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The Vine #1 - 6 Easter (Year A)
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Acts 17:22-31
John 14:15-21

An Unknown God

"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way" (Acts 17).

Let me quote from a child's letter to God. "Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother but what I asked for was a puppy. I never asked you for anything before. You can look it up. [Signed] Jennifer."¹

It's hard for us to even remember what childhood is like. Once the world felt new to us, a day just happened and we accepted it the way that it was, fresh, strange, interesting and sometimes a bit frightening. But eventually adulthood fell across our faces like a veil, and the world and God seem more distant now.²

As a child I lived near Estabrook Forest in Concord, Massachusetts and visited there often. In the twentieth century maple and oak trees had already taken over. Now nothing remains of the puritan farms that flourished there except a few empty cellar holes and low stone walls that seem to run at random through the woods.

One Thanksgiving during graduate school my parents visited my wife and me. We all went back to Estabrook on a cold day long after all the leaves had fallen from the trees. That afternoon we had the hearts of children. We threw rocks on the partially frozen pond and the sounds of the vibrating ice echoed off the hills.

I assumed that my parents were paying attention and they probably thought the same about me. We made our way back toward the car at sunset in the suddenly unfamiliar woods. In a ridiculously short time night had fallen and we were lost. You couldn't see your own hand in front of your face. As we stumbled along in the darkness we kept incorrectly thinking that we could see lights in the distance. Hours later, feeling sheepish, we came out at Middlesex School and a teacher drove us, a long way back to our car.

Sometimes life feels like being lost in those dark woods. We wonder if we're on the right path. We ask ourselves if we have made good decisions. We worry about where we'll end up.

In the Wim Wender's film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (released as *Wings of Desire*, 1987), invisible angels can hear the thoughts of the human beings they watch over. In one scene two angels walk through an outwardly silent library as we hear a cacophony of thoughts. I'll never forget one person's worry as he asks, "What will happen to me?"

I think that this feeling lies behind the Athenian's altar to an unknown God. There is a legend that the Greeks built it during a time of unrelenting plague. They felt desperate and reached out to anything, to anyone that they hoped could help them. They slaughtered sheep on an altar to the unknown. They gave a life for the hope that they might live.

We too make sacrifices to our own unknown gods, sometimes we even sacrifice out children. We act as if money, intelligence, our career, good looks or popularity can protect us when we feel lost. We give up something of ourselves for these things. Because we feel afraid, we are not what we could be.

The philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was one of the most notable figures of the seventeenth century. At the age of twelve he independently proved the equivalent of Euclid's first 32 theorems of geometry. He invented a calculating machine at age 19. His discoveries in the natural sciences and especially in mathematics and probability theory have deeply influenced how we see the world.

Pascal's religious thought was written partially in response to his older contemporary René Descartes (1596-1650). From this distant vantage point we have almost completely forgotten the devastation of The Thirty Years War. The German States lost a third of their population.

Descartes wanted to establish a basis for believing in God that didn't appeal to the religious doctrines that first led to the wars between Protestants and Roman Catholics. He tried to prove that we can know about God through universal reason. Descartes began by trying to doubt everything and then famously said, "I think therefore I am." For him, this very ability to think necessarily means that there is a God.

Pascal was a fervent Christian but he disagreed with this. He believed that, "It is the heart that perceive[s] God and not the reason."³ Over history some great Christian thinkers believed that we experience God mainly through our intelligence. Others believe that we mostly meet God through our feelings.

To the crowds in Athens Paul says, "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 hand,... he gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations, so that they would search for God and perhaps feel for him and find him – though he indeed is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17).

Paul describes my own experience. He says, "In [God] we live and move and have our being." For me God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Communion and baptism are the signs that God is always with us. We cannot do anything for God or win his love as a reward for what we do. But through Jesus we can become adopted as his children.

The English novelist Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) wrote that, "we breathe in with the air of our times," "the conflict between an attraction to the Holy and the disbelief in it."⁴ This is in part because our ordinary picture of the world has not caught up with what we are learning about it scientifically. We inhabit a surprising and mysterious universe at the levels of the microcosmos and the macrocosmos. Today we have more reasons to realize that our physiology, our finitude, mean that we cannot experience anything as it really is. We are in God's hands

We have a personal experience of God through our prayer. During my ninth grade year our English class went up to Ashland Oregon for the Shakespeare Festival. That night we camped out by a lake. I don't know why I did it, but alone in my tent that night I prayed. I cannot even remember what I asked for or how I thanked God, but the next morning I woke before sunrise to a transformed world.

As I walked along the shore of the lake, I felt an overwhelming peace in my heart. The shining water, songbirds, and new spring leaves all seemed to say one thing to me, "All of this is being created by God." I knew a kind of certainty that I will probably never experience about anything else in my life.

I don't always think to do it, but whenever I turn to God, something personal in the universe eventually answers my call. Almost every day I experience the way that prayer changes the world.

We experience evil, dishonesty, suffering and cruelty. But when my children wake up from a bad dream in the middle of the night, I can truthfully say to them, "everything will be alright." I know that much as I love them, God loves them even more.

In conclusion, we can't go back to the faith we see in a child's immediate experience of the world, but neither do we have to accept the false consolations of an unknown god. God, the creator of worlds, libraries, maple trees and quarks is too big to be bullied. God is also too close to our hearts to avoid for long.

Even when we feel afraid and long for a kind of security that this life cannot give, Jesus promises that the spirit of God's truth will always dwell in us. Even when we feel far from that truth, we are members of the holy church and this means we will never be lost from our true home.

¹ Email from Fritz Schneider on 4 May 2005.

² Like Rainer Maria Rilke "The Grown-up" in *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Ed. & Tr. Stephen Mitchell (NY: Modern Library, 1995), 37.

³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* Number 424. However, for other people who did not experience God in their hearts he described what has become known as "Pascal's Wager." He asked his reader to imagine trying to decide on whether God exists or not and compares this to flipping a coin. If God does not exist and you believe he does there will not be much harm done. But if God does exist and you do not believe this would be a total disaster. In his words, "if you win, you win all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Bet therefore that God is without hesitating."

⁴ Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2003), 155.