

For the World: Transcendence

The question I'd like to ask you this morning is, "What kind of a world are we living in?" That's an important question for us to ask at anytime but especially today. It's fitting for us to ask that question on the 15th anniversary of 9/11 because following 9/11 people have often said that everything has changed. Now that might be a bit of an overstatement yet in many ways its true. The Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf said that a good many things did in fact change on 9/11. Especially in the west, the view of many secular people towards religion has changed. More and more people say religion should no longer be blithely tolerated but in fact should be stamped out because religion is dangerous. It leads to religiously legitimized violence. If nothing else, 9/11 served as a wake up call to many people in the West because it revealed, despite many theories of what would happen in the future, that religion simply is not going away. But on the other hand, neither is Secularism. So increasingly we find ourselves living in this globalized, pluralistic world in which religious people and secular people literally live right on top of one another; sometimes within the same marriage, the same family, or the same friendship. And, both parties remain a bit of a mystery to one another. So who do we account for this and how do we make sense of it?

This morning, I would like to begin a new series. Over the course of the next few weeks this fall, I want to try and understand and explain the world in which we live. What kind of a world is this? And in light of that, what might Christianity have to offer such a world? A central tenant of the Christian faith is that God so loved the world, this world, that he gave his one and only son. God calls us as his followers to likewise expend ourselves for the sake of the world. So if Christianity is for the world, then what might Christianity have to offer a world that, in many ways, is not all that interested in Christianity in the first place?

Each sermon in this series will focus on a particular topic and our sermon today will serve as an introduction to the series as whole. But let me say right at the outset that if you consider yourself to be a skeptical person, if you would identify yourself as a secular person, I hope you find the series this fall to be tailor-made for you. Through the thinking and reading I have done in recent months, I am convinced that despite what you might think, Christianity still does have something to say to you. And I hope that along this journey, some of the things I have to say might resonate at a deeper level with you. If you are already a Christian, my hope is that this series will help you better understand the world in which we live and perhaps each of these sermons might provide you with a model of how to engage in conversations with some of those people who are closest to you - friends, family, colleagues - who look at the world in a radically different way. Every sermon I write, I write with the skeptical, non-believer in mind. I hope to address the doubts that many of us have. So, every Sunday is a good Sunday to invite a skeptical friend to Central. But there is going to be something different about this series. And therefore, this might be an even better season in life to invite some of those friends to join you here at Central.

Today the focus will be on the theme of transcendence. Now transcendence can be somewhat of a slippery word, so let me very precisely define what I mean by it. Transcendence refers to an object or an experience that is far greater than the ordinary. It goes beyond our ordinary human realm. Transcendence therefore is the opposite of immanence. Immanence would refer to an object or an experience that falls within the limits of what we would consider to be humanly possible. And so we're going to focus on this theme of transcendence this morning and specifically I'd like us to consider the loss of transcendence and yet the longing for transcendence in the world in which we live. First, let's consider the loss of transcendence.

The passage we're looking at this morning from Acts, chapter 17, recounts a rather famous episode in the life of the apostle Paul - one of the most prominent and prolific of the early christian leaders. Paul travels to the intellectual capital of the ancient world. He travels to Athens, Greece. He makes a tour of the city and while he's there he observes that the city is simply awash in the worship of idols and this is deeply perplexing to him. Verse 16 tells us that he was provoked in his spirit and so he resolves

to do something about it. Beginning in verse 17, he begins to reason with anyone who's willing to listen to him. Specifically we're told that he reasons with Jews and devout persons in the synagogues. Now that word, "devout persons" refers to God-fearers. These were non-Jewish people who adhered to belief in the God of the bible but who had not fully undergone the process of converting to Judaism. Paul talks to Jews and non-Jewish believers in the synagogues, and then classic ancient greek pagans in the marketplace, he even grabs the attention of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers as he's speaking about Jesus and Jesus' resurrection from the grave. They invite him to make an even larger address at the Areopagus also known as Mars Hill. This was northwest of the Acropolis, it overlooked the marketplace, it was the site of the highest court in Athens. And it was from this vantage point that Paul was asked to make a case for Christianity. The world that Paul encountered in Athens is markedly different from the world in which we live today. Let me explain why.

