

" 911: To A n Unknown God – This I s A n Emergency! "

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Fountain Street Church
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SCRIPTURE

In Acts 17 we find the apostle Paul coming into the city of Athens, on one of those missionary journeys; he has a bit of time in between meeting companions and being on his way again. And he surveys the city of Athens with all of its diverse idols and temples and statues. We find them there in the 16th verse of the 17th chapter of the Book of Acts.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and devout Christians and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbler want to say." Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. So, they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting. It sounds rather strange to us. So we would like to know what it means." Now all of the Athenians and foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. 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 by shrines made by human hands – Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him though indeed he is not far from each one of us – for in him we live and move and have our being as even some of your own poets have said, for we are God's offspring thus far."

READING

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love. Before it is

too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamation of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but also a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means for then we shall hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: If someone with courage and vision can rise to lead in nonviolent action, the winter of despair can, in the twinkling of an eye, be turned into the summer of hope.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: Nonviolence is not a garment to put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: Nonviolence, which is a quality of the heart, cannot come by an appeal to the brain. It is a plant of slow growth, growing imperceptibly, but surely.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: If a single person achieves the highest kind of love it will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: If we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

MINISTER: The future depends on what we do in the present.

CONGREGATION: It is possible to live in peace.

Mohandas K. Gandhi

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SERMON

It is a pleasure to be here. I think it was about two years ago that I was here in this pulpit. It was a fine morning then and coming back today is like coming home. It is nice to come to a place and feel at home. And, certainly, Fountain Street Church has become, for me, a place of warmth, of affirmation, encouragement and inspiration. It took me a long time to get there, but then I am a late bloomer. Finally, it is good to be here and to be at home.

We hear a lot these days about September 11, 9/11, being a defining moment for this generation. There are those significant moments in the course of human affairs which have a shaping affect upon the present and the future. And, certainly, the attack upon our nation on September 11 was one such moment. I'm not sure whether the intention was to have the attack on 9/11, which is also the number we dial for an emergency, or whether that happened to be simply a coincidence. But, in any case, 9/11 has been burned into our consciousness never to fade. It is one of those times when we are taken aback, we are given pause, and an opportunity to step back and to think once again about those things that are ultimately important.

And, of course, at a time like that, we flee to the old securities. To the old securities of patriotism, for example. I have seen more American flags flying in these recent weeks than ever in my life, I swear. And it is understandable, too, for the flag is a symbol, a symbol of those freedoms, the values by which we live and by which we are blessed. The flag is a sign of our affection for this nation and our recognition of how fortunate we are to be a part of the American scene. Someone has said to be born an American is already to have won the lotto. So we fly our flags as a sign of our appreciation and our affection for this nation.

But the flying of the flags, the patriotism, also has another dimension to it. It is a sign of that nationalism which is really a less than wholesome response. And nationalism is really, on a grand scale, simply the tribalism with which we have evolved. So that the flying of the flag and the retreat to patriotism can be a bit belligerent, as we say "We're the U.S.A. and don't mess with us." That probably is the downside of that flight to patriotism and, yet, once again we understand it. So we flee to patriotism, but we also flee to piety, don't we? Goodness me! I thought I was going to have a terrific sermon on September 16, by the looks of the crowd. Everybody went to church, temples, mosques. There was a flight to piety because we were seeking once again in our insecurity and vulnerability that word of assurance that there was someone in control. Fortunately, that level of attention cannot be maintained, that level of emotional response. A week or two and the churches were back to half-full. Thank God for that! What would we have done with all those people, all those less than serious observers of religion? But nonetheless, it was a sign of that instinctual response within the human

being, under threat in a time of peril, a retreat to old securities, a wish, a hope, that somebody is in control. A fleeing to the refuge of an Almighty God, an Omnipotent God, the Lord and sovereign of history. Dear God, how we wanted it to be so! In the midst of the recognition and the awareness, not of a changed world, but a world simply becoming conscious, that we are vulnerable and exposed and the old securities simply don't work. We still hoped perhaps there might be someone in charge. Ah, yes, Almighty God. And that is understandable, too, because it is not religion after all. That search and quest of the human spirit in the midst of the insecurity of life, living before the face of mystery, that search for meaning, that search for understanding, that search for security. Is that not how it all began?

As far back as we can trace the human story there is the religious dimension. And the religious dimension is simply that human being, that animal become human, dawning in consciousness, becoming aware, and becoming aware and becoming conscious, becoming self-conscious, aware of so much that is out of control, so much that is full of mystery and threat. And all of that causing that search and quest for what it all means and where one might find some safety, some solace, some peace. As far as we trace back, that is the story, the religious story of the human being.

Religions are human imaginative constructs. The great religions of the world are the consequence of someone's vision, someone's vision that found residence in the minds and hearts of a community. There developed a creed, a dogma, a doctrine; developed modes of worship, devotion, ritual, hymns and prayers and a way of life, a moral code. That is really what we are about in the religious quest, isn't it? A vision, an idea, a story, an explanation or an understanding, some confessional statement and then some expectation about the way one is to live, some moral code. Religion is the human, imaginative, creative construct in the face of the mystery before which we live every day of our lives. And so can we not understand that on a day like September 11, when suddenly the mask of our security is ripped off, that we would retreat to piety, to the search for security, to the longing for that one to be in control.

