

## Where Are You From? What Do You Do?

I absolutely love listening to a program on the radio called “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me.”

“From NPR and WBEZ in Chicago, It’s Wait, Wait Don’t Tell Me.”

I smile every time I hear that introduction to the program.

I usually listen to the podcast either when I am walking my dog or preparing dinner. If you want to listen to it live, it is on Saturday mornings in this market. The program always makes me laugh - from first to last. I recommend it to you. The format of the show is consistently the same. I like that predictability. When “Wait, Wait” was here in Houston a few years ago not only did it sell out but also the demand for tickets was such that they scheduled another program.

The show is setup to have people call in and, as the host puts it, “to answer questions from this week’s news.” There are three panelists who also banter about with the callers and among themselves. I especially like it when Paul Poundstone is one of panelists. When the host, Peter Sagal, welcomes a caller he consistently asks the same two questions: Where are you calling from? What do you do?

From the spiritual perspective we are trying to achieve in here these are among the most important questions to get right: Where are you from? What do you do? And, like all truly profound spiritual questions they look simple, are difficult to answer and their answers are ever evolving.

The really “holy people” I’ve known in my life, either in person or through their writings or the writings about them are consistently clear about these matters: their identity and their purpose. In many ways it seems, certainly at the collective level, we are not usefully clear about wise and useful answers to these questions.

In my talking about living in the gap between the “no-longer” and “the not-yet,” I’m referring to how an old order of believing and behaving is not only not working for us but also is being destructive to us.

I've been, as the phrase goes, "going to church" all of my life. All along the way I have heard, as perhaps you have, countless sermons of Abraham almost sacrificing his son Isaac. (Rembrandt's famous painting.) It is a great and dramatic story meant to show an advance in the human understanding of God. Though the religions around them might call for the sacrifice of humans, the God of Israel did not require that. (We can even make fun of it as a cartoon I have shows.)

While sitting in church this past Sunday and still trying to process yet another school shooting it occurred to me that we willingly allow the sacrifice of children, and others, for ideas and causes we deem more important. There are other countries where citizens own a lot of guns, like Switzerland, where this kind of mass shooting does not occur. Every country has its share of mentally disturbed people. But, no country beats ours in the number of people killed by guns every single day. It is a sacrifice we seem more than willing to make. And, of course, just like any addict who uses, we can come up with all sorts of explanations and/or reasons - read: excuses - as to why this is so and either nothing can be or should be changed about the situation.

I have mentioned to you before "The Book of Joy." I read this book from cover to cover in one sitting. Of course, that was an unusual sitting: on an flight from Rome to Houston.

The book is a reporting of a series of conversations that took place between the Dali Lama and Desmond Tutu over a week long period of time. You likely know the history of these two now-over-eighty year old men. The Dali Lama has been exiled from his homeland for over fifty years and Desmond Tutu lived through Apartheid in South Africa and then led in the Truth and Reconciliation movement in that country.

They each say in their own way that no dark fate determines the future. We do. Each day and every moment we are able to create and re-create our lives and the very quality of human life on this planet. This is the power we have. We can't, however, create that future using the same kind of thinking of belief system that got us here. I'm not here to review this book. You should read it.

Just one of the many valuable gems I got from it was a reaffirmation of my own conviction that the way to a better future lies in education. It is not an education about reading and math, though those are important. It is an education that leads to our seeing and embracing that we all came from the same place and we are all charged with the same task. The best of all great religions teach this: treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated. This is what we need to teach and to be taught.

Ours is a violent culture. Some would argue that the human animal in its desire for security and control has always had a tendency for violence. Innate within us is something like: “You touch one of my children or grand-children, be careful!” We can all feel and know that kind of energy. Actually, the social sciences say that what is innate within us and absolutely essential for survival is our need and ability to emphasize and cooperate. That’s another topic for another time.