In 1946, C.S. Lewis wrote a little know essay, called *Modern Man and his Categories of thought*. In this little essay, C.S. Lewis says that the earliest Christian apostles primarily address three classes of people. And it's the exact three classes of people that are mentioned here in Acts 17. C.S. Lewis speaks of how the apostles addressed Jews, non-Jewish believers, and classical pagans. What C.S. Lewis goes on to say, is that in all three classes, when the apostles spoke to them about the message of Christianity, no matter which class a person might fall in, the apostles could count on their audience adhering to three presuppositions.

No matter what the class, each and every person would have believed in the supernatural, even the Epicureans. Even if they believed if the God's were in some sense inoperative, every person in every class would have been conscious of sin and would have feared divine judgement. And thirdly, every single person would have had a sense that the world was once better than it now was. So the apostles could count on those presuppositions. But that of course is not true for us. Those presuppositions are simply gone. The public mind, C.S. Lewis says, has been radically altered. And that's why Paul had an easier time of it than we do. Because he knew no matter who he was speaking to, no matter what their religious, spiritual, philosophical commitments might be, he knew he could talk about God, he could talk about a divinely created order, he could talk about the reality that human beings would be held responsible for their actions in this life, and everybody would have agreed not so much with the details, but with the basic categories of thought. They would have tracked with him. They would have understood what he was talking about. But that is no longer the case. Therefore the task for us in our day is that much harder and the question is why? The answer is the loss of transcendence.

In our world today, we have lost a sense of the transcendent. No one explained it better than the philosopher, Charles Taylor in his book *The Secular Age*. Now this is not an easy read. It is 800 pages long. I read sections of it in the past, but this summer (believe it or not), I slogged my way all the way through it and it was well worth the effort. In this book, Charles Taylor, one of the most prominent philosophers alive today, sets out to describe what it feels like to be both a believer and a non-believer in the world in which we live. He seeks to describe how we came to this point, how the world came to be the way that it is now. Towards the very beginning of the book he asks this rather thought-provoking question. He asks, why is it that in 1500 AD for example, it was nearly impossible not to believe in God, but today, some 500 years later, we find it not only difficult but almost inescapable? Back then, belief in God and some kind of divinely-created order was simply taken for granted. It was unchallenged, it was un-problematic. People may not have believed in the God of the bible but they believed in some kind of supernatural reality. Now that's simply gone. Now the belief in God is just one option among many. Therefore it is contested and highly debated. It may still be possible to believe, but belief is much more difficult to sustain. What's interesting about this is that it puts both the believer and the non-believer in the exact same position. If we look around, if we look over our shoulder, if we glance sidewise, we notice there are significant numbers of people in the world today who believe radically different things about the nature of reality than we do and that can't help but introduce doubts and uncertainty in our own mind no matter what our particle view of the world might

be. We all live in this cross-pressured space. We all have to grapple with doubt. No one, no matter what their commitments might be, can believe naively anymore. Naivety is gone. We all live in this same space. We experience these same cross-pressures. Perhaps you yourselves have experienced this. Let's say you are a Christian but your best friend is a non-believer. But because you so love and respect your friend, because you so appreciate the way in which they think and the way in which they live their lives it causes you at a very deep, experiential level to doubt whether or not you're right. Maybe there isn't a God. Because my friend seems to be living their life without any reference to God whatsoever and they seem to be doing just fine. Or the reverse could also be true. Let's say you're not a Christian but your best friend is, and because you love and respect your friend and you appreciate the way in which they think and live their life it causes you to doubt. Maybe you are wrong and they are right. We all experience this pressure, this doubt, this uncertainty. And that's why I always say I'm a little bit suspicious of people who say they have not doubts. Because in my mind, when you say you don't have any doubts, you're either lying or you're not thinking this through. It is possible for us to believe today but belief is much more difficult to sustain. The question is, "How did we get here?"

