

Sunday, October 3, 2021  
Saving the Church by Bringing Back Jesus  
Hebrews 1:1 – 4

Theologian Charles Taylor says we live in a secular age = by this he means that belief in God is no longer the default setting (Taylor, *A Secular Age*). Once people would have been embarrassed to say they did not believe in God. It was expected. Good for business to go to church. Good for reputation to be seen at church. Good for politicians. Not believing in God is now the default setting.

The 1950's were the heyday of "church-ianity". Billy Graham urged Eisenhower to choose a denomination, if only for appearances. "Frankly," Graham warned, "I don't think the American people would be happy with a president who didn't belong to a church." Eisenhower reluctantly agreed and he chose the Presbyterian church because "Mamie is Presbyterian." A week and a half after his inauguration, Eisenhower was baptized at the National Presbyterian Church in D.C. The president wasn't thrilled about doing this and he had agreed to join only after the Reverend Edward L. R. Elson promised to keep it quiet. Eisenhower wrote in his diary, "We were scarcely home before the fact, was being publicized by the pastor, to the hilt. The president screamed to his press secretary, Jim Hagerty, "You go and tell that minister that if he gives out one more story about my religious faith, I won't join his [goddamn church]" (Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God*).

Appearances no longer matter when it comes to religion. Now, it's considered a private and individual matter. People now flaunt disbelief in God. A group dubbed themselves the "New Atheists" and bragged about being smarter than religious people. No one feels obligated to attend church these days. Attending church is not even on the list of Sunday morning options in a secular culture. The farmer's market down the street draws 20 times the number of people we have in worship. More people will show up to listen to a bunch of old white guys from the good old days do some rock and roll than will go to church on a Sunday. This is not a complaint; a statement of reality.

The church has a chance to hit the “reset” button. If this were baseball, the church would be the Mets. The church has to realize that everything has changed:

From the center to the fringe  
From majority to minority  
From settlers to sojourners  
From privilege to one of many  
From control to witness  
From maintenance to witness  
From institution to movement.

Now, we can face the rising tide of atheism and ask, “How’s atheism working for you?” What do we get if we throw away belief in God? What exactly is the appeal of a life with no church? Are people flourishing? Do they have deep levels of satisfaction and meaning? Does money buy happiness? What are people doing with all those Sunday mornings?

After all, the atheists have gone popular with an t. v. ad featuring Ron Reagan, Jr. of the Freedom from Religion group. There’s a softness to the appeal that is more palatable than the perorations and tirades of the run-of-the-mill secular atheists. A smiling Reagan asks people to drop belief in God and join freedom from religion. There’s almost a feeling of liberation with the idea that we can be free from religion. Nothing matters more in America than freedom. People drink “freedom to choose” as if it were a good whiskey. People like to think they are free, like to have the illusion that they are free, that they owe no one anything. “Give me freedom” is the new American cheer!

The problem with Reagan’s appeal is that it is so shallow. He quips in the last line, “I am not afraid of going to hell.” Big deal. Neither am I. He acts as if it has never crossed his mind that millions of Christians do not even believe there is a hell. And millions more are universalists and do not believe God is a God of anger and wrath and destruction. Atheists will have to do better.

Steven Weinberg, in his essay, “Without God,” explains “Living without God isn’t easy. But its very difficulty offers one other consolation – that there is a certain honor, or perhaps just a grim satisfaction, in facing up to our condition without despair and without wishful thinking – with good humor, but without God.” Here is a more honest attempt to dismiss the idea of God, but as Stanley Hauerwas notes, Weinberg and other atheists never

seem to realize that it is by no means easy to live with God. Atheism, even when dressed in the glitter of television advertising, may not be all that easy.

I think the church can do better than offer people a grim satisfaction, a facing up to the human condition without despair. We can offer something stronger than wishful thinking – the Bible calls it hope. I think the church can offer more than good humor; we can offer a relationship with Jesus.

The secular world writes checks it can't cash, makes promises it can't keep. Atheism may not be the upgrade that it promises. Have you noticed how the corporate world and its evangelists – the advertising geniuses have co-opted religious language to sell us a bill of goods? Remember “the sponsors, my friends, will sell you all they can.” Disneyland: “The happiest place on earth.” Really? Have you ever stood in a line for a ride at Disneyland? MasterCard: “There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's MasterCard.” Do you know that credit card debt is sinking more American families than any other problem? Do you know that the old Christian teaching that money can't buy happiness is coming true every day from people who buy things they do not need, with money they do not have, to impress people they don't even like? All State: “You're in good hands.” Do you really think that's true? Even Wal-Mart is in on the secular con: “Save money. Live better.” Of course, the Wal-Mart idea is for you to spend all your money with them so that you have the illusion of saving money by paying less for all the junk you buy. And there's American Express: “Don't live life without it.” And the ad slogan that actually frightens me is from the gambling site: Caesar's. The Caesar's slogan: “Life is more fun with skin in the game.” Then there's the television ad with a powerful voice and impressive man, dressed in Caesar's robes shouting, “I am Caesar. You are Caesar. We are Caesar.” “You are, I am, we are we are all Caesar's Oh yeah!” The iconic image of the Roman emperor Caesar is deliberate, and this makes it a direct challenge to Christianity. In the first century, there was Caesar as Lord and then there was Jesus as Lord. And his church shouted, “Jesus is Lord!” Now, the church is challenged to once again claim that it is Caesar who is the rival; and what he rivals is the Lordship of God in the person of Jesus Christ. It is Caesar, not Jesus, who bears the burden of proof – Caesar, not Jesus, who would attempt to pretentiously, idolatrously usurp the title of “king” for himself.

I want to offer our secular world something different, not a membership in a church, but a relationship with Jesus. We start with Jesus and then we figure out how to make the church like Jesus. Hebrews tells us that God has given Jesus as the complete revelation. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. As his people, we are to be the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's being.

If we keep Jesus in the center; and we will be headed in the right direction. Rowan Williams reminds us that the Apostle's Creed only mentions three individuals, Jesus, Mary, and Pontius Pilate. Think of Jesus as the center and on one side there is Mary the one who says "Yes" to Jesus and on the other side, there's Pilate who says "No" to Jesus. You could say that sums up the world in which we all live. Through our lives we struggle between one pole or the other, towards a deeper "yes" or a deeper "no." Jesus calls us from the shadows as the one into whose life we must all try to grow, who can work with our "yes" and can overcome our "no."

The more we say yes, the easier it is to say yes. Life comes down to how often we say "yes" to God. Maybe you can manage to say one little "yes" to the invitation of Jesus and go from there. Let's start with the "Yes". "Yes" to the call of Jesus on our lives. Yes, to faithfulness to Jesus! Yes, to being the reflection of Jesus in our community. Yes! Yes! Yes! Let us shout, "I am, you are, we are – Jesus! Jesus is Lord!" Amen