



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

When Brilliance Bows

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ OCTOBER 8, 2017

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and have our being.”

Acts 17:22-28a (NIV)

A few weeks ago, the *Wall Street Journal* reviewed a book, another addition to the growing genre of books arguing against the existence of God. According to the review, the author is “merciless in spelling out his message: Ultimately our lives are meaningless. Evolution is blind and serves no intrinsic purpose.” Another quote: “We are each but a blip in cosmic time and space.”

That's the author's first message: human life has no purpose or meaning. Here is his second message: this is bad news. The author acknowledges that this is terrible for us. He recognizes that meaning matters to us, that human beings long to live for a purpose greater than their own lives, that we seem wired for significance. But, he says, the bad news simply is this: "Our lives lack the cosmic meaning for which humans... yearn." It's a grim message and the review begins with these words: "Do not buy this for a depressed friend."

So there are two messages here: Message one: life has no purpose or meaning beyond itself. Message two: we want and need meaning, purpose and significance.

Now, the reviewer. The book reviewer lives in London, a history professor. She not only agrees with the views of the author; she has written her own book explaining that human life has no purpose or significance beyond itself. She says that among all of her own friends and colleagues, not one of them believes that there is any wider purpose to human existence. Not one, she says.

I pondered this grim book review and then noticed this: the reviewer's name is Joanna. Such a pretty name—and it is a biblical name, from two Hebrew words which mean "God is gracious." And not lower case "god" in some generic sense. The Hebrew word means the true God, the God of Genesis, the Creator, the God of Abraham and Moses. I wondered if she realized what her name meant. So I looked her up and read her bio and also read an interview with her in the British newspaper *The Guardian*.

She is the daughter of Christian medical missionaries. You can be sure that her parents named her knowing full well that they were identifying her as a child who belonged to God. In the interview she said that when she was a girl, she was told that God watched over her and she believed it. But when she became a young adult, she walked away from faith and instead believes, teaches and writes books to convince others that human lives connect to nothing eternal, nothing divine, nothing transcendent. It's a common story,

and some among us can put their own children and grandchildren on that list.

What does an unbelieving world need? What do our own half-believing hearts need? Is it information? Yes, we are to defend the faith. Yes, there is a place for rigorous and vigorous intellectual give and take. We are to explain and answer questions, to engage on the level of the intellect but just information is not enough. We need encounter.

Encounter, Not Just Information

Joanna, the professor and book reviewer, has information about God. She grew up in the church, she knows many things about the Bible and Christian faith; she knows them, at least from the nose up. She needs more than just information. She needs encounter; she needs a meeting with her Maker. She needs to see what is not visible to her now. There is more to us than our intellect.

For instance, the Bible is filled with doxology, of passages that exalt and esteem and praise Almighty God. Doxologies don't use just informational words. They speak of power and wisdom, of glory and honor and majesty, of victory and might, of blessing and beauty, of goodness and eternity, of dominion and authority. These words come out of deep places, out of the heart. When we hear them, they stir us at our core, in our deep places. They are affective words, not simply informational words. These writers of doxology—David, Solomon, Paul and John—weren't people who had simply accepted a set of principles. They had been near the One they describe; He had brushed by them and they had been changed by the meeting. They had encountered the loving and mighty and altogether good presence of the living God and it overwhelmed them and they sought to capture it in doxology.

We are meant to know that God is God, that God is great, that God is good. And we are meant to know that each of us is more than a "blip in cosmic time and space." Long ago King Solomon wrote:

“He has set eternity in our hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We do long and yearn for meaning and purpose and significance; these are some of the hallmarks of being human. We are created for this. Each of us knows it. We love and need a great ideal that calls us to sacrificial service. Or we seek a great vision of beauty that beckons us to creative work. Or we need a great question that sets us on a quest to ponder and study and experiment and learn. We are not a blip in cosmic time and space; we are the beloved of God, made for meaning, meant to bow our own brilliance before our Maker. The longings and yearnings are deep in us. It isn’t just that we hope for more, it’s that something in us recognizes, wakes up to the knowledge there is more to this world, more to this life, more to me, more to you, than we have understood or dared to believe.

Take Paul, for instance. In our scripture today, he is brilliantly teaching at the Areopagus in Athens, the meeting place for philosophical debate. But some years before that, Paul had been the greatest enemy of the faith. Now Paul was full of information. No one of his generation had more. He had intellectual dominance and extensive knowledge; he was a master of regulations, rules and laws. But he had not yet truly met God. Then there came a moment in time when the living God said to him, “You ... Now.” Three times in the book of Acts, that dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus is described. Paul was met—not with a set of principles or a contained body of knowledge. Rather, he was met by the living Jesus and it was a power encounter, involving all of him—his intellect, his emotions, his spirit, his very body, which fell to the ground. He who had been so sure, so confident in his understanding and in his control of events, suddenly found himself on the ground, on his knees, before the presence of the living Christ, unable to see or move. He had been entirely unaware of his spiritual and intellectual blindness; suddenly he found himself literally, physically unable to see, for three days.

My husband Al, a good and wise man who is long at his prayers these days, said one morning, “I prayed for the people in the media. They have blinders on. They have scales on their eyes.”

