

God Is Not Far, but Not Everything

John 1:1-18

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If a pop song even mentions God, many people consider it religious and appropriate to sing at funerals and in Sunday morning worship. I remember one morning cringing in my pulpit chair as a sweet girl sang

From a distance the world looks blue and green...

From a distance there is harmony...

From a distance we are instruments

marching in a common band,

playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace.

They're the songs of every man.

God is watching us. God is watching us.

God is watching us from a distance.

[by Julie Gold, 1985; Bette Middler won Song of the Year in 1991]

Is that where we think God is—at a distance? Too far away to really get involved but keeping his eye on us, kind of like Santa Claus mysteriously watching us all from the North Pole? That's a common vision of God, something like the William Blake illustration, an old man with a long white beard sitting on a cloud looking for something to make him mad.

In the book we've been discussing in our 9:00 a.m. group [*Simply Christian*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2008], Bishop N. T. Wright talks about the puzzle of how heaven and earth relate, where God's space is in relation to human space. One option is to hold the two spaces firmly apart, that God is far away and unconcerned, as the Epicureans did in the time of the New Testament. Another option is to slide the two spaces together, to say that God is everywhere and everything, as the Stoics said in the first century. A third option—the option we find in the Bible—is to say that heaven and earth overlap and interlock.

If God is really at a distance, it does explain why the world is so messed up. You don't really have a "problem of evil" if God just made the universe the way a master watchmaker makes a watch, and just set it to running. In that view, there are physical laws that are inviolable, things have consequences that cannot be changed, and if human choices gum up the works that is strictly the problem of the humans. Don't expect God to help you clean up your own mess. Tom Wright says, "If I believed in a distant, remote God like that, I wouldn't get out of bed on Sunday morning either."

This view of God as the far away creator who has no time for us was popular among some Greeks and Romans, but it comes to us chiefly through the influence of the Deists of the 18th century. The Deists included some of the thinkers behind the American Revolution like Tom Paine, Ben Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. For them, God operated according to the laws of nature, so there could be no miracles and no human Son of God. The world could be known by reason, and the only God that was reasonable was a creator who did not involve himself in daily human existence. It may be that most Americans today have a more Christian view of God than that, but they still tend to think of God as up there, out there, and not very involved in my life.

A couple of years ago a study of American youth concluded that the dominant religion of youth was something they called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism [Christian Smith, National Study of Youth and Religion, University of North Carolina]. The teenagers saw God as out there somewhere, but not really

involved in history. They saw God making moral demands, essentially having one law, “Don’t be a jerk.” God does not need to be involved in your life unless you really have a problem, in which case he becomes a cosmic therapist to help you get rid of your bad feelings. Those teenagers didn’t get those ideas in a vacuum. I think they got them from their baby boomer parents.

There is a reaction to Deism, though. Many people know that there has to be more to life than a mechanistic universe. This has all got to mean something. There has to be spirit in there somewhere. So the reaction is to close the gap between God and the world entirely and say that the two are one. This is pantheism—the view that everything is God—or its watered-down version panentheism, that God is in everything. In the 18th century in this country we had the dominance of reason and a mechanical universe, but in the 19th century we had the reaction here in New England of Transcendentalism, nothing other than a pantheism importing Eastern ideas and saying that there is a soul not only over but *in* everything. One pastor has said “The debate for the last three centuries has been whether the living world is a soulless machine or a machine with a ghost in that machine” [James Kellerman, First Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Chicago, 1/8/2010].

One way to get past the emptiness of thinking that God is far away is to think that God is everywhere—that God is the wind, the breath in me, the air around me, the sunshine, the sea, emotion, beauty, poetry, connection, sexuality—it’s all God. If you think that pantheism is uncommon in America, you haven’t been paying attention. The two most important religious movies of my lifetime have been *Star Wars* and *Avatar*. In *Star Wars*, the idea of a personal God is replaced by The Force, the life force that flows through everything. When a planet is destroyed, there is a great disturbance in The Force. For Luke to fly his fighter plane, he has to stop thinking and trust The Force. The pantheism in *Avatar* is much more explicit, with the Divine literally flowing through all nature and accessed by the Na’Vi through their neural connection with a sacred tree. I loved both of those movies and I cheered not only their heroes but many of their messages. But their view of God leaves something to be desired.

Among my many friends in the poetry community on Block Island this pantheism is absolutely the dominant religion. It’s a combination of Native American spirituality, Taoism, Hinduism, Sufi mysticism, astrology, Chinese medicine, and some Christian ideas. I love these people; they are sincere seekers, kind as can be, and responsive to the natural world. But their solution to the puzzle of how God’s space and our space are related is not the solution I have adopted from Jewish and Christian tradition.

The story of the Bible is a story of a God who created the world and is separate from it but who also kept appearing in the world and speaking to people. In other words, as Tom Wright says, heaven and earth overlap and interlock. All through the Bible, from Genesis on, the creator God is not far away but wants a relationship with the human. He carries on a relationship with Abraham and makes promises to him, appearing as strangers who seem to be angels and then to be God himself. He appears to Abraham’s grandson Jacob in a vision of a stairway to heaven with angels going up and down it, as if there is constant traffic between heaven and earth. God appears to Moses in a burning bush and then as smoke on Sinai and as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. This appearing climaxes in the establishment of a Tent of Meeting where God regularly meets Moses and talks to him face to face so that Moses’ face shines like the sun. Eventually that Tent of Meeting becomes the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was the place where heaven and earth overlapped.

But all that history of God appearing and speaking and meeting his people was leading up to something. The story of God’s presence in this world comes to a climax in the story of Jesus.

In Jesus, as Paul puts it, all the fullness of God dwells in a human body (Colossians 2:9 NLT). This is the same God, he says, who created all things, through whom everything holds together (Colossians 1:16-17), whom we have come to know as Jesus the Messiah, the Lord. Jesus said that his own body was the new Temple. The place of meeting God has become a human person. He is in himself the place where the divine and human intersect and interlock.

The Gospel of John says it in those familiar sentences we read from the prologue every Christmas Eve: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him... In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." And it all leads up to this: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

God is not far away. God is not everything. God is the Creator who seeks a relationship with us and has made himself known finally in the person Jesus. As a hymn from the 1960's put it:

*He did not want to be far,
Nearness he intended,
Therefore into what we are
Christ the Lord descended.*

[Huub Oosterhuis, trans Michael deVries, published by World Council of Churches, 1966]

These are truths that even in the New Testament are expressed in hymns rather than in doctrine, in poetry rather than in prose. I want to close with a poem of my own about these matters.

Island Theology

People formed in the desert do not
naturally believe this barren
world could be God's body and soul.
God appears occasionally,
rare as lightning, scarce as water.
Mostly they wander the steep rocks
after sheep or goats or the hope of palms.
Dry-born children find God in feasts,
those nights when the hidden richness of the world
is tasted and shared around a table.

Island people do not have it easy
but surrounded by an abundance so
available and impossible
to drink, immersed in a God who floods
the dunes with multiflora roses
unwanted, uncontrolled, they think
that this is richness: the sea, the fields,
the sky, the cliffs: always here
revealing the divine and all,
perhaps, there is of God. The feast
for them is opening their mouths
to taste sea air and the flower's breath.

If it is true the desert God
has tented on this island, flared
and warmed in local ways, specific
in memories, then must we say
the radiance around us is
not God? And if God once flashed human,
if we saw and see him speaking, dying
one of us, can God be everywhere,
as much in absence as in roses?
The holy comes and goes, tidal,
strikes the rocks and holds God back
from entering the fullness promised.

It seems that God is intermittent—

not just us. If we were tuned
more finely the sudden silence and static
would still recur. If God be water,
God is spring and shower, wave
and undertow, water encountered
not water itself. So says the desert
wind that lifts the gull and keeps
bayberry small. So says the story
of one who meets in fire and shining
and after that the dark. So says
the human seeking his father
alone in the desert, finding self
only in executing self,
thirsty in all this abundance,
executing a plan to reconcile
the precious profane not-god world
with its own abundant life.