But there is no one in control, dear friends. To announce that in Fountain Street's pulpit is no radical declaration. And yet, I think, in the wake of September 11, once again it is important for us to recognize the temptation to flee to an anachronistic creed. Understanding though we might how natural and instinctual it is to seek for security, the thing that has to be announced and proclaimed and declared and taken in is the fact that history is in our hands. There is no one in control. And it is time for us to make a new declaration because this is an emergency. For what we see in the world at present is the consequence of what religion gone awry can do. It has been very good that we have been delicate about this matter, from our top leaders on down, to

recognize that what we have to do is not with Islam as a religion, but we have to do with religion in its fundamentalist aspects that can drive human beings to acts of travesty and devastation. And that old religion that has such power, that can fuel human passions, is a religion that has to be declared out of bounds in a world like ours that has no room for that kind of fanaticism, that frenzy of responding to an almighty God. The supernatural God is dead. Has been dead for a long time. It just takes the church a long time to catch up with that realization.

When Paul came to Athens in the first century, he came distressed in spirit. I have been to Athens, too. I was not distressed, I was awed. It makes me wonder a bit about the apostle. How could he go to Athens, that university city of the world, that magnificent city that is still wonderful in its ruins, how could he have come and been distressed. But, of course, he came there, this Jewish man, whose God was Yahweh, the God of Israel, who had been knocked off his horse by a vision, a mystical experience, believing with all of his heart and all of his passion that the eternal God, the one true God, the creator of heaven and earth, the sovereign lord of history had revealed himself in the embodiment of Jesus Christ, the Christ who appeared to Paul, and then sent him on a mission.

Therefore, as he came to Athens and he saw all the diversity of temples and statues and the signs of all of that pagan religion that was a part of the great eastern mysteries, he was distressed in his spirit and being a bold and courageous man full of passion he confronted those wherever he went, on the street, in the marketplace, until finally they invited him to come and have his say on the Areopagus, the Mars Hill. I took a little group of pilgrims there a few years ago and made them find a spot of shade on Mars Hill and then I preached to them just so I could get the feel of what Paul must have felt.

But there he was, passionate man that he was, man of vision that he was, man of power that he was. He came to them, and good preacher that he was, he connected with his audience very well. He said to them "I see that you are very religious." And he complimented them for their religious concern. He saw that they had temples and statues and all sorts of gods and goddesses in their pantheon, but he noticed also here and there statues to an unknown God. What he perhaps had not known is that six hundred years prior to that there had been a plague in the city and a poet from Crete named Epimenides had devised a plan whereby they let loose a flock of sheep from the agora, let them wander at will until they lay down. And wherever they lay down, that sheep was offered in a sacrifice to the nearest god. And if a sheep lay down next to a shrine without a god, then there was a statue erected to the unknown god because the Athenians were careful to cover every quarter. And when Paul saw that, and out of his fresh experience of encounter with Jesus Christ, and out of his background as a Jew who believed in the core of Israel's creed that God is one, Paul could not

help himself. So he addressed them. He addressed them in terms of this one true God, this creator of heaven and earth, this one who set the boundaries and the times and seasons of all humankind, and who was bringing all things to consummation, for Paul believed that he was living on the edge of history. He believed that he had been called to proclaim this good news throughout that ancient world before the end came.

To an unknown God, with all the boldness, and the arrogance, and the passion of faith, he said that unknown God I proclaim to you. Don't you suspect that two thousand years later it is time to try again? Don't we know that that God of Paul, the imagery of God in Paul's terms which are the Biblical terms, which are the Christian terms, the Jewish terms, the Muslim terms. Don't we know that that whole religious landscape posits a God that doesn't exist? That Almighty God, that Omnipotent One, that one in control, don't we know enough of our world and of our human experience by now, to know that it is incredible? Let me cite you a couple of statements from some of the disciplines of human learning. Jacques Monod for example, in his Nobel-winning *Chance and Necessity*, says "If he accepts this negative message in its full significance, man must at last wake out of his dreams and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that like a gypsy he lives on the boundary of an alien world, a world that is deaf to his music and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings and his crimes." Erich Fromm in *Man for Himself*, "There is only one solution to his problem. To face the truth. To acknowledge his fundamental aloneness in the universe, indifferent to his fate. To recognize that there is no power transcending him that can solve his problem for him." And finally, this from G.N. Clark at his inaugural address at Cambridge University. "There is no secret and no plan in history to be discovered. I do not believe that any future consummation could make sense of all the irrationalities of preceding ages. It could not explain them, still less could it justify them."

