

THE FAR-NEAR GOD      A SERMON DELIVERED AT THE FIRST METHODIST CHURCH OF  
SOUTH MIAMI, February 4, 1963

It is of the essence of pagan religion that the Gods are far away. The ancient pagans had no understanding, of course, that there was a God who was the Creator of a vast universe consisting of many worlds, but they felt that the chief Gods were not near enough to hear the prayers of the average man. The Chief Gods could be approached, they thought, only by the Kings, and, perhaps, by a few exceedingly wealthy and powerful war-lords. To offset their inability to reach the ear of the Chief Gods, the pagans developed two kinds of procedure. First, they instituted a caste of magicians or priests who carried the message of the average man to the higher Gods, and secondly they developed a belief in a wide system of lesser Gods who were, they believed, concerned with the problems of the little man.

We must look at the pagan belief in many Gods, in part, as the expression of the desire of the average man to have a God who would listen to his small voice. When Judaism taught the world that there was only one God who listened alike to the powerful and to the weak, to the King and to the pauper, it worked a double revolution. When Abraham was described in the Bible as talking directly to the One God, Judaism was telling the world that the average man could command the attention of the supreme deity, and there was no need of magicians or intermediaries.

From time to time, however, Jews, as well as other peoples, have forgotten this basic fact. It is necessary for God, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah to say to a nations which had turned to an elaborate priesthood, "Am I a God near at hand, says the Lord," and not a God afar off!

A basic teaching of Judaism, then, which is a revolutionary today as it was then it was first taught by Abraham, is that God is near at hand. He is concerned with what happens to you and to me. Does this mean that Judaism did not teach that God was far away? On the contrary, Judaism taught that God was much farther away than the pagans ever dreamed. To the pagan the High Gods lived in what seemed to them to be at the top of mountains or in valleys which might be one hundred or two hundred miles away. To the Hebrews, God was much more distant than this for He was considered to be not only the creator of one nation or of one mountain, He was thought of as the Creator of the entire world, the sire of this vast and limitless universe. It is in this sense, that the Hebrews broadened man's understanding of the power of God, but they also made him seem to be more distant. Isaiah has this awareness of the transcendence of God when he proclaimed, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?...It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and to Him, the earth's inhabitants are like grasshoppers."

Judaism, then, gave to the world the unique concept of a God who was near at hand, and yet infinitely far. He was at once the God to whom David addressed his psalms, and the God who resided in the highest heavens, placing the stars in their orbits, and saying to the oceans, "Thus far shalt thou rise and no farther". He was the God who walked in the garden with Abraham, and yet, He was the God beyond human understanding. He was the far-near God.

The Hebrews understood that their concept of God was a paradox. The Psalmist expressed his understanding of the paradox in these terms:  
 "When I behold thy heavens, the work of the fingers,  
 The moon and the stars which Thou hast established;  
 what is man that Thou art mindful of him  
 and the child of man that Thou dost care for him?"

We can see the psalmist expressed the inability of the human mind to account for the fact that the God of infinite power could be concerned with little man. Yet the psalmist says in the next breath,  
 "Yet Thou hast made him little lower than God,  
 And dost crown him with glory and honor  
 Thou hast given him dominion over the words of Thy hands.."

In poetic and majestic language the psalmist was saying, "How could the God who created the heavens, and stars and the planets, the constellations and the nebulae, how could this God of the cosmos be so concerned with little man as to give him this rich and varied earth capable of satisfying all of his needs?!"

The ancient Hebrews knew that their concept of God was illogical or that it seemed to be against logic. How could God be so infinitely far away, and yet so close, that one Jew could say, "Not a sparrow falls, but that God is aware of that loss". The psalmist phrased it again this way, "Indeed the Lord of the universe is our redeemer". The Lord of the countless worlds is still concerned with our redemption with our needs and problems.

Only faith, we have been told can enable one to accept this paradox. It is a paradox which both Christian and Jew accept together. It is this mutual faith, dear friends, which shows more than anything else that we are much closer together than most Jews or Christians would care to admit. As I understand it, Christianity resolves this paradox by teaching that Jesus represents that part of the Godhead which makes it possible for the God of the universe, distant and powerful, to be "our redeemer". It is Jesus, Christians say, who brings God near, who represents the concern of the Deity for the average person. Judaism prefers to confront the awesomeness of the paradox straight on. We say, "It may seem to be illogical, but we believe that God is at once both far and near". We believe that He is at once to be feared and loved--that he the source of justice and mercy. We may use different terms, as Christian and Jew, but both of us, are expressing a faith in the same paradox. The true Christian and the true Jew together constitute a small minority in a world which essentially denies both the infinite power of our creator and His nearness to all of His creatures. It is we together who are striving to prove that this paradox is the highest possible logic, and greatest of all truths.

