

Where Is God?

Johnny and Tim – introduction to my theme

There were two brothers, Johnny and his older brother Tim, in a small rural village. The two boys were always up to some misdeed. If someone had been locked up in an outhouse, or if someone's dog had been painted green, one always knew who the culprits were, Johnny and Tim.

One day, the boys' mother became so exasperated with their behavior that she asked the local preacher to speak to her sons and put the fear of God in them so that they would mend their ways. The preacher asked the mother to send her sons to him one at a time. When the younger one, Johnny, a lad of eleven, came by, the preacher made him sit in a chair by his desk and then proceeded to ask Johnny, "Where is God?"

Johnny did not answer. The preacher then asked again, this time in a louder voice, "Where is God?" Again, Johnny did not answer, continuing to sit in silence. But when the preacher stood up and asked Johnny for a third time, this time in an even louder voice, "Where is God?", Johnny got up and ran out the door. He went straight to his older brother, Tim.

"Tim", Johnny gasped, "we are in big trouble." "What's wrong?", asked Tim, warily wondering which of their sins had caught up with them. "God is missing" said Johnny, "and they think that we had something to do with it!"

My overview for today

As you may have surmised, my reflection today is indeed about "Where is God?" It is not intended to be a light-hearted question as in my little story of Johnny and Tim, but rather an introspective on what has perhaps been a challenge for many of us. It certainly has been challenging for me over a long period of time. The question could also be rephrased in several other ways, such as "Who is God?", or "Why is God", or "How is God?", or even "What is God?" I'll simply leave it as "Where is God?" In short, I am going to share a few thoughts on God that have occurred to me. I realize, however, that this will just be the tip of the iceberg; there will be much more not said than what I can touch on today. However, I think and I certainly hope that I am asking a question that may have perplexed many of you at one time or another. In some sense, I am quite like the disciple Thomas; I am looking for hard evidence, which in the case of God is quite elusive. As such, I am resigned to my faith quest and my understanding of God being a life-long journey of discovery, with lots of questions and few answers, and with the arrival point being one of a big surprise. Perhaps I may even discover that the end is just the beginning!!

Key thought from today's scripture reading

In today's scripture reading taken from 1 Kings, Chapter 19, we learn a bit about where we might find God. In this reading, we hear of the terrible situation that the prophet Elijah finds himself in, warily escaping from Jezebel's wrath. In due course, Elijah is told to go out on the mountain and God will pass by. But in waiting for God to pass by, Elijah finds that God is not to be found in the big or momentous events, such as that of wind or earthquake or fire, but rather in gentle whispers. When he realizes this, Elijah pulls his cloak over his face and goes out to the mouth of the cave in which he is hiding to listen to God's gentle whispers. If we think about this, it is certainly sage advice. In so much of our life, we tend to spend our energies on things of

grandeur and not so much on the little things that inform our daily living in a most meaningful way. And it gives a good indication of where we might look to find God!

We know nothing except that we know nothing

As many of you know, graduating engineers in Canada typically partake in a ceremony known familiarly as the Iron Ring Ceremony and more formally as the Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer. The ceremony was prepared about 100 years ago by noted writer and poet, Rudyard Kipling. One of the statements in the ceremony, which is spoken by the senior members of the profession to those just entering, goes as follows: “we know nothing except that we know nothing.” In the Iron Ring Ceremony, this statement is intended to bring attention to the need for humility in our working endeavors. And so it is with God and our understanding of God. At best, after the journey of a lifetime, it feels just that way: we know nothing except that we know nothing! We search, we occasionally catch glimpses, and we may even get feeling a bit comfortable, but ultimately we never quite arrive at a full understanding of God. But as with so many things in our life, it is not the destination that matters but rather the journey. And for me, I can say that the journey of my faith seems to be boundless, sometimes frustratingly so, but at the same time always leaving me with new challenges for another day.

Creation or evolution?

One of the oft-cited controversies between religion and science, which inherently involves the existence of God, is that of creation vs. evolution. This is certainly a topic that I have pondered a bit from time to time, and perhaps you have too. To set the stage of this dichotomy, here is a short story for some humorous context.

A little girl named Abby asked her mother a question. “Mommy, how did the human race begin?” The mother answered, “Well dear, God made Adam and Eve, and they had children, and so all of mankind was made.” The little girl pondered her mother’s answer. The next day, she asked her father the same question. “Daddy, how did the human race begin?” The father answered, “It’s like this Abby. Many years ago, there were monkeys who really loved to breed, and from this the human race evolved.” Her Dad’s reply confused Abby girl as both parents answered the same question quite differently. So, she then went back to her mother and said, “Mommy, you said that human beings were created from Adam and Eve, but Daddy said that they evolved from monkeys.” The mother answered, “Well dear, it’s really very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your Daddy told you about his!”

