

WHY IS GOD HIDDEN

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 22, 2018
based on Isaiah 45:9–12,15-19; II Corinthians 3:12–19***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Why Believe.” We have been journeying through the classic “proofs for God” — a set of arguments designed to demonstrate the reality of God, all of which point to some way that God is revealing God’s reality to humanity. The ontological argument points to the idea of God that God seems to have implanted in the human mind. The cosmological and teleological arguments point to how God is revealing God’s power and glory through nature. The moral argument points to the moral awareness in all human beings and argues that this is showing us that there is a good God who is the source of that moral consciousness. The argument from religious experience points to all the testimonies that people offer to having had an experience of God’s presence, and argues that these religious experiences must be the result of God’s Spirit touching human hearts. The argument from Scripture, which we considered last week, points to the amazing witness of the Bible as a vehicle by which God is speaking to humanity. In all these many ways, God is revealing God’s self to human beings. And yet, none of these forms of self-revelation comprises an undeniable proof for God. In every case, God remains in some sense hidden from view, which is why people can continue to question whether God even exists. As the prophet Isaiah expressed it in the passage we heard earlier: “Truly you are a God who hides himself.” (Isaiah 45:15) Why does God not simply make God’s presence and power more obvious? We will consider that question this morning. {prayer}

If God is in some sense hidden from human view, certainly this is due, at least to some degree, to the limitations of human understanding. In the same passage where Isaiah speaks of the hiddenness of God, he compares humanity to a pot that cannot possibly comprehend the purposes of the potter, and that would be rather insolent to question its Maker. God by nature is so far beyond human beings that it is to be expected that humans would have difficulty comprehending the reality of God.

Or perhaps the hiddenness of God is due even more to the hardness of the human heart. Human beings often do not “see” God because they don’t want to see God; they would rather pursue their own course and forget about God. In his second letter to the Corinthians, in the passage we heard this morning, Paul speaks of a “veil” that is between people and God, obscuring their vision of the glory of God; and he says that the veil is there because “their minds are hardened.” (II Cor. 3:14) Clearly, human weakness and sinfulness play a large role in obscuring God’s reality from the human mind.

Yet it seems that if God truly wished to reveal God’s self to humanity, God could cut through both the limitations of the human understanding and the hardness of the human heart by simply making God’s presence indisputably clear to everyone. God could

appear as a giant form in the sky, or speak as a thundering voice from above, or fire down some well-placed lightning bolts whenever people did wrong; that would dispel all doubts! Think of how quickly God could turn people around. If it were obvious that God stood directly over people, they would no longer deny God, and they would no longer engage in any evil deeds. Yet God not only refrains from dazzling displays of power, but withholds any sort of indisputable communication, even from those who are seeking to communicate with God. When people pray, for example, they would love to hear a voice from God whispering in answer, but this never happens. Isaiah was right—it is not simply that God is hidden, but that “God hides himself.”

But why would God withhold open communication when it seems that so much could be accomplished if God simply made God’s presence and power more obvious? Why doesn’t God flaunt power a bit? In a world in which God was undeniably at hand, humanity could say goodbye to both atheism and immorality.

But what sort of world would that be? What sort of freedom would people have? If God’s presence were overwhelmingly obvious, people would not think to question God and would not dare to disobey God. But this means that people would essentially be puppets, cowed into submission before the Almighty. And what sort of relationship would people have with God? They would relate to God like lowly serfs before the imperial throne, giving obeisance and fealty to the overpowering Ruler whom they could not oppose and who always stood directly over them. They could hardly relate to God in faith or genuine love.

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote a parable that provides a very helpful reflection on the human situation in this regard. The parable has been retold in many forms.¹ Imagine a powerful king who fell in love with a humble maiden in his kingdom, and who dreamed that he might marry her. He desired not simply that she would be queen, but that she might join with him in a relationship of real love. But how then should he approach her? He could, of course, ride up in his magnificent carriage, summon her from her cottage, and declare that she should become his wife. She would likely not resist; no one resisted him. But the king wished that she would love him, and love cannot be compelled. A less forceful entrance was necessary. Perhaps he should appear at her doorway, bow to her, and invite her to join him for a stroll. Of course she would be impressed. She was an ordinary maiden; she would be stunned to find the king at her door, in all his majesty! Surely she would join him. But would that be love? She might be swept along by his glory; but she would be going with him not out of love but because she was overwhelmed by his royal stature. A different approach was needed. Perhaps the king should invite her to the palace, to elevate her position—dress her in royal robes, give her a place at the royal table, and surround her with servants, so that she would feel less intimidated by the king’s position. She would surely love the sumptuousness of the palace. But then how could the king know if she really loved him, or if she loved more the marvelous things he was giving her? The