Charles Taylor rejects a lot of the common theories that are out there. Many people advocate the so-called secularization theory that religion is basically irrational, and that progressively, eventually, over time, science and reason will simply replace religion and faith. As people gain greater knowledge as they acquire greater technological prowess, religion will simply disappear. But the problem with that thesis is that it is far too simplistic. It does not take into account what we actually see all around us. If nothing else, 9/11 proved the secularization thesis wrong. Or as Miroslav Volf says, it proved it at least only half right. Yes, there are pockets of people around the globe who have become deeply secular. But the rest of the globe has not followed suit. In fact, in the secular world in which we live, religious faith persists. And so we cannot say that the secular age is marked by the absence of religion, but rather what we see are ever-multiplying new options of how to make sense of the world in which we live from the militant atheist to the most orthodox believers and every conceivable combination in-between. So how do we account for this? We can't take the world of 1500 AD and simply subtract God and end up with the secular age. No, we are experiencing something remarkably new. And therefore we can't speak of this monolithic modernity that's slowly going to overtake the globe. No, we have to speak of multiple modernities because the fastest growing, over-arching perspectives on life when you consider the world as a whole is not secular humanism but, surprisingly enough, is Christianity and Islam. But here is what is true of all of us. No matter whether we consider ourselves believers of some sort or non-believers, all of us have in some sense lost a hold on the transcendent. Now Taylor coins the term, "the immanent frame" to describe the world in which we live. You could think of a picture frame. A frame blocks certain things out and focuses your view on others. The sociologist, Peter Berger uses the image of a world without windows to describe the world in which we live. A world without windows.

What do they mean by that? Taylor says you can think of the 1500's as a time of enchantment. The world was shot through with spirituality. People believed in spirits, supernatural beings and forces, and everybody recognized that in order to truly flourish as a human being you had to undergo some kind of personal transformation. That could only come about through connecting to something beyond yourself; by connecting to the eternal or the transcendent. They recognized that this life is not all there is and that is what has principally changed because now, to borrow the term from Max Faber, we live in a disenchanted world. The reality of God, the supernatural seems not only irrelevant but impossible and just seems implausible and therefore we understand the world now solely in terms of the natural, or the imminent order without reference to the supernatural or the transcendent. And for us therefore, whatever human flourishing entails, we believe that in order to truly thrive and flourish as human beings, it has to come through what this world alone can offer. That is what is truly different. For the first time in the history of humanity, we think of how to flourish as human beings solely in terms of what this world alone can offer. And that's what leads to what you might call expressive individualism; the idea that each individual person has to carve out some kind of meaning, some kind of significant, some kind of happiness for oneself, by following one's own path, doing one's own thing. So the idea

here with the imminent frame is that it's a way of viewing the world that blocks out the supernatural and the transcendent and focuses exclusively on the imminent and the natural. Now my friend Josh Yates, who appropriately enough is here today, helped me think through this image by describing the imminent frame as living in a room. Every single one of us in the modern world lives within this room. It's not a question of whether we live in this room, but how we live in this room. Now, if you're a militant atheist you might say, "well of course there is no world outside the room. And if you don't see that, well then you're just being silly and foolish." A militant fundamentalist might say, "Of course it's obvious that there is a world outside this room and if you don't recognize that, you're silly and you're foolish." For the rest of us, we may have a particular view whether there's a world outside or not, but there's enough doubt or uncertainty that leads us to consider that there might be other options. So the only question is whether we live in this room with the windows open to the possibility of the transcendent. Or if we live in this world closed off to that very possibility. It's as if we close the windows and draw the blinds to try and block out all exposure to a transcendent order beyond us. But even if we have closed those windows and shut those blinds, there may be occasions in our life when we hear noises outside. We hear the rustling of the trees, we hear the bushes scratching on the windows, maybe we hear the blair of a taxi horn which causes us to consider, maybe there is something out there after all. And we go to the window in order to consider the possibility of what might lie beyond.