So, there you have it! What answer would you like to accept? While I understand that many folks see it as an either/or type of situation, that one either believes the creation story or believes in evolution, religion vs. science if you will, I have come to think that it is not an either/or scenario at all. I certainly accept that evolution has played a huge role in the development of life as we know it. There is simply too much hard evidence showing how life has evolved. Furthermore, if we are willing to stretch our minds to another scientific explanation of how the Universe began it is with the so-called theory of the Big Bang. This theory postulates that some 13.8 billion years ago there was a cataclysmic event referred to as the Big Bang, and from there the Universe as we know it was born. And the Universe continues to grow or expand in the most confounding of ways. But, what ignited the Big Bang? If there was nothing before the Big Bang event, could God have had a hand in it and therefore be the creator of the Universe? Perhaps we’ll never know and perhaps it’s just as well that we do never know, but for now I’ll accept that

the hand of God was in the Big Bang and from that point forward we evolved to a Universe and a world as we know it today.

As a final thought on the creation vs. evolution, or religion vs. science, argument, it can easily be said that we can't prove the presence or existence of God, at least not in any conventional sense of proof. Naysayers tend to make this point often. Instead, we have to rely on heuristic evidence and, in turn, a sense of faith. But, this is also true in much of science. I can no more prove Newton's second law of motion than fly to the moon by flapping my arms. But, I accept this famous law as being valid or true, since every time I apply it I get a meaningful, repeatable, appropriate answer. Indeed, it informs my scientific life in an amazing array of ways! In short, I have faith that Newton's law will work for me each and every time I use it. Can it not also be so with the presence of God in our lives?

My small study group gatherings

For several years, just a few years ago, I was part of a small group of folks from another United Church here in the city. Our get-togethers were always over an early-morning breakfast at Fuddrucker's Restaurant. It started off as a weekly gathering through Lent one year in which the group studied that particular year's Lenten resource book. We then continued to meet on a two to three week basis throughout the next several years, with most of our focus being on some aspect of our faith. The gathering was led by the church's minister, and invariably after a brief prayer to kick off breakfast, she would go around the table and ask each of us where we had seen or experienced God in the past two or three weeks. Quite a simple and appropriate question! I certainly couldn't argue that, but I can say that I often found it rather awkward to come up with what seemed like an appropriate answer. Perhaps that says more about me than the question, but I also had a sense that I was not alone. In due course, I came to realize two things about the question of where we experience God. The first thing is that by asking such a question, it does tend to make one more aware of being open to God's presence. A more active rather than a passive awareness. You might give it a try and find that it is helpful in leading to an attitude of gratitude and an appreciation of God. The second thing, which reflects very nicely on today's scripture reading and the plight of Elijah, is that too often we are looking for God or to experience God in big events or in momentous ways rather than in quiet whispers. God truly does speak to us in a myriad of ways and many of these are often subtle, frequently gentle, and typically quiet. To some extent, we have to train our eyes and minds to see God and to feel God's presence in our daily living.

To illustrate the subtleness of God's way of expressing his presence, we might consider the story of the flood that hit a populated region. As the water level rose in the nearby river, a man named George found that to stay dry he needed to move up from the main floor of his house to the upstairs and eventually onto the roof. It was surely a devastating flood. As George sat on the roof, it was not long before a fellow came by in a canoe and offered him a ride. George turned down the ride saying that God would save him. A bit later, a bigger boat came along with several folks on board, and the captain of the vessel offered to have George join them. Again, George said no, that God would save him. As the water levels rose even higher, things for George were getting quite desperate, but shortly a helicopter hovered overhead and offered to pick him up from the roof. For the third time, George refused the help and said that God would save him. Needless to say, the flood waters rose so high that George was eventually washed away and drowned. As he entered the gates of Heaven, George stopped to ask God why he hadn't saved him. And God replied that he had indeed tried to save him, saying "I sent you a canoe, and you turned it down.

I then sent you a larger vessel, and you turned it down. And when things were really bad, I arranged for a helicopter pickup, and you turned that down too!" So, George, I really am on your side!

As you can see from that story, God does work in mysterious ways. Truly, we cannot always know how it is that God is doing his work, but we must keep our eyes open to such divine providence.

The wrap!

So, to conclude today, let me ponder a few ways that we might experience God and for which we may have a sense of gratitude for God's presence in our lives. When asked the question at our small group gatherings at Fuddrucker's, I often reflected on some aspect of nature, a pastoral scene if you will, as one way in which I felt that I experienced the presence of God. But, there are so many more. At the moment, we have our two and a half year old twin grandchildren living with us for a few weeks, and each morning when they wake up and I enter their bedroom, the shouts of joy are overwhelming. "Grandpa!" And to my wife, Marlene, "Grandma!" They are so excited that they literally vibrate with happiness. Or the presence of God may come from the satisfaction that we experience when visiting an elder or other person living in a care home. Or when we speak to God in prayer, perhaps expressing thanks, perhaps asking for understanding and guidance, or perhaps asking for God's touch on a friend in need. The ways of God are many, and our challenge is to open our eyes to these many expressions of God's presence in our lives. May you go from this place today with a sense of gratitude for God in your life, being open to how the gentle whispers of God are at work in you and for you.

Indeed, may it be so! Amen!