

“THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS”
Psalm 8; John1:1-18; Acts 17: 21-31
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On March 9 of this year, a report was released that made the front page of *USA Today*. It wasn't the story of yet another corporate bankruptcy or a sex scandal involving a prominent politician. It was the American Religious Identification Survey reporting what is widely being proclaimed as the decline of religion in America. The headline read, “*Almost all denominations losing ground, survey finds,*” and the bold print proclaimed, “*Faith is shifting, drifting or vanishing outright... The percentage of people who call themselves some type of Christian has dropped more than 11% in a generation.*”(1)

Most alarming for many was the fact that the group that claims no religion at all — the atheists, agnostics and other secularists — has almost doubled during the past eighteen years, from 8.2% to 15%. So many Americans claim no religion at all, that this category now outranks every other major U.S. religious group except Catholics and Baptists. The report concludes that in a nation that has long been mostly Christian, “*the challenge to Christianity... does not come from other religions, but from a rejection of all forms of organized religion.*”(2)

There was a time when the village church with its spire pointing toward heaven was the tallest building in town. It reminded all who passed by of the values that the people held and the focus of their faith. Nowadays, the tallest buildings in our cities and town are the offices of large corporations, dwarfing the churches in size and prominence, and I suspect, overshadowing their influence as well.

Didn't it all start about four hundred years ago when a man named Galileo pointed his first crude telescope toward the heavens? Yes, 2009 marks the 400th anniversary of Galileo's first recorded observations with a telescope. When Galileo looked through that lens, he discovered what contradicted thousands of years of traditional belief. He found that the moon was neither smooth nor unchanging, and that the earth was not the center of everything!

Many of Galileo's contemporaries fiercely rejected his findings. Some refused to look through the telescope for fear of what they would see. The pope summoned Galileo to Rome, where the Inquisition found him “vehemently suspect of heresy.” Galileo was forced to “curse and detest” his own work. He lived the rest of his life under house arrest, and his publications were banned. Only in 1992 — 359 years after the trial — was an apology issued by Pope John Paul II, officially admitting that Galileo was right.(3)

As foreign as the idea seems to our thinking today, early astronomers, of course, believed that the earth was the center of the universe and that the other planets, and even the sun, revolved around it. In the early 1500's, before Galileo's telescope, Copernicus, a Polish astronomer, had proposed the radical idea that the sun is the center around which the other planets rotate. He taught that the sun is the source and sustainer of life. The work of Copernicus marks the starting point of modern astronomy, the beginning of the scientific revolution. This shift in focus, from

the earth to the sun as the center of the solar system, became known as the Copernican Revolution.

When we are born, we see ourselves as the center of the universe. Everyone and everything exists in relation to us. Babies are very self-centered creatures! Gradually, as we grow and mature, we begin to see that the world does not revolve around us. Indeed, we begin to see that we are an alarmingly small part of the cosmos, no more than a cog in the machinery. Even though our Judeo-Christian heritage teaches that God has placed humanity at the very pinnacle of the created order (Psalm 8:5-6), we are not the center of the universe. In our self-absorbed and self-consumed culture, how much we need to hear that!

Of course, none of us today would proclaim that the earth is the center of the universe and that the other planets as well as the sun revolves around the earth. Yet how many of us, by our actions, imply that we are the center of the universe, that **the whole world revolves around us**. We demand a grossly disproportionate share of the world's resources to sustain our lifestyle. We have developed a cultural elitism and a chronological snobbery that makes other civilizations look tame by comparison.

When I was a seminary student, I remember so well one of my professors cautioning us not to assume that our perspective was somehow superior to others. When Harrell Beck and his wife, Leila, came to Boston to teach, they bought a home in Lexington. They had met when Professor Beck was on an archaeological dig in the Near East. They fell in love and got married, and Leila left her native Egypt to come with Harrell to Boston. Wanting Leila to appreciate the rich cultural heritage of New England, some of the well-intentioned women of the area took her on a tour of the historic, Revolutionary War sites of Lexington and Concord. "Some of these homes are over 200 years old!" the New Englanders told her. Dr. Beck, in his dry style, commented, "My wife, who grew up with a pyramid in her back yard, was not impressed!"

When Paul arrived in Athens, a leading city of his day, he encountered much the same atmosphere that a person finds in any modern city in the United States: some superficial attention given to religion, but not much in the way of substance and meaning. Paul noticed that the city was full of idols, statues to this god and to that one. The idols were offensive to the Apostle, but then Paul noticed an altar with the inscription, "*To the God Nobody Knows.*" In other words, the people were so concerned about doing their religious duty that they erected an extra altar, just in case there was one of the pantheon of deities that they had accidentally forgotten.

Before we laugh at the superstitious nature of the first century Greeks, may I say that I have encountered many 21st century Americans whose religion is little more than superstition. Like the person who throws a pinch of salt over his shoulder for good luck, we come to church if we need a favor from God or if we are feeling especially guilty about something, and hope that by doing this or that God will smile favorably in our direction. I can never quite understand the mentality of people who join a church or attend services or give a little money because, as they say, "I want to have all my bases covered." That, my friends, is superstition, not religion. Superstition says, maybe there is a God and maybe there isn't. But just to be on the safe side, I'll give lip service to the traditional faith. Superstition says, "I'll call on God when I need to, but when things are going well, I'll just go on my merry way." Superstition is inconsistent. It does not take life seriously. It plays the odds rather than faces the realities. Yet that's the level upon which most people operated in first century Greece and the level upon which many people function today.