Opposed to our mutual viewpoint have been the philosophers who have taught down through the centuries that God was either far or near, but not both. Most of the philosophers have taught, following Aristotle, that God was so powerful and impersonal that He could not possibly be concerned with the problems of little man. Their conclusion has been that prayer to this far away God is an absurdity. On the other hand there have been

those like Bertrand Russell who have taught that man himself is the God. In other words, these worshippers of the self teach that there is only the near God, the power within man to help himself.

These philosophers, among whom are many but not all psychologists and Marxists, would teach us that man can pray only to himself. According to either of these views, whether God be only far away or only very near, man is alone and must rely merely on his own strength. Judaism and Christianity on the contrary, profess that the meaning of the world rests neither in God alone nor in man alone, but in God and man acting in concert.

I conclude with a story from the Hasidic Rabbis of the Eastern European Jewish community that was wiped out by Hitler. These Rabbis taught, "When God created the world, he placed a part of his divine self in each human being. Ever since creation, then, the divine spark in man has been attracted as if by a magnet to its divine source, and it has been struggling to return to its place of origin." According to the Hasidic Rabbis man prayed whether he wishes to or not, because there was within him a force which has its own power and its own will to grow upward. It is this divine spark within us, said the Rabbis, which causes us, even involuntarily, to turn to God. They taught that God was not merely abstract spirit, He was also part of the body of the earth and the relationship between man and God was the search for the divided divine self to be restored to an original unit. Prayer, said the Hasidic Rabbi, was the divine calling to the divine.

Another Jew once taught, "The Kingdom of God is within you", but he also said, "They will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Earth and heaven, (within and without), body and soul, far and near, as Christian and Jew, we have one message for a lonely world. Religion as we conceive of it dear friends, is the struggle to unite that which seemed to be divided and which seems to be opposed. In simple terms it is this, "We shall not despair; for we are not alone in this infinite cosmos; God is with us". As one of our Sabbath prayers go, "He is father than the farthest star, and yet, he is nearer than breathing".

### AN INTERDENOMINATIONAL SERVICE

For tourists, military personnel, new residents, the handicapped, those who work late in the day, and anyone who prefers an outdoor service in the loveliness of the early morning.

### A VOLUNTEER SERVICE

The ministers, singers, greeters, hosts, etc. all contribute their time to this service. (Only the organist and technician are paid). Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Chambers make the facilities of the Breezeway Drive-In Theatre available without charge. Mr. and Mrs. Hershel Day, distributors of Seal-test Milk, provide the orange juice and coffee-cream. (We buy the other items at the coffee table out of offerings.)

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Rev. H. S. McKelvey, Minister



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BREEZEWAY DRIVE--IN CHURCH SERVICE

HOMESTEAD, FLORIDA

PROGRAM

MEMORIAL SUNDAY

MAY 31, 1964

ORGAN PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP - Holy, Holy, Holy #6

INVOCATION

HYMN OF PRAISE #39 (1,2,4)

O beautiful for spacious skies, For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountains majesties Above the fruited plain,  
America, America, God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good, with brotherhood From sea to shining  
sea.

O beautiful for pilgrim feet, Whose stern, impassioned  
stress, A thoroughfare for freedom beat Across the wilder-  
ness. America, America, God mend thine every flaw,  
Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law.

O beautiful for patriot's dream That sees beyond the years  
Thine alabaster cities gleam, Undimmed by human tears.  
America, America God shed His grace on thee, And crown Thy  
good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

THE SCRIPTURE LESSON - Isaiah 40:21-26 Jeremiah 23:23-24

THE PRAYER HYMN #458 (1,2,4)

My country, 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, Of thee  
I sing. Land where my fathers died, Land of the pilgrim's  
pride, From every mountainside, Let freedom ring.

My native country, thee, Land of the noble free, Thy name  
I love, I love thy rocks and rills, Thy woods and templed  
hills, My heart with rapture thrills like that above.

Our father's God to Thee, Author of liberty, To Thee we  
sing. Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy  
light, Protect us by Thy might, Great God, our King.

THE PRAYER PERIOD

THE OFFERING

WORDS OF GREETING

SOLO - "Thanks be to God."

Mrs. Earl Fosnaught

SERMON - "The Far-Near God" - Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard

HYMN OF PERSONAL COMMITMENT #291 (1,4)

Take time to be holy, Speak oft with thy Lord, Abide in  
Him always, And feed on His word, Make friends of God's  
children, Help those who are weak, Forgetting in nothing,  
His blessing to seek.

Take time to be holy, Be calm in thy soul, Each thought  
and each motive Beneath His control, Thus led by His  
spirit to fountains of love, Thou soon shalt be fitted  
for service above.

BENEDICTION

THE DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,  
Praise Him all creatures here below,  
Praise Him above ye heavenly host,  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

THE POSTLUDE - Mr. Charles Helger, Organist

Mrs. Forrest Bruce, Hostess

Mr. Eddie Harris, Technician

Minister: H. S. McKelvey, Phone: 247-3025

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Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard of Temple Beth AM. is our  
guest speaker today.

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DIAL-A-PRAYER 247-1412