

## Gods We Don't Believe In

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Isaiah 55: 1-9; I Corinthians 10: 1-7a

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The old man and I had been talking for a while when he said something that shocked me.

This was over thirty years ago, and I guess I haven't stopped being shocked by what he said because I knew him as well as I know anyone, and I couldn't believe he felt this way.

Up until that moment in our conversation this elderly deacon in a country church had talked about how good God had been to him and his family through some very tough times and how thankful he was to God. For some reason that I can't now recall, the conversation turned to a movie that had just come out, "Gandhi," starring Ben Kingsley. He had seen the movie and was impressed by Gandhi the man, which made his statement even more shocking.

He said, "You know, it's a shame that a man as good as Gandhi will spend eternity in hell because he didn't accept Jesus as his Lord and Savior. But that's the way it is."

I couldn't respond to him right away. He noticed my extended silence. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

After a while, I finally said, "I'm just sitting here, not sure how to respond. But it seems strange to me that you would entrust your life and those you love to a God who is less generous, less gracious than you are. I'm wondering if the God you believe in is different from the God I believe in."

I've thought a lot over the years about the God this man believed in. According to the theology of this good Christian man, God has the capacity for love and hatred. We all deserve God's wrath, according to this theology, because we are all sinners. God wants to demonstrate his capacity for love by being gracious to some; but God also must show his capacity for ruthless justice by damning all others in his wrath. God has been dishonored by the disobedience of his creatures, and only blood will satisfy him. And because his dignity is infinite, the innocent blood that is needed to satisfy him, must be the blood of an infinite being, his own Son. So Jesus came to save those God has chosen to love by dying as a sacrifice on the cross, but (as this theology often says) Jesus didn't die for the damned. God never loved them. They were created just to show God's judgement on sin. I confess to you that I find this theology utterly chilling.

There are even Christians in the world who believe they have worked out a terrible logic that says that because God doesn't love the damned anyway, if we could figure out who the damned are, we don't have to love them either. In fact, we can be as cruel as we want to them. Thus is justified everything from the torture and execution of Jews and Muslims to the killings of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

I remember as though it was yesterday sitting on the back porch of that old man's house, talking and listening, and wondering how such a good Christian person can believe in a God so cruel, so ruthless, and so small that most of us wouldn't want to know him. It brought to mind a statement by the Christian

ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr once made, that he just couldn't believe that God would send people to hell over a difference of metaphysical opinion.

We often talk about what it means for God to reveal himself to humanity. But there's another conversation we might want to have, at least inside ourselves. What does the God we believe in reveal about us? And what is revealed about us by the gods we don't believe in?

St. Augustine of Hippo, probably the greatest Christian mind in all of the Church's history, once said: "If you have understood God, it isn't God you have understood."

I want to take that statement very seriously. It has a way of whittling down our overblown estimations of ourselves and our ability to understand things. But I also want to take seriously the rather straightforward testimony of the first Christians who maintained in wonder and surprise that when they met Jesus of Nazareth they had somehow met God in the flesh.

Those earliest Christians were far less prepared than Christians of other centuries – especially Christians of my tribe, that is, professional theologians – who were all too ready whether out of piety or anxiety to try to say more about God than anyone can honestly know.

Doctrine never saved a human soul. But I hear stories all the time about how lives have been changed forever by that simple Palestinian Jew who lived 2000 years ago, who loved and taught and healed and was executed by the ruthless apparatus of Roman tyranny.

That's really what we have, you know: the word of people like us who believe that they met God in and through this man, Jesus; and that through that encounter God shared God's own life and love with them. That's what we have. But it is enough, certainly, to save us from the ravages of false gods.

And there are so many false gods. I would number that god who sends some humans to hell just to prove he can among such false gods. I would number among the false the god who sends people to hell because they don't believe the "right" doctrines. But there are lots of others.

