

Last Saturday night at six o'clock, I checked my watch, looked around me and saw several Morningside members at the function I was attending, and concluded that if the rapture had indeed occurred, it had thankfully left my faith community largely intact. I had one brief momentary hesitation as I considered that perhaps I should make sure our guest preacher for the day had not himself been *raptured* because that would mean that I needed to write a sermon, quick. That sermon would have started, "Apparently, I have been wrong about a lot of things."

I am, of course, being flip about the whole thing, but no more flip than my colleague who recently reminded me that when she was in seminary, a fine Presbyterian seminary, I might add, she and her classmates would have "rapture drills." This exercise consisted of dressing in all white, proceeding to the main quad of her campus and seeing how high each person could jump, I presume into some rapturous cloud of faithful folks being taken up.

I'm still being flip about it, and I suppose I should stop. It is one thing to be critical and another thing altogether to mock. This is, after all, someone's faith I am cracking jokes about, and however misguided and unbiblical I may consider the prognostications to be, if indeed they are offered sincerely, I oughtn't mock them. But there was a spate of media attention garnered by the preacher offering the doomsday scenario. I'm told the Huffington Post had a rapture watch. It all put a couple of questions into my mind. My question was this: is this what the world thinks about us? Do they hear *church* and think *judgment*?

I realize that the Presbyterian Church had a brief stint at the top of the headlines recently, but it was ever so brief. A couple of days, perhaps, an interview on NPR, and quickly our church business was relegated to old news. Maybe that's as it ought to be. We don't do what we do for media recognition, but this weeks long countdown to the rapture left me wondering if the majority of the non-Christians, or even some of the Christians think we're a bunch of doomsday watching kooks. If so, is it any wonder that large swaths of the modern population will happily identify as *spiritual* but don't want to touch *religion* with a ten foot pole.

This is not a new phenomenon, though, now that we think of it. It has been around a long time. It is, I think, to this congregation that Paul found himself preaching in Athens.

Rhetoricians consider Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, the *areopagus* in our text today, to be a model of persuasive speaking. Paul brilliantly begins his discourse by buttering up the Athenians. He immediately starts by saying how religious they are. And to be sure, all of the evidence would point to that. From where Paul stood, this is not an exaggeration, there were temples everywhere. There were temples to Athena and Poseidon, and even Mars Hill was named for the god of war. It's not an exaggeration. And in the mix of them all there was that one that Paul used as the crux of his sermon, that *temple to the unknown God*.

It was a perfectly reasonable temple to build. The ancients weren't so different from us. I'm sure the full spectrum of religious opinion and belief was as present then as it is now: surely there were those who found the whole operation a bit absurd, those who basically believed but didn't want to make a show about it, there were those who were the pillars of the temples (pun intended) and of course, those who were shaking down to their very

sandals with fear of the gods and fear of misplaced or misdirected faith. I suspect it was for this last crowd that the temple to the unknown God offered some solace: those who feared they might have missed a God in the cacophony of the religious landscape.

The ancient Athenian religious landscape was as cluttered as our own, with varying degrees of sincerity, intelligence, scholarship and devotion. I suspect that, though the apostle used the word *religious*, perhaps maybe *spiritual* would suit better.

I wondered enough that I went wandering back to the Greek text to see. The noun root is *daimon*, which probably sounds a lot like an modern English word to you, and the adjective is *deisidaimon*, and what struck me as I read this was that I'm pretty sure something gets lost in translation. Pejoratively, it could be translated as superstition, but I don't see any point in being pejorative. The point is that the Athenians, from Paul's vantage point, were very concerned with all things divine and the proper relationship with them, or at least their architectural landscape suggested. Paul wanted to preach to the spiritual people. He wanted to say to them, *have you considered this possibility?*

It can be a popular theme for preachers to play upon to beat up on those who identify as spiritual but not religious. It is popular in some circumstances because the preacher can play to a sympathetic house. Presumably those who choose membership in a church have found some solace in religion and perhaps are surrounded by like-minded persons. It's preaching to the choir, so to speak. It is easy to assume homogeneity of faith and push to the margins all those who struggle with what others take for granted. But it is wrong.