The book of Acts says that it was like scales falling from Paul's eyes when he finally bowed the knee and bowed his life before the living Jesus. The God Paul encountered that day was not the God he understood, not the God he could describe, not even the God he wanted. It was the God who simply is who He is, and it was Jesus. Paul knew *about* God, but he didn't *know* God. Then God showed up and it was Jesus.

Who is this for? It's for all of us. For some of you it may be that the rough edges and hard places of this life have left you awfully close, truth be told, to the belief that God is not there, that it all makes no ultimate sense, that there is no more to this life than this life. But deep in you is the longing to connect your small and brief life to the Great Life that is God. Perhaps your own yearnings have become highly disguised, hidden behind a veil of cynicism or flippancy or just dull acceptance. But the gift is for you.

Brilliance Bows

In the late 1800's in London there was a brilliant man named Francis Thompson. He had real genius as a writer but he was an addicted, tortured soul, his life shadowed by difficulty. Open up his biography and the story you will read is marked by deep sorrow and hard struggle. But, he says, Jesus pursued him even in his running from God, even in his denying. His poem begins:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him...

from those strong feet that followed, followed after...

Francis Thompson could not escape the pursuing and unrelenting love of Jesus, whom he calls the "The Hound of Heaven." In his running, the Voice keeps coming:

“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me...”

“Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me...”

“Ah, ... blindest, weakest, I am He Whom thou seekest!”

Like Paul, it's the story of a brilliant man running and resisting and refusing and then being found, bowing before the living, loving God.

In the last few years, Al and I have had some international students come into our lives and into our home. One of them I will call David. I won't use his real name for the sake of the safety of his family, who still live in Afghanistan. We only know David because he, who was raised in a Muslim country, in a Muslim school, in a Muslim family, during the years of the Taliban, became a Christian. The story is remarkable. As a teenager, he liked talking to American soldiers who let him practice his English. And at a gym he got to know a young Asian man, who talked to him about Jesus and the Bible. He knew this was dangerous conversation, conversation to be avoided, so for three months, he stayed away from the gym. But he didn't forget. And over time, through more conversations and through God's own pursuit of him, he described the private struggle in his own soul, his private prayers in his own room at home, and his ultimate yes to the One who pursued him. He was overwhelmed by God's pursuit and presence. Yes, he had information, but more than that, he had an encounter with God. He was 16 years old.

His conversion cost him. He was expelled from his school, had to flee the city, and then the country for his safety. When we met him, he had just come from the United Arab Emirates, where three things had happened to him: he was nurtured in a Christian congregation, he found success working for a global technology company, and he met a young Christian man who worked at the U.S. Embassy whose father was a professor at a Christian university in the States. Through that connection, we came to know him. Today he is in graduate school. Just this weekend he and our son met up with each other. They are friends.

Ask... All Who Call On the Name of the Lord Will Be Saved

If this stirs anything in you, then this is for you, and it's for me. No one is turned away. There are no beggars at the gate of God's mercy, holding an empty bowl, who are told, "This is not for you, it's for other, more worthy people." We are told three times in the Bible, by three different people—the prophet Joel in the Old Testament, Peter in Acts, and Paul in Romans: "All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved." Is there anyone this is not for? Anyone with too shoddy a record?

Let's visit the scene of a great crime. It is told in detail in the early chapters of the book of Acts. It's the murder of a young man, Stephen, the Christian church's first martyr. Paul was right there, part of the authority that commissioned and approved Stephen's death. He stood by as a witness to the execution, nodding in approval. Then, within weeks, he had his own encounter with Jesus. He came to see, came to understand what he had done. Think about that. You can't make up for a murder. You can't take it back. It can't be fixed, or undone, or restored. In human terms, it's irredeemable. But redemption isn't from us. It's what Jesus has done for us.

He is the Redeemer who carried the heavy weight of judgment, that weight of having to face all those we have wronged or injured or hurt, of owning all the places where we have failed. That's what the cross is, what Good Friday is. The judgment does fall, but not on us. Things are redeemed; things are set right. Justice and mercy are perfectly met. I think of that scene: Stephen dying, Paul watching and nodding. Today both are saints together in heaven, loving, worshipping and serving the great, eternal, majestic, entirely good and altogether lovely, fully perfect and powerful God, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Savior, our Friend. Everything made right.

There is nothing you have done, nothing you have said, no mistake you have made, no secret knowledge you have about yourself that is a barrier to the perfection of God's character. Paul wrote, "He gives everyone life and breath ... God did this so that they would seek him

and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'"

God has given brilliant gifts, intellectually, artistically, physically, to all of us. We are all derivative, all depending entirely on what God has created us to be, on what God has provided for us to use and enjoy. There is not one IQ point for which any human being can take credit. Not one artistic gift or talent anyone has that they created for themselves. It's all gift. The very ability to argue and reason and write and speak about the non-existence of God is a gift of God. How excellent and perfect it is when brilliance bows to the God who gives the gift. I think of Joanna, whose very name means "God is gracious." She is brilliant, accomplished, acclaimed, and educated, an interesting person. I think of the author of the book she reviewed who is truly so sad believing that human life has so little meaning and purpose. Oh, may they have an encounter with the living God. May they meet the Maker who has given them such gifts.

Psalm 145:18 says, "The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth." Jesus said: "Ask ... seek ... knock." In the words of Psalm 75: "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

