

“Functional Atheism”
Luke 24:36-48, Acts 3:12-19
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We don't believe in God. We're atheists. We don't believe in God. Not really, do we? Or not all the time. Or at least we act like we don't. We are functional atheists. A lot of us are. I think that's what Jesus was saying to his disciples and I think that's what Peter was saying to the crowd in the passages that we just read. In Acts chapter 3, Peter and John are walking to the Temple when they encounter a man who has been lame from birth. This man had been carried there by his friends so he could lay by the entrance to the Temple and beg. When he sees Peter and John, he ask them if they can spare any money. But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. I love how the text says that he jumped up and when he went into the Temple he didn't just walk, he leaped! Isn't that how you would do it? If you had never walked before and now all of a sudden found that your legs were strong, wouldn't you test them out? He jumped and leapt and praised God. And everyone was astonished. And that's when Peter asks them the question: Why do you wonder at this, and why do you stare at us? If you really believed in God, if you really thought God was with us here and now, wouldn't you expect such things to happen?

On Easter evening, the disciples were still hiding out in the upper room in which they had shared the Passover meal with Jesus. They were scared, but they were also excited and dumbfounded, for two of them had been walking that day toward Emmaus when a stranger began walking with them and they soon discovered that it was Jesus. At that moment Jesus himself came and stood among them, as if by magic or something, because they hadn't unlocked the door. And they were astonished. And that's when Jesus asked them the question: Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts?

What did you think was going to happen?

Why? Why do we wonder, why do we doubt? Why are we scared and why do we stare? Because we're atheists. We don't think God really acts in the world. Maybe back then, but certainly not now. Tom Long says, "In our time there is a kind of functional atheism that prevails for many. Life is perceived to be barren of God, and if God ever should speak or act, it would be an incredible exception to the norm. Indeed, the crowd in this passage rushed to Peter and John because their ministry of healing seemed to be an astonishing interruption in the dreary business of life as usual. "Why do you wonder at this?" Peter asks the crowd, in his sermon, which speaks of another world, where the healing and forgiving power of God is as pervasive and present as sunshine and rain."¹

Do we believe that? Do we believe that God is present with us? I think we do here. Maybe we act that way when we walk into this room. This is the house of God, after all, right? We're supposed to hear from God when we are here. Do you remember when you first came into this sanctuary? I do. In the fall of 1988, I had come to town to interview for the pastor position at this church. Larry Irey and Juanita Cole met me here to show me the church. We walked in and looked around and I could sense the presence of God in this old building. It was different from other churches I had been a part of. I had first been called to the First Presbyterian Church of Ashland, Kansas. That church has an old brick building with a sanctuary full of dark wood and curved pews and stained glass representation of Jesus standing at the door knocking and of Jesus the Good shepherd and of Jesus greeting the weeping Mary Magdalene in the garden Easter morning. The church has so much stained glass that one cannot see the outside world when you are in the sanctuary. And the pulpit is on the other side of the chancel. Do you know why some churches have the pulpit on the left and others on the right? Me neither. But one feels enveloped in the holiness of God. So maybe we're not atheists when we are in here, but what about when we leave. Are we astonished to hear from God out there? Here in the house of God it's different. But what about out there? What about in our real life? Is God out there too?

1 Long, Thomas G. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, p. 410.

In the Bible is the story of a man that I relate to all too easily. As Barbara Brown Taylor also says, the first time I read this story, I knew it was true whether it ever happened or not. There Jacob was, still a young man, running away from home because his whole screwy family had finally imploded. He and his twin brother, Esau, had both wanted their father's blessing. Jacob's mother had colluded with him to get it, and though his scheme worked, it enraged his brother to the point that Jacob fled for his life. He and his brother were not identical twins. Esau could have squashed him like a bug. So Jacob left with little more than the clothes on his back, and when he had walked as far as he could, he looked around for a stone he could use for a pillow. When he had found one the right size, Jacob lay down to sleep, turning his cheek against the stone that was still warm from the sun. Maybe the dream was in the stone, or maybe it fell out of the sky. Wherever the dream came from, it was vivid: a ladder set up on the earth, with the top of it reaching to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending it like bright winged ants. Then, all of a sudden, God was there beside Jacob, without a single trumpet for warning, promising him safety, children, land. "Remember, I am with you," God said to him. "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Jacob woke while God's breath was still stirring the air, although he saw nothing out of the ordinary around him: same wilderness, same rocks, same sand. If someone had held a mirror in front of his face, Jacob would not have seen anything different there either, except for the circles of surprise in his eyes. "Surely the Lord is in this place," he said out loud, "and I did not know it!" Shaken by what he had seen, he could not seem to stop talking. "How awesome is this place!" he went on. "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."²

Was it? Was it the house of God and the gate of heaven? Of course it was. And so is the pillow you sleep on. And the bedroom you sleep in. They are the house of God. And so is the kitchen you eat in, and the basement that holds your tools and your laundry. It is the house of God and the gate of heaven. And so is the gate that leads to your garden, and the gate that leads you out on to the street. And so is

2 Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in the World*. p. 3.

the town you live in and the hospital you are so scared of and the busy street that holds nothing but strangers and the office in which you work. If we weren't as blind as bats we might come to realize that all the world is the house of God, that each place is the gate of heaven. And if we realized that, then Peter and Jesus wouldn't ask their questions because we wouldn't be surprised or shocked or frightened. People encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, at the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers. When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay. Do we see God in those places?

What would it mean for us to realize that not only is this the house of God, but so is out there? What would it mean to live as if we were not six-day-a-week atheists? What would it be like if we could see the gate of heaven all around us, no matter where we were? Perhaps it would mean treating all of God's creation with care because God himself is in it. Perhaps it would mean treating each person as a child of God and worthy of our respect and care, no matter their age or race or gender or anything else. Each person you meet might be a gift of God. The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield speaks of this truth when he says, "Imagine that every person in the world is enlightened but you. They are all your teachers, each doing just the right things to help you learn perfect patience, perfect wisdom, perfect compassion." That's possible if we live in a world where God is all around us. And if we're awake enough to not be functional atheists but instead to believe. Just a little bit. Just enough to open our eyes and wherever we are, we can say "this is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven."