

“We Are In This Thing Together: 2x2”

Luke 9:2-6 (Mark 6:7)

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Do you believe in Antarctica? [Indulge me! This is a preacher's riddle; all of you who have actually been there don't get to play!] Few of us have been there to touch or see it first-hand. We have come to trust the second- and third-hand sources of evidence that Antarctica exists. We base our knowledge on first-hand accounts of those who have been there, on scientific evidence and the record of its history in maps and photographs taken from space. Thousands of people have contributed to this body of knowledge. Few of us have directly seen Antarctica, yet, we believe it exists.

Although raised Jewish, when asked if he believes in God over his many years in the media, award winning interviewer Larry King is famous for his agnostic answer, "I don't know I've never met Him." This response is shared by many who are strangers to or estranged from religion. Unless they have a convincing, direct, personal experience of God, for them God doesn't exist.

One of the challenges to belief in God is that many don't trust the second- or third-hand witnesses of faith. The evidence in their "maps" (holding up a Bible) is confusing and at times conflicted. The evidence of God in the lives of religious people may be even more dubious as we repeatedly see the pious betray their values and the humanity they seek to serve.

But just because one hasn't personally experienced God or seen God in the lives of those who espouse God's existence doesn't mean that God doesn't exist.

Humanity has known about Antarctica for less than 200 years. Yet Antarctica existed before its discovery in 1820. It wasn't until 1907 that Ernest Shackleton led the first expedition to the South Pole. Just because human beings hadn't directly experienced Antarctica until then didn't mean it wasn't there. In fact it had been there all along.

That spiritual expression is found in all human cultures since pre-history is proof of God for some (Collins, The Language of God) or for others evidence of the evolutionary value of community in shared religious behavior and nothing more (King, Evolving God). Millions upon millions of people in all times, places, languages and cultures have experienced the reality we call "God" and have left us a legacy of their art, music, philosophy, accomplishments and even failures.

Yet, for many of us moderns, although we haven't been there it is common knowledge that Antarctica exists but unless we have our own, personal, direct experience of God, well then, God doesn't?

How do we know? How can we know what to believe about God?

In our New Testament lesson this morning, Jesus sends out the disciples to proclaim the "kingdom of God and to heal." To "proclaim the kingdom of God" meant for them to announce that the promised future of God envisioned by the Hebrew prophets ...a world governed by love, peace and justice...had broken into history in the life and teachings of Jesus and all who chose to follow could join the parade. Physical and psychological healing is a sign of that future (Luke 4:18-19) breaking into the present.

Note that the resource that Jesus sends out with the disciples to do the work of the Kingdom is not money, equipment or social status, but each other. In the gospel of Mark's version of this same story, Jesus sends them out "two by two." In other words, in the Christian tradition, the full potential of our spirituality is discovered in community. That is what John Wesley, the founder of Methodism meant when he said, "The Gospel of Christ

knows no religion but social; no holiness, but social holiness." We are all in this together.

In her new book "When Spiritual Not Religious Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church" (Jericho Books, 2013), UCC pastor and author Lillian Daniel expands on her well-documented concern about the modern trend toward "personally manufactured spirituality."

Describing a long cross-country airplane trip during which she is introduced as a pastor to the person next to her, the fellow traveler is a self-defined "spiritual not religious" person who then goes into a long explanation about why he no longer goes to church and how terrible some churches can be. Instead, he now finds God in a sunset or at the beach or while in the mountains and as he watches his young son play with their puppy at home. Being polite and finally extricating herself from the conversation, Daniels writes:

"So you find God in a sunset?.....You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating..... Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church." (Daniels, p. 128)

There is nothing wrong with finding God in the awesome beauty of nature, at the beach, in the mountains or watching a sunset. The Judeo-Christian tradition has long known God to be found in nature -- in fact knows God as the Creator, the spirit which binds us all in the natural order. (Examples: Genesis 1-2; Psalms 8, 121, 144; Job 40:15-f)

"So you find God in the sunset? Great, so do I. But how about in the face of cancer? Cancer is nature, too. Do you worship that as well?" (Daniels p.6)

If all we want from spirituality is comforting platitudes and to be left alone we don't need the church. If we reduce Christianity to "being a nice person and doing good for others" we can do that on our own. But when illness comes, or a loved one dies, when our business fails or our teenager wraps his car around a tree, we want something more than finding God in a sunset. In fact, it won't be intellectual answers that we will need at such a time, as much as church friends and family to wrap their arms around us, cry with us and walk with us in the journey through the valley of the shadows. We are all in this together.

This is open enrollment period for our GroupLIFE small group communities here at LAUMC. If you want more out of your faith, if you want to discover this God we find so elusive, if you simply need to know that somebody cares about you, sign up today. The powerful music, brilliant sermons and marvelous coffee-hours of this church are all fine and good, but it will be in small groups that we will discover the lost continent of spirituality for which so many of us are looking.

One of my first jobs in seminary almost 40 years ago was in the library. One Saturday morning, Albert Allier and I were at the sign-in desk when a man with two large brief cases came walking through the entrance. We asked if he had any books to check and he said, "No," they were all his.

Just before the library closed late that afternoon, the same man came out with the two brief cases clearly loaded down with weight. We asked him if he had any books to check out and he said, "No" they were all the ones he had brought in with him.

Suspicious, I ran outside and got the license plate of his car as he drove off. Albert and I reported our concerns and the license plate number to the library director that next Monday morning. She called the police and within a few days, a detective came asking us to identify this particular man. It turned out this fellow had 750 volumes belonging to our seminary's library in his basement, which having been caught, he was happy to return. When asked by the detective why he would steal books from a seminary library

he answered, so he could "study the Bible on his own." The poor fellow thought he could get the heart of Christianity by studying books alone in his basement. We concluded that he hadn't gotten to the "Thou shalt not steal" part!

Spirituality is, of course a deeply personal thing, located not just in our heads but in our hearts. That being said, the fullness of any spirituality cannot be found alone. Even the contemplative hermit needs a community to feed and pray for them.

On this our Open House Sunday here at LAUMC, if you are a new comer welcome! You know somewhere deep down inside that you want more than platitudes and convenient Christianity for yourself and your family. For the long-timers here, they have found something so significant in their lives that LAUMC has become a part of it.

"Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself." (Daniels p. 128)

A lot of the folks who join our church have been members somewhere else and at some other time in their life. They settle down with us because they find that we will welcome them where ever they are in their journey; that it's OK to have doubts and questions; that we are a safe place to heal from the wounds of their religious past.

We have no desire to judge other churches or put down other denominations. We're not perfect and we've had plenty of our own failures. That's why Jesus sends us out "two by two." We need each other to get it right, to "touch heaven and change the earth with head, hearts and hands."

Amen.