The story of Israel reminds us that even the most brutal gods of antiquity kept rearing their ugly heads time and time again through history. Moloch with his thirst for human blood, even for the sacrifice of children, was worshiped not far from Jerusalem, and scholars tell us that there's evidence that bloody god was worshiped much longer than we would want to admit.

The ancient gods promised to deliver all the things we still seek, like prosperity and influence and security. "Sacrifice this child, and I'll give you your heart's desire," says one god. "Do away with this man or woman, and I'll ensure your safety." The laws of Israel cut against such worship, but the laws of God often were swimming up-stream against a flood by calling God's people to welcome the stranger in the land and to care for the most vulnerable people in society.

We Reformed Christians know about the false gods of nationalism, the false gods of so-called racial purity, and the false gods of militarism that were denounced by the Confessing Christians of Germany prior to the Second World War. Christians like Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood how even good values like patriotism and pride in one's heritage can be transmuted into

evils to which some people are more than ready to shed rivers of blood.

Whenever the gods appear, notice how seriously they take themselves, reminding us, as G. K. Chesterton once said, "Satan fell by the force of gravity." No false god comes to us with laughter, unless it is at the expense of someone else. False gods demand brooding anxiety; they feed on fear; they stoke anger and revenge; they are sensitive to any threats to their dignity.

Idols just can't take a joke because they know better than anyone that their feet aren't the only things made of clay; their whole carcasses are manufactured from the stuff.

What kind of a God would demand infinite punishment for an insult to his dignity? A thin-skinned god, so insecure in himself that he would rather shed innocent blood than extend undeserved mercy.

If this morning we were to take a count of all the gods we do not believe in, it would take us much longer than we have for worship. Once we start thinking about it, we would go way beyond the ancient idols to some of those contemporary ones that contemporary writers tell us about, like the novelist Neil Gaiman who spins fantasies about his, "American Gods."

We all know we cannot trust our lives to the false gods of technology, those pimply-faced, rude and unsophisticated ruffians who refuse to think through the consequences of their clever inventions and offer convenience for the price of our souls (or, at least, in exchange for privacy).

We know we cannot afford to give our hearts to the gods of fame or celebrity, those often well-dressed but superficial gods who promise so much and delivers nothing at all.

We know that there are gods who will require the sacrifice of our children; there are gods who will demand the sacrifice of the broken and sick and the aged among us; there are gods who will promise all sorts of things if only we will endorse their hatred or share their fears.

We don't believe in any of these gods, though they do tempt us sometimes when we are most vulnerable and try us when we are least prepared to resist them.

They come disguised in costumes that are guaranteed to get a foot in our door. And we seem to have so little protection against them.

But we do have something to protect us; just this: We have met this man from Galilee, this Palestinian Jew named Jesus, this itinerant preacher and healer, this strange, gregarious teacher who welcomed everyone no matter who they were. We have heard his teachings. We have seen his spirit of generosity and his forgiveness has touched us. We have been amazed over and over again at how he loves even those who hurt him and killed him. We have taken into ourselves a wisdom that runs exactly counter to the claims of the false gods.

We believe that love is more powerful than hate; that forgiveness is more powerful than vengeance. We are persuaded that the creative power that made everything and holds everything in being is given a human face in him. And we long to be like him too. And we believe that coming together to worship him is a foretaste of the highest joys of heaven.

There are a lot of gods we don't believe in, gods to whom we would not trust ourselves, our loved ones and this world. But unto the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ we entrust all we are and all we love.

Let us pray:

Gathering here together, gracious God, entrusting ourselves and all we love to you and you alone, in this moment, in this beloved community, we know we have the strength to resist the siren calls of the false gods. We know the false gods only want to consume your good creation and humanity, although they make false promises and appeal to selfish interests to trap us in their webs. In every wilderness through which we pass uphold us by your love that we will not become ensnared by the falsehoods of the false gods but will continue to grow up into the fullness of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ; amen.