

The first time I can remember asking about God was when I was maybe 5 or 6 years old. I was riding with my mother and my younger brother in our big orange Chevy Nova—this was the early 1980s-- and I can remember exactly what we were driving past—a used car dealership on the main street of our small town. I remember the question just sort of occurring to me: “Mom,” I asked, “where is God?” Now, being a parent myself, I know that this question belongs to a whole class of questions that you sort of dread getting from your children. This class of questions includes other classics like “why is the sky blue,” “what happens when we die,” and “where do babies come from”—questions you really don’t want to hear, whether driving down the road or anywhere else. My mother, though, from what I can remember, handled the question pretty well. She told me that God isn’t somewhere, God is everywhere. I don’t remember if I asked a follow-up question, or if I just gave her a puzzled look, but she continued with her answer, saying that God was all around us all the time, and whenever or wherever we needed God to be, God was there.

Back in July, Carole Westphal preached a sermon titled “An Atheist Looks at the Bible.” It was a follow-up to an earlier sermon of hers, in which Carole “came out” (in her words) as an atheist. In both sermons Carole passionately and articulately staked her claim to what she calls “Christian atheism”—which I understand to mean living a life worthy of the highest moral teachings of Jesus and Christianity, a life that seeks to leave the world a better place than you found it—but without a belief in a God, or at least, without a belief in a personal God, a creator God, what she calls a “theistic” God. And in her most recent sermon, Carole took on the question of how someone holding such views might read the Bible. She reads it, she said, as a

human product, a collection of the defining stories and motivating narratives of a people, as a cultural repository of the Hebrews and Christians of ages past, a preserve of the greatest truths and lessons of those cultures.

I should say, for those of you who saw the title of my sermon today and thought you were coming to hear a stinging refutation or an adamant disagreement with Carole's sermon, for those that came expecting some sort of homiletical smackdown, that you are likely to be disappointed. Carole and I agree on nearly every point. I too see the heart of Christianity in the highest moral teachings of Jesus—to love your neighbor, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. I too understand the Christian mission as leaving the world better than you found it. I too understand the Bible as literature transmitting the great lessons of antiquity, distilled to pure form. It should perhaps not be too surprising that Carole and I agree on so much; we work, after all, at the same church, sharing the same mission. And we have had many of the same teachers. Two of the three members of my doctoral committee at Iliff were members of Carole's committee; apples don't fall far from trees, and Carole and I are two apples sitting on the ground under one big tree.

But we don't agree on everything. Even people who share the same convictions about the Christian lifestyle, who share the same faith community, who have common goals and dreams for the Church, and who share the same intellectual heritage—even people with so much in common can take the same data and reach very different conclusions. And in the spirit of dialogue, today I want to talk about where some of my conclusions—some of my beliefs—

diverge from Carole's. I want to get around to talking about the Bible eventually, at the end, but first, I want to talk about a question that I think lies at the base of the way I think about religion—that same question I asked my mother so many years ago—where is God?

A couple of weeks ago I hiked my first fourteener. It was a beautiful day with no sign of those afternoon thunderstorms that can pop up and chase hikers off the mountain, so my friends and I took our time, stopping to take long breaks to just sit and stare out at the horizon as far as our eyes could see. As I was sitting there on one of those long breaks, the words of Job 38 came to mind. I have long loved Job 38; some call it the “third creation story,” because of the passage’s beautiful images of creation. If you recall, the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter comes near the end of the book of Job, after incredible misfortune had befallen him, and after his friends had come to be with him but had failed to comfort him, and after Job in all of his frustration and anger had called upon God to answer for all of the terrible things that had happened to him. And after being silent for 30-something chapters, God did answer Job, not in a defense of God’s own righteousness or the justness of what had happened to Job—but in this poetic, moving account of God’s relationship with the world. “Where were you,” God asked Job, “where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who laid the cornerstone of the earth when the morning stars sang together?” This is a God who knows the “way to the dwelling place of light,” who “has cut a channel for the torrents of rain,” who “makes the ground put forth grass.” This God has “bound the chains of the Pleiades, and cut loose the cords of Orion.” This is a God who can number the clouds, who “can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together.” This passage is in the best tradition of that Hebrew poetry which

can be so profoundly beautiful; “who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst out from the womb?— when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped,” And my favorite part of this passage, and maybe, just maybe, my favorite part of the entire Bible, is this: “Do you know where the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? Can you number the months that they fulfill, and do you know the time when they give birth, when they crouch to give birth to their offspring, and are delivered of their young?” Do you know where the mountain goats give birth? What a vision of the way God is present in the world.

I thought of those verses up on the side of Mt. Bierstadt. I didn't see any mountain goats up there that day, but on previous drives up Mt. Evans I had encountered the sheep and goats that make their home high up on the mountains. They roam the mountainsides and mountaintops, seemingly oblivious to the long line of tourists in SUVs, snaking their way up the mountain road. They live there, agnostic about the concerns that plague us human beings, unconcerned about the major, important city that lies just to the east with all of its commerce and bustle. They are removed from our lives and our world so much that we are unaware of their existence unless we decide to take a day trip up Mt. Evans or a hike up Mt. Bierstadt, but in Job—and this is why I love this passage—in Job, God knows where they give birth. Not only does God know where they graze, where they play, where they sleep, but God knows where they give birth, that most intimate and sacred time, God is there and God knows.