“In contrast to that,” says Paul in his sermon to the people of Athens and the people of Cleveland, “There is a better way. This unknown god can be known! This mysterious presence to which you pay lip service can be understood and comprehended. You are missing something in your lives that this superficial nod toward religion is not going to satisfy. Why don’t you try real religion for a change?”

The essential message of Christianity is that the God whom we believe in not only exists, but is actively pursuing us, redeeming us and seeking to guide us from day to day. God is not just a vague something or other that we try not to upset. God can be a vital life force, making a difference in our lives, not just in emergencies, when we don’t know where else to turn, but in every aspect of our existence.

The unknown God makes himself known through the creation. I could easily become a nature worshiper. When I see a bird or a beautiful wild flower or the gracefulness of a deer or the overwhelming lure of the ocean or the majesty of a mountain or the power of a thunderstorm, then I am aware of the power of God operating in the world and I stand in awe of God’s creation.

The unknown God makes himself known through other people. When I am down and someone listens to me, when I am happy and someone celebrates with me, when I am anxious and afraid and someone takes my hand — then I know that God exists and that God cares. God often works through other people.

The unknown God makes himself known most profoundly and most completely in Jesus Christ. When God became a person, God limited himself, yet revealed his true nature in such a compelling way that it’s hard for me to understand how anyone could miss the point. If we want to see what God is like, all we need to do is look at Jesus. Jesus cared about the people that everyone else forgot. He was also concerned about the dimensions of personality that everyone else seemed to overlook: their inner feelings, their yearnings and their deep need for God. He wanted to see that the hungry were fed. But he was concerned not only with the sharing of daily bread but also with satisfying the hungers of the human heart. He was concerned with the alleviation of pain and suffering, but he recognized that mental and emotional anguish is the most severe pain of all. He talked with people about matters of life and death, reminding them that only those who are prepared to die are really ready to live, and that life after death is not only a future possibility but can be a present reality. Jesus taught by example that the meaning of life is not up for grabs — it need not be a superficial and self-centered existence, but a bold and confident adventure of faith.

Copernicus discovered that the earth was not the center of the universe, that the sun was the center around which the other planets rotate. Christians believe that the Son is the center around which our lives should rotate, that is S-O-N. This is a fundamental Christian belief, a shift in focus, if you will. If we embrace that belief, it will cause a Copernican Revolution in our lives, for we will begin to see that I am not the center of the universe, nor does the world revolve around me. Instead, we have a new center: the bright light of the Son — S-O-N — to lead and guide us from day to day.

The unknown God can be known. My own journey of faith has convinced me of that. Yet God remains beyond our total comprehension, and more powerful than we can imagine. It was Pascal who said, “*A religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true.*”(4) While the reality of the presence of God stands at the center of biblical faith, God’s presence is always elusive. “*Truly, you are a God who hides yourself!*” Isaiah writes in 45:15. The Deity of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures escapes human grasp and manipulation.

Several years ago New Testament scholar, J.B. Phillips, wrote a book that became quite popular in religious circles entitled, *Your God Is Too Small*. In it he addressed a number of issues that people have about Christianity and pointed out that oftentimes our concept of God is too narrow or too provincial to embrace the Lord of the universe that the Psalmist writes about. The God of the cosmos can embrace scientific discussion and the expansion of human knowledge. The God that we worship can embrace the ideas of Galileo and Copernicus and Darwin and the best minds of our post-modern world. Francis Collins, who, until last summer, headed the National Genome Research Institute, said in an interview, “*When I discover something about the human genome, I experience a sense of awe at the mystery of life and say to myself, ‘Wow, only God knew that before.’*”⁽⁵⁾ Collins writes, “*In my view, there is no conflict in being a rigorous scientist and a person who believes in a God who takes a personal interest in each one of us.*”⁽⁶⁾ If you believe that science and faith are not compatible, then perhaps your God is too small.

In his book, *A Mass for the Dead*, William Gibson tells about his own struggle for faith. He says that one time after his mother died, he picked up her gold-rimmed spectacles and her faded, dog-eared prayer book. He sat in what was her favorite chair. He opened the book and tried to hear in those words what she must have heard. He placed her spectacles on his nose and tried to see what she must have seen in that book. He reached — in desperation — for the slender thread of her faith, once so alive, so real, so meaningful. William Gibson writes that he did not see what she had seen; he could not hear what she had heard.

Gibson tried to stoke the fire of his mother’s faith — but it never works that way. Every one of us must discover the faith and come to know God for ourselves.

This morning I stand before you to tell you about “*The God Nobody Knows*,” the God who is bigger than all our concepts and theories and ideas. My friends, this God is knowable, for I have seen evidence of God’s power and handiwork, and so have you. I have seen God at work in the kind and loving acts of so many people, and so have you. I have seen God revealed most clearly through Jesus Christ. World-famous missionary, E. Stanley Jones, who taught a class of Boston University seminarians, myself among them, was fond of saying, “*If God is like Jesus, he can have my life without question.*” God is like Jesus, and I hold him before you today.

You are not the center of the universe! Our earth revolves around the sun, and God intends that your life revolve around the Son (S-O-N.) If you have not already done so, it is my prayer that you will take that “leap of faith” and commit your life to **the God who can be known**. And may each of us commit ourselves to follow where God leads.

Notes:

1. Grossman, Cathy Lynn. *Redrawing the Map of American Religion*. *USA TODAY*. March 9, 2009. pp. 1f.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Collins, Francis S. *The Language of God*. New York: Free Press, 2006., p. 156.
4. Pascal, Blaise. *Pensees.*, p. 191.
5. Keefe, Mark. *Reconciling Science and Religion*. *Plain Dealer*. February 8, 2003., p. E4.
6. Collins. *Ibid.*, p. 6.