

Romans 5:1-11  
3 Lent/Year A  
24 February 2008  
Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson

*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.*

“How can people live in this world without God in their lives?” I am often asked this question by people who have just come through a traumatic moment or who are feeling the crushing weight of a lifetime’s worth of burdens. “I just don’t understand how anybody can make it through the rough times without God in their lives,” they say.

In the most recent issue of the *Christian Century* magazine, there is an excerpt from John Haught’s new book *God and the New Atheism*. Haught is the senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University. The article in the *Christian Century* is entitled “Amateur Atheists: Why The New Atheism Isn’t Serious.” In the article Haught speaks of a class he teaches to undergraduates entitled, *The Problem Of God*. The goal of the class is to expose his students to the “most erudite of unbelievers,” himself believing that any mature commitment that intelligent young people might make to a religious faith should be critically tested by the very best opponents.

In Haught’s eyes, however, the erudite opponents of religious faith are NOT the authors of the most recent mega best sellers espousing the glories of atheism. Perhaps you have read one of these books or all of them for that matter: *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *Letter To A Christian Nation* by Samuel Harris or *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens. According to Haught, the arguments of these new atheists are rather ridiculous when compared to the masters that he and his students read: Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Frederick Nietzsche, Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. Personally I haven’t yet read any of the books by this new breed of atheist,

but I have read the works of these classical atheists; I read them with enthusiasm and fascination. Parts of what these philosophers wrote about made sense to me at the particular life stage I was in when I read these great works. What I wasn't prepared for, however, was the great sadness that came along with it. You see, what the masters knew that these new atheists don't have a clue about is that true atheism takes one into the very depths of Nihilism, that view of the world where there is no meaning, no truth, no hope, no values, a world of nothingness. As Haught says in his article, "Atheism, as Sartre remarked, 'is a cruel and long-range affair.' Like Nietzsche and Camus, Sartre thought that most people would be too weak to accept the terrifying consequences of the death of God. By contrast, the recent atheist authors... would have the God-religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - simply disappear, after which we should be able to go on enjoying the same lifestyle as before. People would then continue to cultivate essentially the same values as before, including altruism, but they would do it without inspired books and divine commandments."

A good friend I grew up with became a philosophy professor at the University of Utah. He was a disciple of Nietzsche and Sartre, proudly proclaiming to all who would listen that he was a Nihilist. He was also an alcoholic for much of his adult life, and in the end, he didn't make it, dying before he reached the age of 40 from alcohol poisoning. You see, not even Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre could embody the tragic heroism that they believed should be the logical outcome of atheism. My friend Rick tried and it was more than he could bear.

For the past two Wednesday's, in our Lenten Series, we have been talking about "fear." Last week we took the uncomfortable plunge into a discussion on the notion of

the “fear of God” and we read some pretty unsettling texts from the Old Testament. I didn’t do a very good job of wrapping that discussion up partially, at least, on purpose. I think that it is good sometimes to sit with ambiguity and tension because it helps us to deal with the deeper questions of life, questions that most of us shy away from. Last week a comment was made that I want to paraphrase in a moment because I think it captured the essence of what all of us were feeling. The comment went something like this: “What if we are all fooling ourselves and the God that we know is truly the wrathful God known by the ancient Israelites, the one who destroyed nations and punished his people for their transgressions. What if this wrath is awaiting us, what if this is the fear of God that we are to understand?” I was hoping that this question would arise because I believe that within all of us there is at least a piece that believes a wrathful God is ready to pounce on our indiscretions either now or after our death. In the end, what is worse, the emptiness of the Nihilism that awaits the atheist or the wrath of an angry God that awaits the sinner?

You see, it is into this scene that Jesus emerges and proves to be the one who saves our souls. Perhaps nobody has ever understood this better than the Apostle Paul. Let me ask you, did you hear the reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans when it was read just a few moments ago? Did you really listen to it? I want to read it again, just in case you missed it, this time from the Phillips translation.

Since then it is by faith that we are justified, let us grasp the fact that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have confidently entered into this new relationship of grace, and here we take our stand, in happy certainty of the glorious things he has for us in the future. This doesn’t mean, of course, that we have only a hope of future joys - we can be full of joy here and now even in our trials and troubles. Taken in the right spirit

these very things will give us patient endurance; this in turn will develop a mature character, and a character of this sort produces a steady hope, a hope that will never disappoint us. Already we have some experience of the love of God flooding through our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us. And we can see that it was while we were powerless to help ourselves that Christ died for sinful men. In human experience it is a rare thing for one man to give his life for another, even if the latter be a good man, though there have been a few who have had the courage to do it. Yet the proof of God's amazing love is this: that it was while we were sinners that Christ died for us. Moreover, if he did that for us while we were sinners, now that we are men justified by the shedding of his blood, what reason have we to fear the wrath of God? If, while we were his enemies, Christ reconciled us to God by dying for us, surely now that we are reconciled we may be perfectly certain of our salvation through his living in us. Nor, I am sure, is this a matter of bare salvation - we may hold our heads high in the light of God's love because of the reconciliation which Christ has made.

I hope that this text gets way down into your bones, into your marrow, for this is the food that will feed our parched and terrified souls. Getting back to our original question, "How can people live in this world without God in their lives?" I don't know, in fact, I have never understood how anyone can truly bear life's pain or appreciate life's beauty apart from the one who made us; I simply don't understand how it is possible. But one thing I cling to with all that I have, with all the strength I can muster is that in Christ Jesus I have been reconciled to God and so have you. It is between the emptiness of Nihilism and the wrath of an angry God, that we find Jesus our Lord and deliver.

In Jesus Name; Amen.