You see, this is where I am old-fashioned. It has been fashionable, in these last three hundred years since the Enlightenment, to move ever farther away from a God who knows us. We like to speak of a cosmic God, or God as the set of principles that governs the universe, or God in the Deist model, who winds up the world like a clock and then steps away to do something else, leaving the world to work itself out as it will. It has become fashionable to think of God, if one even ever does think of God, as an impersonal force that strikes a match to light the Big Bang, or of God as a light inside each of us, or of God as a soul-force that permeates all things. And I see the attractiveness of those ways of thinking about God—I really do. Like so many of you I reached a point where old ways of thinking about God were no longer satisfying to me, where I needed to imagine God differently or stop to trying to deal with God altogether. I know the appeal of conceiving of God in these new, post-Enlightenment ways.

But I like a God who knows where the mountain goats give birth. I like a God who is bound up with this world, whose existence is tied up with my existence, and your existence, and the existence of mountain goats and fish and field mice and fleas. I like the God described in the New Testament, where we are reassured that God feeds and clothes even the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. We are told in the New Testament that God can count every hair on our heads, a task I should say that in my case must be getting easier by the day. I like that kind of radically present God.

If you believe in God, one of the first things you have to decide is whether God is imminent or transcendent. That is, do you believe that God is nearby or far away, here and now or

somewhere else, personal and involved or abstract and removed. There are, of course, a million points in between, but if you think about it, you probably already imagine God basically in one of those two ways—nearby, or far away. I am one of those that thinks that God is nearby—radically so. Maybe it's that answer that my mother gave me so long ago—that God is everywhere, all the time—but I cannot escape the feeling, the gut feeling, that God is here. I feel that on the side of a 14,000 foot mountain, I feel it with my toes in the ocean, I feel it here with you—part of what it means to be me is understanding God to be radically present in the world and bound up with the world. That's where I'm old-fashioned, that's where I part ways with Carole, but that's where I must stand.

And that is how I read the Bible. The Bible is, by any reasonable standards, a deeply flawed book. Parts of it are plagiarized. Parts of it repeat other parts. Parts of it are incoherent, or patriarchal, or violent, or portray God as patriarchal or violent. Parts of the Bible cannot hold up to scientific scrutiny, or do not comport with our understandings of the way the world works. There are more errors in the ancient manuscripts of the Bible, as scholars like Bart Ehrman now tell us, than there are words in the Bible. The errors outnumber the words. It is, by any standards, a flawed book.

But this is, I think, where we've gone wrong, thinking of the Bible like a modern book. A modern book has a publisher, it has editions, it has a copy-editor and a bibliography. A book, if it's a good one, takes an idea and develops it for the edification or the entertainment of its readers. A book might have some responsibility for factuality and coherency. In this sense, the Bible is

not a book. It does not want to be a book; it is a modern book of the kind I've been describing only insofar as we have made it into one, with explanatory introductions and sidebars with tips for living and footnotes for explaining away the difficult or offensive parts. It is a book today, that you can buy at Barnes and Noble alongside the latest John Grisham or the Harry Potter series. But it is only that way because we have made it that way.

Stripped of all this, the Bible is not a book, nor does it want to be one. It is, rather, the accumulated experiences of those who have understood God to be present in their lives. I understand the accounts and stories in the Bible to be the narratives and recollections of people not so different from you and me who believed that God was active and present in the world, doing things in the world, shaping the world, improving it, continuing creation, in a sense, at every moment. It is, I believe, at the end of the day, an account of the lives of people trying to live life with God. It presumes a radically present God—a God who forms human beings out of mud in the Garden of Eden and then walks in the Garden in the cool of the evening. A God who wrestles with Jacob by the riverside, who speaks through Moses and the prophets, a God who leads the people through the wilderness by fire at night and by cloud by day, a God who knows when a sparrow falls from the sky and who gathers her children like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Its stories presume the presence of God in a way that we find difficult to accept, in this age of Enlightenment and science and verifiability, it is an account that insists on understanding God on personal terms, God with a personality, God with quirks, and ultimately a God with a powerful and perhaps inexplicable interest in us.

It is an inescapable feature of being human, I think, that we understand God in the terms that make us the most personally comfortable. So perhaps that's what I am doing here—making God in my own image, or at least in the image that I would have God take. If that's the case, so be it. But for me, it begins with the experience, with the knowledge, somehow, of God's presence and God's radical care for us. I see in the Bible the stories of others who felt the same way—who felt that God surrounded them in the joyous and difficult moments of their lives, who felt the genuine, deep presence of God in the world. I read the Bible with that lens, that bias, if you will, and I suddenly care a lot less about its flaws and inadequacies and its myriad scandals. And I see in it the stories of fellow-travelers, separated by time and space and culture but nonetheless linked by common experience.

The great thing about a tradition and a church like ours is that you don't have to believe like I do. People can disagree on something as fundamental as the nature and existence of God, and still be a part of the same faith community, and engaged in the same struggles for peace and justice and equality and leaving the world better than you found it. We can disagree on the Bible, and theology, and all the rest, and it is well that we do. But each of us, as Paul writes, each of us must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Put another way, each of us must find our way in this world and each of us must find our peace with God, and we must each arrive at our own understanding of God. If you find yourself accepting everything Carole said, or if you find yourself agreeing with everything I have said, then I would suggest that you probably haven't thought about it enough. It is yours to work out, yours to struggle with, your conclusion to draw. And as for me, I take comfort in the God who made the clouds a garment

for the sea, who knows the way to the dwelling place of light, who has given birth to the frost of heaven, who has bound the chains of the Pleiades, who can number the clouds and send forth rain, and who knows where the mountain goats give birth. Amen.