And that therefore, brings me to the longing for transcendence. When Paul goes to Athens and he makes this tour of the city, he makes this initial point of contact in his address at the Areopagus by referring to one of the altars he saw during the tour of the city. He observed other objects of worship and he says, "Men of Athens, I can see that you are a very religious people. I even found this inscription on one altar, 'To the Unknown God'" and then he used this for his launching pad to make a case for Christianity he says, "What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you". And he proceeds to lay out who God is, who we are, what's gone wrong with the world in which we live and what God has done about it through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in order to repair what has gone wrong and to connect us once more to him. But I wonder what Paul would say to us today. If Paul were to come and visit New York City and make a tour of New York, I don't think he would be struck by our churches and our temples because they're dwarfed by our skyscrapers. And if he made his way down Wall Street or Broadway, what would get his attention? I suspect it might be our ticker boards, our billboards, our marquee signs. And I think if he were to address us from the steps of City Hall, Paul would not say to us today, "People of New York, I perceive that you are very religious." No, I suspect Paul would say, "People of New York, I perceive that you are very secular. You go about your lives without any reference to the possibility of God or some transcendent order that goes beyond the ordinary human realm. And yet you are so very busy. You New Yorkers are so busy trying to carve out some kind of happiness for yourself. But the ways in which you're pursuing it are limited to what this world alone can offer. You're trying to make more money, or acquire greater status, or achieve more influence, maybe get a better body. You're trying to find some meaning, some significance, some happiness for yourself, through cultivating relationships with people that you love or pursuing a vocation that gives meaning to your life or perhaps by contributing in some way to the common good. All these things are good" Paul would say to us, but the problem is that they are all limited to what this world alone can offer. I think he would go on to ask us as good as those things may be, do you ever find yourself wondering if this is it? Do you ever find yourself wondering if perhaps there's something more? When you experience the wonder of a new birth, when a child comes into this world; when you experience the excitement of new love, or when you experience the painful loss in the death of a friend; or when the thing that you had been pursuing ultimately doesn't satisfy, do you have moments of doubt? Do you have moments when you feel like maybe you're missing something? Maybe you have been cut off from something. Maybe your life is lacking something and you ask, "is this all there is?" The beauty of Charles Taylor's book is that he says, "this is another unique feature of the secular world in which we live. We live in this disenchanted world and yet we're haunted by the memory of an enchanted one. It's almost as if we nostalgia for the transcendent. We don't believe in it, and yet we

miss it. The novelist, Julian Barnes puts it perfectly:

"I don't believe in God, but I miss him."

We're haunted by this memory of the transcendent but it's almost as if the moment that unbelief become possible, the mystery fades and doubt sets in. And then we're afflicted by what Taylor call the "malaise of modernity". We experience this malaise, the immanent world on its own seem so flat, so empty, so dreary and we begin to wonder to ourselves if there might be something more. When that happens, there are two ways you can go. You could double down on trying to carve out that meaning, that significance, that love, through he immanent order, but it's also possible that it might open you up to reconsider the transcendent.

When I was at Northwestern, I became friends with a Russian literature professor. And he said that both Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, 19th century authors, were authors way ahead of their time. He was fond of saying that Dostoyevsky was the author for the 20th century, anticipating what would come in the 20th century. But he said Tolstoy was the author for the 21st century. He saw where the world was going today because what he foresaw was the radical skepticism of our secular age and that is especially true in his novel, *War and Peace*. One of the leading figures in *War and Peace* is a man named Prince Andre, who decides that he is going to abandon his pregnant wife, Lisa, and go to war against the French. And they ask him, "why are you going to war?" and Prince Andre says, "I'm going to war because I must; because this life that I am leading here is not to my taste." Malaise has set in, the modern world in which he is living, no longer satisfies. And what we soon discover is that his main ambition in life is glory. He wants to achieve military glory. He wants to become the Napoleon who conquers Napoleon. He goes off to war and he tells us he's not afraid of death, he's not afraid of wounds, of loss; he's willing to sacrifice his most cherished relationships for just one moment of triumph; for just one moment in which he will win the love of men, which he acknowledges that he does not know and will never know. But that is what he is living for in the immanent frame. He doesn't see the futility or the vanity of this pursuit. He doesn't change his view until he is literally bludgeoned over the head on the battlefield, thrown to the ground. He's on his back and forced to look up into the heavens. It is then, as if for the first time, he actually sees the sky. And this is what Tolstoy writes, "Above him there was nothing but the sky, the lofty heavens, not clear, yet immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds slowly drifting across them. 'How quiet, solemn, and serene, not at all as it was when I was running,' thought Prince Andrei, 'not like our running, shouting, fighting...how differently do those clouds float over the lofty, infinite heavens. How is it I did not see this sky before? How happy I am to have discovered it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all is delusion, except those infinite heavens. There is nothing but that.'"