It is wrong because it runs counter to the very text we claim as sacred. The bible is full of skeptics and strugglers. Think of Job. Think of Ecclesiastes. Or if you can't think of them, go read them. You'll find in those pages people struggling with profound doubt

and profound distrust of that which is unknown, all in the Bible. My friend Kathy Sakenfeld once said to me that she was pretty sure that the inclusion of Qoheleth, that's the author of Ecclesiastes, in the authorship of the canon, that's the Bible, meant that there was room in the company of the faithful for the most radical of doubters, for the most hardened of skeptics. The answer to skepticism isn't judgment. At least not the way we commonly think about judgment.

I have some idea of where skepticism comes from. I suspect many of you do as well. How can one not harbor secret or not so secret doubts when tornadoes slam through town after town, week after week? It scarcely seems that the ink is dry on one check before another is needed to offer care to those affected. And of course, there are those events in life that move us to the great unknown – death, love, anything surrounded by mystery. And of course, there is always the damage to faith that has been done by the church itself. I read just this past week a story from a woman who describes herself exactly as what we've been discussing: spiritual but not religious. Marilyn McGuire, an author of books about what she calls the new consciousness, writes:

“Last summer I went to visit my children and grand children in Georgia. They have a beautiful home on a lake and they were there with another family. We spent the whole weekend taking care of the children and the dogs and just having fellowship together. We said blessings before meals, we went walking in the woods, and we were all in a state of love and kindness toward each other. On Sunday morning, we got in the boat to go to boat church. You ever hear of boat church? I hadn't heard of boat church either. We threw on our jeans and got in the boat and went. A beautiful mist was rising up off the water. We were heading to boat church and I'm surprised. There's Ted Turner's kids, on

this same lake and they're waiving to us and we're waving back. All the boats gather up and people have their dogs and their kids, and I'm thinking, oh, how wonderful. Here's the preacher on his float boat, here's the choir and they're singing, and the first thing the preacher says to everyone is, 'you're all sinners. Every one of you is a sinner.' He sat and told everyone how bad they were, and I thought, this is why I don't go to church. This man has probably been up all night drinking. I don't know who he's talking about, but it's not about me and I felt very protective of my children and grandchildren and the two dogs sitting there. I thought, I'm sure God's not here.'"¹

Whatever the church has to say to non-belief, whatever the church has to say to agnosticism, whatever we say to those who find the concept of religion off-putting, it cannot be a polemic against doubt or skepticism. We've contributed enough already in that regard.

But what Paul did was to say to the Athenians that the unknown God whom they worshiped is indeed the God of creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus, and in his preaching he pointed to a day of judgment that would come and would see Jesus as the judge of the world.

It seems that even in the first century, talk of the end of times and judgment couldn't be escaped! (Please note I didn't say *rapture*. That is such a late addition to the religious lexicon that to use that terminology to describe Biblical stories is anachronistic at best.) The idea of God's judgment is indeed part of our faith tradition from times long before Jesus. And it is an idea whose time has come, but not in the way that we've heard lately.

¹ Marilyn McGuire in The Life of Meaning: Reflections of Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World. Bob Abernethy and William Bole, eds. (Seven Story Press, NY, 2007) p167

I want to take a moment to clarify something about judgment, at least in the Biblical sense. It doesn't mean punishment. That may or may not be our modern understanding based upon our legal system. I am not a legal scholar, far from it, but I have a hunch that when we think of the judge, we think of someone in a robe, in a room with a bailiff, handing down sentences or dismissing charges. But if we want to think about judgment in a biblical sense, in the sense that Paul would have understood it and meant it, we have to think differently. We have to justice as something that is wrong being made right. In the Hebrew Scriptures there are plenty of stories of righteous judgment and they are the stories of wrong things being made right. So the judge, then, is the one who comes to make things *right*.

