

“Transcendent and Immanent, High and Low, Near and Far”

When I was a young man I became disillusioned with the church of my upbringing. That disillusionment did not lead to atheism or agnosticism. Rather I embraced the favored religious notion of many Enlightenment era intellectuals; men such as Thomas Jefferson and John Locke—Deism. For me it helped to explain creation outside of a scientific theory, but it also helped explain the evil, injustice, and randomness of life. Deism, as I understood it, had God creating the universe and its principles and then stepping outside of it to observe how it worked. It was all a big experiment. It was not unlike one of my favorite books of Sci-Fi satire, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams.

In that series of books (humorously referred to as a five book trilogy) the earth was created by a group of hyper-intelligent beings (mice) as a vast computer program to answer the question of “life, the universe and everything.” A great computer called Deep Thought stood in observation of what was happening as men and women, like zeroes and ones in computer code, interacted. This complex interaction would lead to the answer the great questions they were asking.

While I still enjoy the satire of *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, my interest in Deism has faded. Today’s scripture readings help to explain the latter. The God that I grew up learning about and the one that I accept from my study of scripture is not totally transcendent, outside of human experience. Neither is God totally immanent, completely within human experience and understanding.

Today’s scriptures help us understand that God spans the entire spectrum—from transcendent to immanent and back again. In Psalm 147 we get a picture of the transcendence of God; God as creator, sustainer, and controller of the universe. We also get hints of God as immanent; that is a God who is with us and cares for us. Of course, that shows up most clearly in the Gospel lesson; in which God through his son Jesus of Nazareth heals those who are “sick or possessed with demons.”

It is through the reading of these two passages together that we get a fuller picture of God. YHWH is not merely a clockmaker or experimenter who created the world out of curiosity or as a hobby. God created the natural order and like a gardener or parent cares for it, nourishes it and wants the best for each part of it. Indeed, God cares so much for the creation and people that God sends messengers—angels, teachers and prophets—to intervene in the lives of the humans. Each of them has the mission of getting humanity back on track when it has gone astray.

The ultimate expression of this comes when God sends his Son into the world not to condemn the world, “but in order that the world might be saved

through him.”¹ Thus we get the most profound expression of God’s immanence or nearness in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

That is why I think that it is important to read scripture in its entirety and examine the arc of the story from Genesis through Revelation. If we only read Psalm 147 or the Isaiah passage appointed for today we would likely come away with an image of God as only transcendent. Conversely, if we only read today’s Gospel we might think of God only as immanent. We do not get the whole image of God from just one verse or passage, or book, or Testament. We need the entirety of the scriptures to grasp, as best we can, the fullness God.

We also need the entirety of scripture to understand how people through the ages experience and respond to God. If we only read the psalm we might think that the only response to God is praise and awe. If we only read this passage from Mark we might think that the best response to God is to bring our illness and pains to God. You will note that there is nothing in the passage of awe, thanks, or praise of God for the miracles that Jesus works.

Thankfulness and acknowledgment of God’s gifts to us, is one reason why I am reintroducing the mite box as a Lenten practice. This age-old practice involves keeping a small box on hand where we drop in a coin as a small expression of our thankfulness to God. When we experience a blessing we drop a coin in the box as a tangible way of offering thanks. It is a good practice because as we become more mindful through the practice. We begin to realize how many blessings we have. This is particularly true of the little blessings such as the sparkle of the sun, the blossom of a flower, a kind word, the embrace of our beloved, the opportunities to help one another...the list is infinite. At the end of Lent we will gather in all our boxes and present the collections as a gift to God, through the Episcopal Migration Ministry.

Oh, in case you were wondering what led me away from Deism and the focus on the transcendence, it was experiencing the immanence of God through Holy Communion. I experienced the nearness of God who is not just close but indwelling through the bread and wine of Communion. In a moment I felt God’s spirit transforming me. I felt the Spirit rush through my entire being like the blood in my veins. God was in heaven and also right here in me. I did not have these words but it was clear that God was transcendent and immanent, and there was nothing I could do but accept it.

It takes all sixty-six books of the Bible, plus the Apocrypha to help us get an inkling of how great and wonderful God is, and how near and intimate God wants to be with each of us. That is the expanse of God’s love. Indeed, the answer to the question of “life, the universe and everything,” is love. Love is both transcendent and immanent. Love which is pervasive, inclusive, and unconditional, that is the answer.

¹ John 3:17