Well, just three voices, contemporary voices, relatively contemporary voices. In the wake of what we have learned about our human experience, about nature, through the sciences, all the disciplines of human learning, coming to recognize that God of Paul, that God of the Bible, that supernatural being in a realm beyond calling us to an age beyond all of that mythology comes to ruin on the rock of the reality of our present knowledge of our world and our human experience. And it is time that we come to terms with that. You know, there are all kinds of good churches around and they are doing all kind of good things. There are fundamentalist churches of every stripe and Pentecostal churches of every stripe, and there are orthodox conservative churches. There are sacramental churches. There are liberal churches. And you can go the whole spectrum, from the horror of the Taliban to the most liberal of pleasant communities, but all of them are on a spectrum. And all of them are still positing some kind of supernatural scheme with some kind of supernatural being who

shifts the gears of the universe and pulls strings and will finally make everything right. You do not have to be a screaming fundamentalist. You do not have to be mean, down and dirty. You can be suave and smooth and liberal and open, but until you cross the Rubicon of acknowledging that there is no God out there, you are all playing in the same ballgame. And it is a dangerous ballgame because religion is powerful. And it provides the fuel for the frantic action of frenzied people. It can be co-opted by unscrupulous leaders and in the name of God, all kinds of atrocities have been perpetrated down through the centuries. Jewish, Christian, Islamic, fundamentalisms of any stripe in the name of God wreak havoc on the human scene. There is no one out there. It is ironic that I should say that here for it was in the mid-seventies that I heard Duncan Littlefair say it here. I think the last time I was here I mentioned that incident because it was stamped on my consciousness never to be lost. "Honk If You Love Jesus" was the title. And the text from Matthew, the 11th chapter, "Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden and I will give you rest." And Duncan said, there is no one out there. And I was troubled by that because my whole ministry, my whole life, was posited on the conviction that there was someone out there. And the choir abated my distress only a little bit when they sang, the Lord Bless You And Keep You.

And so, it is ironic that I come back here some twenty years later to say that Duncan was right. And this congregation has had that kind of a ministry and that kind of a voice for over one hundred years, do you know that? Sometimes you can become a part of a great place like this without fully understanding its roots. Knowing that it has stood alone on the other side of the Rubicon. No one out there. So are we left bereft? Is there no hope, is there no comfort, is there no religious solace? Oh, not at all, for if I could point to my own experience I would say to you that there is more wonder and awe in my life today. As I contemplate not the God out there, but that mystery of being within, that pervasive presence of creative spirit, that has pervaded the cosmic process of billions of years and has brought us to this present moment, I do not need a God out there pulling the string and shifting gears and intervening episodically into the course of events, human affairs, for I can contemplate the wonder and the real miracle. And that is out of the soup of the cosmos, out of star stuff and stardust, we have come to a community like this and a moment like this when with awareness we can be conscious of that which is sacred and that which is holy. Conscious of the fact that this whole process of billions of years has emerged in the human. And isn't that after all the incarnation which we will celebrate so shortly now really the story of how God has become human or the human is the locus of the divine? Has not this process emerged in the likes of us who can stand in wonder, who can give voice to the universe? Are we not that self-consciousness of the whole process that can contemplate itself and offer adoration and praise? Is not the miracle that we are here together in community, that we can confront one another, that we can look into one another's eyes, that we who have come

out of that initial cosmic explosion, are here aware of ourselves, aware of one another, in community, recognizing that although there is no one out there, it is in our hands and it is for us to secure this world, that it has been put into our hands to live with compassion, to live with passion, and to make sure that the future is secured for coming generations. It is in our hands to bring peace to the world. There are those magnificent, prophetic pictures of messianic eras in the prophets where the lion and the lamb will lie down together and no one hurt or destroyed in all God's holy mountain. And I see those how as magnificent pictures, poetic dreams, dreams not of some future state, but a critique of every human arrangement until finally we come to our senses and grow up to a maturity enough to take responsibility for our lives and our world and our history. Oh it is not at all a barren, bereft condition in which we are left. But it is an amazing experience of grace every day, marveling at every sunrise and every sunset, at the flow of seasons, at the lilt of a child's laughter. This, my friends, is the human story. This is our opportunity. This is our privilege. This is our calling.

God, not almighty, omnipotent, out there controlling, but God inwardly moving. Not with power, but with love. The persuasion of love. The vulnerability of love. The irony, you know is that the Christian God who is revealed in Jesus is the God who was revealed in the flesh of a child at Christmas and crucified on Good Friday because you see where the spirit manifests itself, the spirit is powerless, the spirit is vulnerable and I can give you no guarantee that we will finally pull this off. For we are powerless except the power of love. The power of love that cannot force itself. And neither will it ever be defeated. And finally, that God within is biased toward life and love and grace and freedom. I would like to suggest to you, Fountain Streeters, that you go out with the passion and the conviction of St. Paul and change Grand Rapids. Turn it from its erring orthodox ways. Turn it from its conservatism, its meanness of spirit, its arrogance, its self-righteousness. Tell them of the unknown God. But, you see, it doesn't work that way. All you can do is be what you are; an island and an oasis' eschewing the supernatural being of traditional religion and embodying that God, that spirit, that creative movement from within and be open to all who came searching some Scythian on a long, long journey. But thank God for a place like this! You are unique, you know, for not many have had the courage to cross the Rubicon. Not many have had the courage to say, nobody out there. So, let's get busy with this our human situation, by God!