When Paul says that Jesus will come to judge – those aren't his exact words, but in the larger context, it's clear that's what he means – he means that things are going to be made right.

To those who worship an unknown god, Paul said, that this god, this particular God, this God whose story has been shown in the covenant relationship with God's people the Israelites, this God who revealed himself in Jesus, is the God who is working to make the world right. That's judgment, and that's the judge.

The idea of judgment is an idea whose time has come because the world needs some judging. The world needs some right-making.

Don't you think so? Don't you think there are some things that need to be made right?

When winds blow so hard they blow down whole towns and there is nothing but rubble left, don't we know that we are going to need to work awfully hard to see some things made right?

When our economy is so dependent on cheap labor that there is a black market for it so strong that a fence seems reasonable and discussion of how to fix the problem derails civil political discourse and yields legislation so controversial it clogs the court system, don't you think maybe something needs to be made right?

When you and I can get into our cars and drive over the Cheshire Bridge Road and see a sign that reads, "new girls, no clothes, high heels" and realize that is someone's daughter and granddaughter who has found that the most reasonable way to earn money is to strip for pay, doesn't it leave us wondering if maybe some things need to be made right.

Please don't mistake my point. I don't wish to demagogue about morals or politics or to suggest in any way that I have just shown up in Atlanta and seen something that you haven't already seen. I may be new to Atlanta, but I'm not new to these problems and neither are you. But the problem of these problems is that they are the *root* of the skepticism that points to an unknown god whose way is unclear, who to be perfectly frank, if he's going to judge the world and make things right, could stand to get on with it.

Paul claims that Jesus is the incarnation of that unknown God and that in Jesus, we can see who God is. That's not a problem. The problem comes when Paul claims that we who follow Jesus have to make those problems our problems. The call of the Christian is to participate in God's judgment, not by rendering judgmentalism, but by seeking and working for God's *right-making* in the world.

The church has a fine history of preaching Jesus. The late Peter Gomes, in his wonderful book [The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus](#) suggests that the church, in preaching Jesus, has missed what Jesus preached. And what Jesus preached has the capacity to stretch us to

the very limits of our capacity. And being stretched to our very capacity has the distinct possibility of offending us if we take it seriously enough.

To illustrate his point, Dr. Gomes told a wonderful story.

“There is a famous *New Yorker* cartoon that shows plutocrats leaving a church after having said sweet nothings to the preacher at the door. In the caption, the wife, swathed in furs and jewels says to her top-hatted husband, ‘it can’t be easy for him not to offend us.’” Gomes adds, “in the wildly popular British import comedy, *The Vicar of Dibley*, the vicar, the bodacious (Gomes’s words, not mine.) Geraldine Granger is often accused by her Tory-blue senior warden of preaching ‘socialist twaddle.’ ‘Why not stick to the Gospel?’ he asks; and she sweetly replies that ‘this is the Gospel.’”²

Please don’t take me to suggest that the gospel endorses a political party or ideology. I’m sure it doesn’t. But judgment rightly understood is understood in the context of what Jesus preached. The ethical implications of what Jesus preached are impossible to miss if we have eyes to see them and will risk being offended. If you’re willing to be offended, I have a simple exercise for you: read the Gospel. Mark’s is the shortest version, if you’re concerned about time, and write down what Jesus said. When you’re done, look back over what Jesus said. That’s the work of judgment we’re called to participate in. The living of that judgment, that *right-making*, will stretch to the very capacity what our faith and perhaps our emotions can sustain. But the chief end of Christian faith is not faith itself but its capacity to change us and to change the world around to the wholeness and healing, love and kindness that Jesus preached.

² Gomes, Peter. The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus. (HarperOne: NY, 2007) pp18-19

Jesus' preaching may surprise us. It may offend us. It may change us. This is our answer to the question of what the world thinks of us.

In that lies God's gracious judgment.

In that lies the answer to the question of the unknown God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.