suddenly no longer has any juice. We no longer find it adequate or convincing. The old way of knowing God has gone and the new way has not yet come, and we may feel lost, stranded, anxious, even bereft. "Do not leave us comfortless!" -- those are the poignant, candid words of today's Collect. What once gave us spiritual comfort and meaning has been withdrawn, and here we are on our own, casting about for what is true and lasting and real.

Is there something wrong with us if we find ourselves in this situation? Only if we think that religion requires us to march in lockstep, eyes in front, with no permission to look around and ask questions, as if we were cogs in a machine. But of course we are not cogs in a machine. We are living beings with a living faith, and a living faith behaves like everything else that is alive -- it ebbs and flows, it grows and changes, it takes in and it lets go. If we believed at forty exactly the same things about God and the world that we believed at the age of ten, then we would rightly suspect that something in the development of our faith had gone awry. Being willing to bear the discomfort of letting go long-held convictions and certainties and to enter uncharted territory is a necessary part of growing into spiritual adulthood. Spiritual maturity depends as much on un-learning as on it does on learning.

So how do we move forward in faith if we find ourselves in an in-between time? How do we respond to the atheists and agnostics of the world, or to the atheist or agnostic that may be speaking in our own heart? One way is to use our heads and to read works of contemporary theology that help us to grasp and to speak about our faith in more sophisticated terms. Reason and the analytic mind can be good tools for taking our faith to the next level and to communicating it more convincingly to a skeptical world.

But sometimes our deepest knowledge of God comes not through ideas but through prayer, not through explanations of doctrine but through the felt wisdom that speaks through our whole body-self -- through our feelings, intuition, and imagination, and through the silence of contemplation. We *do* want to think critically about our faith; we *do* want our faith to make sense; we do *not* want to be

ignorant or naive. But at the same time we do not need to limit our knowledge of God to what can be grasped by the most rational little corner of the left side of our brains. As the writer and social activist Joanna Macy likes to say, we are not brains on a stick. We have our whole body-self as a resource for connecting with God.

This is where prayer comes in as way to open us to the vast mystery of God when our ideas of God have become too small. I am talking now about a particular kind of prayer -- not prayer that is full of words, however useful verbal prayers can be for spelling out our relationship with God and for naming what we fear and love and long for. I am talking about the kind of prayer that takes place beyond words or below words, the kind of prayer in which not just our thinking mind is engaged but our whole embodied self as we listen intently in silence for the presence of God.

Today's Gospel gives us a clue about how to pray in an in-between time when the old certainties have fallen away and the new has not yet come. The whole seventeenth chapter of John, from which this morning's passage is taken, is devoted to Jesus' final prayer before his crucifixion. In this passage he prays for his disciples and for us, and in the very first line he prays, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world" [John 17:6]. "I have made your name known." How has Jesus made known God's name? By bearing the divine name himself. The most powerful disclosure of Jesus' identity in the Gospel of John may not be how he completes his various "I am" statements -- I am the good shepherd, I am the vine, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world -- but in the stark way that he names himself to the woman at the well: "I am." That is Jesus' name, and that is God's name, too. I AM. That is how God names God's self to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM" [Exodus 3:14]. The word is translated in different ways: I AM WHAT I AM. I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE. As God says to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you" [Exodus 3:14].

I AM is a mysterious word, suggesting a dynamic, irrepressible flow of being, the very fountain and source of being itself, as if God is more like a living process than a static thing, more like a verb than a noun. The name for God in Hebrew -- what we typically pronounce as Yahweh -- is actually four consonants -- YHWH -- that cannot be pronounced at all, for in Judaism the name of God is too holy to be uttered aloud. The only way to say the divine name is to breathe it, one syllable at a time. YHWH. YHWH. Try it. YHWH. Each in-breath is an inhalation of God, and each out-breath is an exhalation of God. YHWH. YHWH. With every breath in, we breathe in God. With every breath out, we breathe out

God. YHWH -- God in our lungs, on our tongue, on our lips. No thoughts of God, no ideas about God, just God breathing through us, the holy Breath of Life. YHWH. YHWH. God fills each breath.

Try that sort of breath prayer for a while -- maybe using the name YHWH, or the name Jesus, or any other word that expresses your intention to be with God - - and before long our busy minds grow quiet. Just as Jesus left the earth when he ascended into heaven, so we leave behind our thoughts about Jesus, our thoughts about God. Whatever we think about God and Jesus is irrelevant, because we are not thinking any longer; we are simply being with God, simply breathing God.

What happens when we give some time to praying like this with a patient, innocent openness to whatever comes? Eventually we may discover that everything in us has been gathered up -- our thoughts and feelings, our convictions and doubts -- and all of it is has been drawn into the heart of God. Where we are, God is. Where God is, we are. It is as if we have stepped into the Trinity and are experiencing within ourselves the flow of love that is always circulating between God the Father and God the Son through God the Holy Spirit -- or, to use St. Augustine's words for the Trinity: the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love that flows between. That is the promise of contemplative prayer: that we don't have to settle for ideas about God, or thinking about God, but can actually have an experience of God.

Maybe that is our best response to the atheists and agnostics within us and around us: to take the Ascension seriously and to know that there is a time to let everything go, to relinquish our ideas about God and to abide in the holy Mystery for a while. That is a good way to live in an in-between time, too: to pray patiently in the darkness of not-knowing, trusting that love will find us and return in unexpected power to set our hearts on fire.