

Keeping Faith in an Age of Science
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"Faith of Our Fathers," a wonderful hymn, isn't it? Yet, the world has changed, and is changing, from the days of our fathers, and mothers. It seems there are more and more challenges to our faith; keeping the faith seems harder. When we get down to the root of it, we find that it is the pervasiveness of Science, and some of the ways of looking at the world that draw inspiration from science, that accounts for much of what we experience as a crisis of faith.

Now, I teach engineering at Wilkes University. Science is useful, and important. It's a key part of what I do.

But the impact I'm concerned about is easy to see: God is largely missing from our culture. At least, God seems to be missing from the intellectual leadership of this country. Look at what we see in the media, from those persons held up as important by our society, what is taught in universities. Yes, there are references to God, but they too often are trivial or, worse, suspicious or contemptuous of religion, particularly Christianity.

Why do I blame this on Science? I really don't, in that Science seeks to explain the observable universe, and religion deals with things that are beyond the bounds that science can address. However, what has happened is that in our culture, we have tried to apply science to almost everything, for good or, often, for bad.

By "Science", I mean a way of trying to determine truth about what can be observed. There are several important principles. The first comes to us from the Greeks: the principles of logic. Experiments are based on observations that can be repeated and tested for their validity. The scientific approach has yielded wonderful and amazing knowledge of the creation.

A further principle is not quite part of the scientific method, but often is applied where observation fails. It is the idea that the simplest explanation for something observed is the most likely, or best. And, going further in this direction, is the idea that "nothing is special." That is, nothing is due an assumption of having a preeminent place in the Universe. Now this last is not really part of the scientific method, but is often useful in searching for the truth. It was Copernicus's view that the Earth is not so special that the cosmos revolves around it; the cosmos, including the planets, revolves around the sun instead. Only the Moon revolves around the Earth. And as Galileo discovered, other planets have moons too. Eventually we realized that the Sun isn't unique either. All those stars in the sky are like the sun; some bigger, some smaller, some about the same size. And now we know that many of them have planets too. To the Church, this sounded like a statement that the Earth is not a unique and special place created by God for us. Where would this idea lead? Well, now we know.

The problem for us is that this idea that nothing is special, which is not really central to science, has become pervasive among the intellectuals in this country. Humans are just seen as primates who happen to have more intelligence, but are governed by the same DNA and biology

as the other apes. Western culture is not so special; other cultures have equal value. How can we believe that God had a "chosen people" who were special? And what is so special about Jesus? Other religions have their founders or heroes.

It is interesting that this idea has outrun science to the point where the belief that no culture or idea is particularly worthy clobbers obvious truth. If an African tribesman says that the Moon is the egg of the Great Fish, why, his culture has equal value, and so his truth is no less valuable than ours. Possibly more so, since he has not been contaminated by our culture. This is the kind of thing one hears from the intellectual leadership of our society. Even the leadership of the Church is not immune to these influences.

Ultimately science tells us that it can explain most of what we observe in the physical universe. So, who needs to assume the existence of God? Especially when it is more convenient to our desires, and gratifying to the ego, to assume that there is no God. We are the ultimate beings who matter.

This really is not a new problem. In the days of Israel, the issue was not so much whether there is a God, but whether gods are numerous and subject to manipulation, the pagan view, or singular and all powerful, as the Israelites and later the Jews came to understand. Even then, a person could decide to ignore God on the grounds that God, or gods, did not care, and that there was no accountability for cruelty and evil. You have heard some of the myths of the Greek gods. Did they really care about humanity? Not much at all! I will read a few verses from Psalm 10, verses 3 and 4:

Psalm 10: 3,4: For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord. In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, "God will not seek it out," all their thoughts are, "There is no God." (NRSV)

Does this not sound familiar? Here we have the same attitude, pervasive in our day, that there will be no accounting for evil. There is no God who matters. Just as we struggle with the fact that we cannot prove God's existence to the unbelievers, in any terms they will accept, the same was true then. Those who wanted to do evil and be unaccountable for it could justify to themselves, saying "There is no God," then, as now.

In the first century, there is not only the challenge of paganism, but also of philosophy. The science has its roots in this philosophy. Many of the philosophers of the apostle Paul's day dismissed a personal, caring God as being less than meaningful, just as followers of science in our day tells us that the Universe can be explained without needing for there to be a God. Let us join Paul as he confronts this issue in Athens, the capitol of philosophy. I read from Acts, chapter 17, verses 22 to 34. Paul is arguing his case before the leading intellectuals of his day. I read from the New Revised Standard Version.

Acts 17: 22-34: Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription. 'To and unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the

world and everything in it, He who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor He made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and He allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God, and perhaps grope for Him and find Him -- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In Him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we too are His offspring.'

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed, and of this He has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." At that point Paul left them.

Paul was not successful in Athens. It was a good message. But no church was founded. Indeed, we read in I Corinthians what Paul has to say when he soon afterwards arrived in Corinth from Athens. I will be reading I Corinthians, 2, verses 3 to 5, also from the New Revised Standard Version:

I Corinthians 2:3-5 "And I came to you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of Power, so that your faith would not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God." (NRSV)

Paul arrived "with fear and trembling." He had failed to convince the philosophers in Athens, and they had, as some translations have it, called him a "babbling." That must have been quite the insult in philosophical circles. In the jargon of our day, they "disrespected" him. Paul has come to recognize that God's message simply cannot be argued in the philosopher's terms. Man's wisdom makes the hearers deaf to God's wisdom. Lofty words of philosophy do not work. The gospel -- the proclamation of God's love and mercy, of Christ crucified -- this word contains God's power in a way that the philosophers' words of wisdom do not.