king appeared to be in an impossible dilemma. He desired an authentic relationship of love with the maiden; and that meant that she would need to choose to marry him out of love—a real love which was a love for him and not a reaction to his position or his wealth. But it seemed that no matter how he approached her, she would be so overwhelmed by his splendor that such love would be impossible. How could he connect with her in a genuine way?

Then the king realized the answer. He needed to conceal his royal magnificence, so that he could meet her on her level. And it had to be more than simply a temporary mask. He could not just show up in peasant garb to make her acquaintance and then whip off the costume to reveal his true magnificence. If he wanted a genuine connection, he would need to truly enter into her world and join in her life. So he left the palace and all his royal trappings, and moved into a simple cottage near the maiden, where he took up life as a carpenter, with the aim that she might come to know him, and, perchance, to love him.

Kierkegaard surely had in mind the words of the apostle Paul in Philippians: “Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but he emptied himself, and took the form of a servant, being born in human form.” (Philippians 2:6–7)

The central thrust of the Bible is that God desires a relationship of love with human beings. But if God appeared directly in all God’s glory, human beings would be intimidated and overwhelmed by God’s infinite majesty. In order for people to freely choose to enter into relationship with God, God must conceal God’s magnificence; and in order for God to initiate an authentic relationship, God must come to humanity on a human level, which is exactly what God does in Jesus Christ.

This of course entails a risk. For the king, the risk was that the maiden might not choose to love him; and for God, the risk is that human beings might turn away and ignore God’s overture. But such risk is necessary if human beings are to be able to respond to God freely and genuinely.

The “hiddenness” of God is thus exactly what must prevail in a world in which human beings are intended to be free. It is only if God is concealed from clear view that people can have the freedom to choose for or against God—to decide to join with God or not, to decide to follow God or not, to decide to do good or to do evil. God must “hide himself” in order for people to be independent actors in the world, whose choices—including the choice for God—will be real and meaningful. It is for the sake of human freedom and authenticity that there can be no indisputable “proofs” for God.

At the same time, if people are to be able to choose to enter a relationship with God, there must be ways in which God reveals God’s care for people. The situation must be such that human beings are able to perceive the reality and love of God, while at the same time they are able to ignore and reject God. This is precisely the situation that prevails on earth; and it is this situation that is reflected in each of the classic proofs for

God. Each of the arguments for God's existence points to some way in which God's reality is apparent—and yet not overwhelming. Every person remains free to recognize the existence of God—through nature, or through the human concept of God, or through the human moral sense, or through religious experience, or through the witness of Scripture—or one can choose to close one's eyes to it all. God thus reaches to humanity in a gentle fashion, so that people might respond to God not out of compulsion but out of love.

The hiddenness of God necessarily leaves room in the end for doubt and disobedience, but it is also what leaves room for an authentic response of faith and love. It is to such a response that God invites human beings; and that invitation comes to its focus in Jesus Christ, who is the perfect revelation of God's love and grace, and the full identification of God with the human condition. In the passage in II Corinthians where Paul is talking about the veil between humanity and God, he says, "In Christ the veil is set aside." (II Corinthians 3:14) When people choose to respond to God's outreach to them through Christ, then God is no longer hidden, but becomes truly known. As Paul says, "When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." (II Corinthians 3:16) Human beings on this earth, of course, can never behold the full glory of God—as Paul would say, "we see through a glass dimly" (I Cor. 13:12)—but the response of faith brings people finally into that relationship of love that God intends, in which people can know the goodness of God, can live in a transforming fellowship with God, and can reflect God's goodness to the world. So Paul concludes, "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord, as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed . . ." (II Cor. 3:18).

ⁱ Kierkegaard's actual parable, written in the dense and rather convoluted style that is characteristic of Kierkegaard, is found in his Philosophical Fragments, pp. 31-43. What is offered here is a retelling of the basic idea.