I’m talking about something else. I’m talking about the mentality that got this country started. That mentality allowed people to think that the native Americans who lived here before us were unworthy of having land that belonged to them. They were not worthy to be dealt with as equals. Our country was born out of that kind of mentality. That is the mentality that led us to fight one of the most deadly wars ever over the issue of owning slaves.

That mentality, however, had been long taught to our ancestors. Growing out of the tribal mentality of the Hebrew religion, fueled by the belief of the gone-wrong Christian movement in the fourth century that explicitly taught that anyone who was not or did not convert to this new religion should be exterminated, righteous divisiveness became part of the collective DNA.

One of the things I want to do is to explore this history and to point to a different kind of future.

Heaven and hell, topics we will get to, are nothing more than the belief that God thinks and behaves like we do. Religion almost always creates God in the image of the human and then tries to force all reality into that frame of reference. This is one reason no religious system is eternal and, paradoxically, it is one reason changing a religious system is so difficult. Political ideologies are “religious systems” too.

The death of any of these systems is never easy. The fear that such change stirs up is monumental. This is exactly what Fundamentalism is about, a killing hostility directed toward that which or those who seek to call it into question.

One of the things that has to be confronted in inhabiting the gap between the no-longer and the not-yet is Fundamentalism. I've talked about the origin of what we know as Christian Fundamentalism, which has morphed into a political movement called "evangelical Christianity." Rigidity and righteousness about religious beliefs have likely been part of the human makeup from the beginning.

In our time, and this is one of the things that is creating the gap in which we live, is that there is a massive and what the historian Martin Marty calls "a convulsive ingathering of peoples into their separateness and over-againstness." Their goal is to protect their pride and power and place from others. Who, of course, are busy doing the same thing. The name of the game is, "we are virtuous and they are vicious. We're the good and they are the bad."

Fundamentalism arises when a group or an individual feels threatened. The key word in understanding fundamentalism is reactivity. The movement that gave Christianity the title "Fundamentalism" arose in the late 19th century, and whatever it is, is not "that old time religion." It was invented in the modern world of the 1840s. Indeed, the battle was called the battle between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists.

I've also thought recently about the incredible paradoxical nature of what is going on in our country, in our religious systems, in this world. There is a light side to every darkness and a dark side to every lightness. It is the very evil of fundamentalism that is goading us into new ways of thinking about who we are and what we are to do. We are being stretched, if we fight the bad with the better, into finding a new path. This is where hope is born.

This is why today I want to talk with you a bit about the book of Job.

As you know if you have heard me teach more than three times, one of my beliefs is that we suffer from both religious and spiritual illiteracy. This is especially true for many people who claim to believe this Bible.

If you were to ask most people what is the oldest book in the Bible, more than likely you would be told that it is the book of Genesis. This is because of two things: the book of Genesis contains “the creation story” and it comes first in the collection of writings we call the Bible. The fact is that Genesis contains two stories of creation that are different from each other - in one Adam, which means “human-kind” is created on the sixth day and in the other the human is created at the beginning of the story. People who say they take the Bible literally have clever ways of dealing with this. At any rate, scholars are fairly agreed that this portion of Genesis, and Genesis has at least three different kinds of authorship, were relatively late in development - the current estimate about their origin is around 500 B.C.

The stories in Genesis are of the same historical validity as the story of George Washington chopping down a cherry tree and never telling a lie. Even worse, because of the way Genesis is misunderstood the notion is planted that humans were created in some perfect state and, then, broke some major rule and got kicked out of the Garden of Eden and sent into a hopeless state until God had a change of heart and decided, in the most perverse bit of theology ever created, to send his son to die on the cross so that people could believe in him and go to heaven when they die.

The damage done by this is at least two-fold.

First is the belief deeply ingrained into almost everybody sitting in this room is that we are born no damn good. That is a blunt but true way to put what is called “the doctrine of original sin.”