So, the issue comes to us in our day. People ask: Where is God? How can there be a God, when there is suffering in the world? When those who do injustice go unpunished? When good people suffer, and die? These are important and legitimate questions, and they have been asked in every age. But the leaders of our culture, leaning at least partially on science's ability to explain many of the mysteries of life without mentioning God, has decided that there is no God. Our statements of faith are nonsense to them. We cannot prove God exists, when it seems to them that the simpler explanation is to assume that there is no God. Stuff just happens.

As Christians living in the United States, our problem is that culture does affect us, and we can question our faith. How does one keep faith when our cultural leaders have abandoned God? Indeed, when even some leaders in the Church seem to have lost their confidence in the faith. What is left without the gospel? "Be good, and do good things." That's it. Is it any wonder that the Church is having problems? And we as individuals, we too have our doubts. I

do sometimes. I wonder, as I expect all of us may on occasion, where is God? The world is so ready to give us reasons to abandon faith. Lord, help me!

This is not the end of this sermon. If it was, why would I be here? I would whimper into a hole somewhere. Or maybe just live out my life as a "good" person, mouthing the right things, but fearful that I am a loser waiting to clock out permanently at the end of my days. Or, since life is short and meaningless, go for the gusto and indulge in as much self-gratification as I can afford, taking guidance from the commercials on TV. They are, you've noticed, very insistent on their wisdom concerning self-gratification. I certainly wouldn't be going out of my way to talk about my lack of faith. And yet, I am here. And you are too. Surely, God has an answer.

Yes, he does. It is just not the answer that the wisdom of the world seeks. A while after he has wrestled with this problem in Athens and Corinth, Paul writes to the this to the Church in Rome. I read Romans Chapter 1, selected verses starting with verse 16:

Romans 1: 16-17 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Romans 1: 19, 20a "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world, His eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things He has made."

[The whole passage listed in bulletin is Romans 1: 16-23]

Paul later puts this into the context of the individual. I read Chapter 4, Verse 3:

Romans 4:3 "For what does scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

What I hear Paul say is that God has made each one of us with a capacity for faith, and placed us in a world in which we can find reasons for faith. But we have to be willing to choose faith. We have to be willing to put our self someplace other than at the top of the heap of importance. We must be willing to recognize something, God, more important and wise than ourselves. We have to be willing to consider ourselves accountable. If we are willing, and act on it, God can reward our faith, and we will be reckoned as righteous. Our faith will be rewarded.

I know, and God knows, that faith is sometimes hard. A good friend of mine, one of the most righteous and considerate people I have ever known, several times remarked to me that he wished God would talk to him, and he would then be more assured in his faith. I think most of us would like that kind of assurance. And it does happen. But notice, in the Bible, that whenever God talks to someone, it's not for that person's edification. It's because God has something for that person to do. Something unpleasant. Or scary. Think of Moses. Or Gideon. How about Jonah? He risked a voyage by sea, and the Israelites hated and feared the sea, to avoid his call to go to the evil and hated Assyrians of Nineveh.

Those people I know who have heard God, have been in desperate circumstances. I shared a room at a mission in New Orleans with a young man one night. He told me how Jesus talked with him every day. He may have thought there was something wrong with me or my faith, since I didn't. I wondered myself. Why? Do I not have enough faith? This young man had problems. He was trying to learn to read, as an adult. He was trying to stay off of drugs. He was trying to stay out of trouble and keep a job, when his inclinations and lack of skills pulled him the wrong way. I later came to believe that this young man needed God in his life in a more direct way than I did. Other cases are similar; God has reached out and touched people who desperately needed Him. And this has been validated by the change in the person's life. I am thankful that I have not been so in need that God has had to speak to me in this way. And yet, even I have felt His presence on certain occasions, especially when I was troubled. Maybe you have too.

The key is to have faith. We must first choose to have faith. We must choose to put something other than ourselves first. We have one possible choice of putting ourselves on top. If we put our self on top, we are beyond the power of anyone else to help us. We take all responsibility on ourselves. We must stay on top by gaining power over others, or manipulating them to keep our own needs and desires satisfied. If good is to occur; we must do it. If bad occurs, maybe we are guilty. Being the ultimate power is a heavy responsibility. But ultimately, we cannot even keep ourselves alive.

When we make this choice as a society, we are saying that humanity is the ultimate source of wisdom and power. Anything that science and philosophy and technology cannot do, cannot be done. We individually die and have no hope. And ultimately the Universe, or our part of it, will be swept away and humanity's wisdom with it.

Our other choice is to look at the Universe, and recognize that there is power beyond ourselves, and in faith accept that God is there, and seeks us. And we shall surely find him.

Why choose faith? Because we are frail limited human beings, not the ultimate power in the Universe. Here I will turn the argument against the nihilists who say nothing is special. Are we now so special that our wisdom is greater than that of our Fathers and Mothers? Is our wisdom greater than Paul? Than Jesus? Many generations have had faith, and found the truth. From antiquity, the Bible is a trustworthy record of faith. Or is modern mankind suddenly so wise that this can be disregarded?

So, choose faith. Choose what kind of person you will be. Choose to live out your faith. Choose to put God first, and live like it, so that others will know that, yes, faith is possible in our day. For as Jesus said:

Matthew 6: 14-16 "You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (NRSV).

Amen.