What Tolstoy is describing there is what Peter Berger would call a signal of transcendence. It's like a bleep on the screen; an experience within the natural world but yet, seems to point beyond it to something else. In that moment, the ordinary is abolished and something else seems to shine through. A signal like this is not a proof of anything, it's only a pointer. It serves two purposes. On the one hand it seems to puncture a hole in the way in which we previously viewed the world and at the same time it illicit this desire, this longing for a more adequate explanation for the world in which we live. In many ways, 9-11 served in that way in many people's lives. It punctured a hole in the way we previously viewed the world. In closing, what might Paul say to us in New York?

Well, I don't think he would say to us, "What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." No, I think Paul would say to us, "let's talk about your doubts. Let's talk about those moments where you feel like not all the pieces quite add up; like there is this sense of absence, this sense of lack in your life. Perhaps you have noticed those moments where your goals, your actions, your achievements seem to lack gravity, weight, substance." And I suspect the apostle Paul might say to us, "Perhaps Augustine was right. Perhaps the reason we experience this restlessness in our hearts is because God made us for himself and our hearts are restless until they rest in him." Or perhaps the apostle Paul would say to us, "Maybe the author of Ecclesiastes was right. The reason we long for something

beyond the ordinary realm is because God has set eternity in our hearts." And if that's true then I think Paul would say, "If you long for something more, well then the only thing that will satisfy this longing for transcendence is the God of the bible. The Lord of heaven and earth who doesn't dwell in temples made by human beings, he cannot be served by any human beings because he transcends them all. And this God has revealed himself, made himself known in the person of Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews tells us that in the past, God spoke to us in many ways at many times but now he has fully and finally spoken to us through his son. If we want to know him, if we want to connect with that transcendent, then we must come and experience God in the face of Jesus Christ who is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. It is here at this table that we have the opportunity to commune with him. This table is a transcendent experience. By coming to this table, we have the opportunity to perhaps open up that window a little bit more so that we might see some of the light, and feel some of the breeze of the transcendent breaking in on our secular world. May it be so. Let's pray.

Father God, we thank you for your presence in our lives. We thank you no matter whether we consider ourselves believers or skeptics or some combination of the two. We pray that you would meet us here this morning. Father, we acknowledge that while the transcendent has been eclipsed in our modern world, it has not been erased. In some sense it has been lost and yet we long for it. So Father, we pray that you would fulfill your promise to us by making yourself known to us. You tell us that you are not far from any one of us and you've placed us here in this time and place so that if we might reach out we would actually find you. And then we would discover that you've been seeking us all along. So meet us here, Father, in the face of Jesus Christ, and help us to experience the life that only you can give. We pray in Jesus' name and for his sake, amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul could assume that his audience would share a number of presuppositions about the supernatural, the reality of sin and judgment and a belief that the world was once better than it is now. How is the world we confront today different?
2. Whether you consider yourself a believer or a non-believer, how does the "cross-pressures" of the modern world lead you to experience doubt or uncertainty about your own position?
3. Use the image of a room with windows either open or closed to the transcendent. How would you describe the various settings of your work life, school life, social life, etc.?
4. What "signals of transcendence" have you experienced that have caused you to change the way in which you previously viewed the world?
5. In what ways are we led to ask "Is this all there is?" by the experience of our lives?
6. Paul used the altar with an inscription to an unknown God as his point of contact with his audience in Athens. How might you discuss the possibility of a transcendent God with a friend who initially might be at least somewhat closed to the idea?