Second, this way of understanding creation implies that this God was really A.O.L. (absent without leave) until Jesus came on the scene. Creation having begun at least 13.8 billion years ago and the earth being over 4.5 billion years old leaves God with a long time to work cross-word puzzles before he finally says, “Oh well, I guess I should go down there and do something.”

There is no way of knowing how much damage these two misconceptions have done both individually and collectively over the centuries.

This whole understanding of creation is far more complicated than it sounds. The creation stories say that we were created in the “image” and “likeness” of God. So our understanding of God is critically important to our understanding of ourselves. How we begin is how we end, it is how we go about the living of our lives. Hang on to this as we will return to it.

One of the things Christian Fundamentalists claim is that they take the Bible literally. It is always interesting to me to see when they stop doing that.

I’m sure only God knows how many jokes or stories there are about people standing at the pearly gates and who have to pass some sort of test. Here is one:

A Fundamentalist, Bible believing and Bible knowledgeable person ends up there only to be greeted by Jesus. He is given a test and it is proceeding along nicely.

Jesus: Great! On to question number two. Based on biblical teaching do you accept the following as fact: talking snakes?

Applicant: Yes, Genesis 3:1.

Jesus: Talking donkeys?

Applicant: Numbers 22: 28.

Jesus: Gods that impregnate humans?

Applicant: Of course.

Jesus: Talking donkeys?

Applicant: Numbers 23:22.

Jesus: Dragons?

Applicant: For sure! Deuteronomy, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Malachi all speak of dragons.

Jesus: What about suicidal, demon possessed, cliff-jumping pigs?

Applicant: So it is written in Mark 5:13, so I believe.

Jesus: And, finally, did you do as I commanded and sell each and every one of your possessions and give all your money to the poor?

Applicant: Well . . . Wait! Do what now?

Jesus: Um, yeah. Luke 14: 26-33 and Luke 18:18-22! I said it twice for Pete's sake! You have to sell everything you own to be able to inherit eternal life!

Applicant: Seriously, I thought that was metaphorical.

To take the Bible literally is to abuse it.

As I have said, Genesis is not the oldest writing in the collection called the Bible. That distinction belongs to the book of Job. There are some parts of other books in the Hebrew Bible that are older than Job but Job is the oldest single collection.

Even people who have little experience with religion or the Bible likely know the story of Job. The book of Job raises a question that is fundamental to human existence: that of suffering and the absence of basic fairness and justice in this world.

Anyone who is a follower of the teachings of Carl Jung, as I am, is aware of what is perhaps Jung's greatest work, "The Answer to Job." Trying to understand why there is evil and suffering in this world, especially if God is loving and compassionate, has been part of the human inquiry from the beginning. Some version of what is undertaken in the book of Job exists in all religions.

This is a story. It is not factually true. It is truer than that. Everybody in this room gets a change at one time or another, some more often than others, to be Job. To suffer. Not everyone uses suffering well. Suffering is hard. That is why it is called suffering. Some people move, for a variety of reasons, into anger, bitterness and meaninglessness because of their suffering. Some use it to move into the heart of the Sacred.

Because I believe that religious, biblical and spiritual literacy are important; I want to offer you my take on Job.

Satan is introduced to us in the book of Job. Not as a bad guy. But, as someone who has conversations with God. One day they are talking, maybe they are having a beer together at the pub. God says to Satan, “Hey, how about my guy Job. He is such a faithful adherent of mine.” Satan responds, “Well, it is no wonder he is such a faithful person. Look at how well he is doing in life. He has wealth and a large and healthy family. Why, shouldn’t he be faithful to you? The system of reward and punishment works for him.”

Let me just say here that the system of reward and punishment is foundational to our culture. Though there may be exceptions to this the fact is, and again this is part of our inherited DNA, by and large we think, we believe, that if someone does well in life, they deserve it. If something tragic befalls us, the almost automatic response is, “What did I do to deserve this?”

I grew up being taught that people of color could, as the phrase went, “better themselves” if only they wanted to. While at the same time the opportunities to “better themselves” were systematically denied them.

As an aside, I’m in the process of reading a book that I highly recommend to you in terms of raising awareness about this matter. It is “Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America.” Be forewarned: I am only able to read it in relatively small blocks. But, regarding the issue of what the book of Job is about - fairness and justice - it is, in the context of our culture, a critically important work. As well as being incredibly relevant for figuring out in this gap we are in how we move forward into creating a culture that truly works for everyone.



God defends Job's faithfulness as sincere but agrees to let Satan "test" him for a season.

So, Satan removes all the blessings from Job's life. Tragedy after tragedy comes upon him. His flocks die off, his crops wither, his wealth is destroyed, his sons and daughters are killed, his health is taken from him. The religion and wisdom Job had been taught was that God rewards faithfulness and punishes evil. "Since I am a righteous man," which we all believe about ourselves, "why has this befallen me?"

Then come the so-called comforters of Job. They drone on for thirty chapters urging Job to come clean about his lack of righteousness. They even quote Scripture to back up their point. Their point is that it would be a heresy for Job to hang on to the claim that he was a righteous man. He must have done something to deserve this. This was the theology of the time. It still is for many people! This is what the prosperity gospel of our time is all about.

I want you to be clear about the theology here. How we behave (or believe) controls how God acts. This is Fundamentalist theology. Be good, be rewarded. Being "good" involves believing the right things, belonging to the right group, etc.

Job's friends are convinced he must be guilty of something and they have come to help him come to grips with whatever it is, to beg forgiveness and, thus, bring an end to his misfortune.

Job wouldn't budge. The theology of his day didn't fit with his personal experience and he was going to let his experience be his authority, not what he had been taught. In the most dramatic point in the story Job is pictured as sitting on a garbage heap, scratching the infected sores on his body with a piece of broken pottery. All he had left was his inner sense of integrity. His personal authority was what mattered.

What was at stake in this story was the meaning of life itself. It was only by admitting that he was guilty of something, which he did not believe to be true, could he avoid the fear that there was not a God who was in control. If the theological wisdom of the day was that God rewards the just and punishes the

unjust was not true, then what was? Does this mean that God is not just? Does it mean that there is no God? That either of these things might be the case was the unspoken fear of Job's friends. This is why they, like all fundamentalists, were pressing their case so strongly.

Job would not relent. He was willing to run the risk of stepping out of the accepted theological truth of his day and go for something new. The book of Job, therefore, ends with a new understanding of God. This new understanding says that every human attempt to state how God works is inadequate. Anticipating in a way the insights of modern physics this story says that the human mind cannot embrace the reality of Sacred Mystery. To conclude that our ways are God's ways is always a fatal theological assumption.

As Shelby Spong has in one of his books about the need for a new theological understanding for a new world, "Job resisted the theological conclusions of his day. He refused to let his experience be interpreted by the categories of the past. He held on until the birth of a new consciousness embraced him. Job is thus an icon through which we can see the meaning of a profound religious paradigm shift."

This is what I think we see going on right now in our culture and our world. Our expanded knowledge in the worlds of physics and psychology are telling us that the answers of yesterday are inadequate to the questions that lead to tomorrow. The defenders of the way things used to be, or the way they thought things were, are anxious, frightened. Frightened people do frightening things. Fear leads to anger. Angry people do angry things.

At all times in human history people have lived between what was and what is yet to be. Up until now there have been two competing stories about "what is." The stories we have had available to us are the stories that have been told by religion and the stories that have been told by science. Science is telling a new story. What we get a chance to be a part of is what some folks are calling a "new cosmology." Of course, it isn't new at all. What is new is our awareness of it. Ironically, what the scientists and physicists are telling us is what the mystics in all traditions have always said, "We all come from the same place. We are all inter-connected." We can embrace that or not. Whether we do or not does not change the reality of it. The discoveries of Galileo and Copernicus didn't change anything. They just

recognized what was already true. If something is true it is true all the time everywhere whether people embrace it as truth or not. It is in this so-called “new cosmology” that we are to find the answers of identity and destiny.

What we have a choice in is how we answer the question of what we do. Do we embrace the practice of kindness and compassion or do we embrace the narrow confines of what we think is doctrinal and/or ecclesiastical correctness? I believe that if we could embrace our connectedness, the kindness would take care of itself. You don't hurt someone who is part of your family.

I'm going to go as far as to say that all of us inherited a view of God that simply doesn't work any more. The God-view we inherited is of a, usually, male God who is separated from our world and who stands back and judges humanity's faults and failings rewarding the just and punishing those who deserve it. This view simply no longer works.

It is this very view that perpetuates the notion that we are separate from each other and should in our dealing with each other be like God - judgmental and punishing. This view also, as I have said today, keeps alive the notion that there is something inherently wrong with us. If the “God-view” we have inherited no longer works, what does?

When I say that there is no God in the sky, am I saying that there is no God? Well, there is no God like there is a rock or a stick or a tree. There is no external designer. There is no micro-managing deity.

The Sacred is so much better than that. This doesn't mean that the world is devoid of the Sacred. Quite the contrary! The Sacred is so intimately present in all that is and all who are that everything can be regarded as an expression of God - creative, expansive, entangled, evolving. As self-realizing and self-sharing.

We need a new theology for the “not-yet” and I'm suggesting that it looks something like this. It is a theology in which God is very present in all of the created order. Of course, God is already present. What is missing is our awareness of this. What we need in the “not-yet” are beliefs and practices that do not render

God absent from any person or any place, beliefs and practices that see everything as Sacred.

We folks who want to see psycho/spiritual growth as central to human living and who also want to follow Jesus and to allow all of this to affect our religious life have some very serious and large questions to ask and answer:

Can what goes on in the education program of Christian churches easily interact with the insights from what we are learning from the fields of science? Can it embrace the latest biblical scholarship? Can the creeds we write and recite also reflect reality rather than a stubborn clinging to nostalgia and “the way we have always done things”? Can Christian churches fully affirm human oneness and include everyone completely while at the same time embracing the reality of radical human diversity? Can the faith we are striving for create a new institutional form that brings into being a truth-seeking, truly welcoming community?

We are not there yet but it is where we must go. Or, fall into the gap.

I love the exercise, the spiritual exercise, of trying to put non-dual mind into words. It can't be done but that doesn't stop me. I'm stubborn.

The Hindus and Buddhists are better at this than the Jews and Christians. Nonetheless, here goes:

Everything that is and all who are are an expression of the one Sacred Mystery beside whom nothing exists. This Sacred Mystery is without beginning, is unborn and always will be. It transcends all human limits, measures and comparisons.

Perhaps the person in the Christian tradition who came closest to capturing this is St. Bonaventure who said, “By God's power, presence, and essence, God is the One whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. God exists uncircumscribed in everything.”

You don't have to go anywhere to get to God. God is never absent from us. We, however, are frequently absent from God.

You follow this? Because it's going to deep now.

How do we awaken to this truth? That sounds like an easy, simple question. How do you come into the presence of Sacred Mystery? You can't. You are already there. If all that there is is Sacred Mystery, then simply making the distinction between being away from it or in it is already an error. If all there is is Sacred Mystery, then even that which you imagine to be other than Sacred Mystery is also Sacred Mystery. If all there is is this Sacred Mystery then there is no escaping Sacred Mystery and, therefore, no need to do anything with regard to it.

What I'm trying to do in talking like this is to undermine all your thinking about God, about Sacred Mystery. Only when we can see through the thoughts and the words that express these thoughts can we at last be free from the thoughts and the word and then be free to use them without falling into a trap.

Understand? I hope not. Because it is a Mystery, a Sacred Mystery.

But I do hope it opens the door a little bit wider to who you are and what you are called to do.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.