

“Some heard thunder”

March 21, 2021

In today's scripture reading Jesus is in Jerusalem. He is among Jews from Israel, but also some foreigners, some Greeks. These are likely Greeks who have converted to Judaism. They want to see Jesus, having heard about him from others. They have chosen a very good day to seek him out since on this particular afternoon, God suddenly speaks. Out of nowhere, or perhaps everywhere, God's voice announces, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." It is a shocking, wonderful, astounding eruption of the divine into everyday life. Jesus tells the astounded people around him that this happened for their benefit, to help with their belief. Jesus already knows who He is, after all. But God wants these Jews to know that Jesus is the one He has chosen to be the Messiah. Having said this in front of the Greeks, the word is sure to spread outside of Israel as well.

But there is a curious detail in this story. We are told that not everyone hears God so clearly. Some people think that what they heard was thunder. Others think they have heard some kind of message from an angel. Others, the minority, hear the voice of God declare that Jesus is his son.

Like the people on that day, we often disagree about what is being said about God, especially in the Bible. Was it thunder or the voice of God? How much of this event really happened? That's an important question, because we want to know how much stock we should place in words like these. If it didn't happen, then we don't have to pay much attention to it, and we can get on with the business of our lives. So what really happened on that day when the Bible tells us God spoke?

That question is relatively new. For a very long time, the Bible was read as a history book. If it was in the Bible, it happened. But 100 years ago, a major debate broke out among Christians in North America. In the 1920s, liberal preachers started giving sermons suggesting that not everything in the Bible was literally true. Now, this idea was not new, academics had been debating this for a few decades in university classrooms. But now these ideas were being heard from a pulpit,

SHALL THE
FUNDAMENTALISTS
WIN?



OR THE NEW KNOWLEDGE
AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

HARRY EMERSON
FOSDICK

In 1922, this man, Rev Harry Emerson Fosdick delivered a sermon in New York that became famous almost overnight. He told his congregants that many experts now doubted that the virgin birth was true.

He declared that it seemed unlikely that God had dictated the contents of the Bible to the human beings who wrote books like Isaiah, Genesis and the gospels. Instead, he argued, some Christians now believed the Bible had been written by human beings, based on their own ideas. As such, the Bible was not literally true, and could not be accepted as history.¹

Fosdick's words sparked a furor. His sermon was disseminated throughout the United States in pamphlet form, paid for by John D. Rockefeller.² His words enraged conservative Christians. They called his perspective unchristian in that it threatened to undermine the entire Bible. If people stopped believing in the virgin birth, why should they believe any other part of the Bible was true? Why believe in the crucifixion, the healing miracles, or even the resurrection? They argued that if you question one part of the Bible, you throw into doubt the entire Bible. It is all or nothing.³

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall The Fundamentalists Win?" May 21, 1922 .

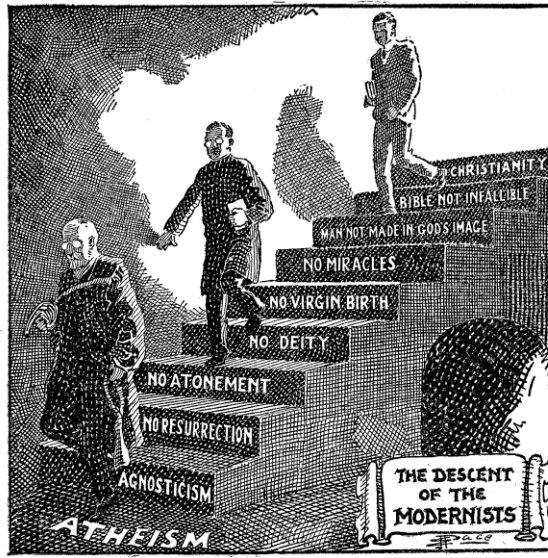
The Riverside Preachers Edited by Paul H. Sherry New York: Pilgrim Press, 1978 pp. 27-38

https://www.wrs.edu/assets/docs/Courses/Classic_Fundamentalism/Fosdick--Shall_Fundamentalists_Win.pdf

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/harry-emerson-fosdick.html>

³ See for example, Clarence Edward Macartney, "Shall Unbelief Win? A reply to Dr. Fosdick," a sermon preached on July 13, 1922, at Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<https://thisday.pcahistory.org/2014/07/july-13/>



This cartoon was produced the same year as Fosdick gave his sermon. It shows the fear that doubting the literal truth of the Bible will lead to atheism. People like Fosdick were called modernists. People who stood for the truth of the Bible started to call themselves fundamentalists, because they believed in the fundamentals of the Bible.

This difference of opinion split Protestantism in two. Southern American Protestants rejected the liberal position entirely.⁴ They had long before convinced themselves that the Bible endorsed slavery, so they weren't going to start questioning it now. In the north, denominations split along the lines of whether the Bible was seen as literally true or not. In seminaries, professors who questioned the literal truth of the Bible were fired.

Although it was not so clear back then, both sides actually share a common perspective. Both want the Bible to be literally true. The fundamentalists believe it is literally true, the world really was created in 7 days, and Noah's ark was real. The liberals also expect the Bible to be literally true, and when they find that it defies scientific laws, they are disappointed. If the Bible is not literally true, then that means it must be fiction or myth. That has led to a view of the Bible as an artifact of a past superstitious age, when people believed just about anything was possible. At best, liberals see the Bible as a source of morals to live by. Love your neighbour, don't steal, don't murder. But the detailed stories of the Bible are so tied up in fictions that it is easier to just ignore it. Let's just take the morals and run. Most people have embraced rationalism over faith, which seems too tied up in fictions and superstitions.

⁴ *Critical Issues in American Religious History: a Reader*, Robert R. Mathison, ed, (Waco, Texas: 2001), 475.

Thanks to our education and popular media, we're all rationalists now. We expect there to be one meaning to any event. In detective stories, there is always a rational explanation for every murder. A good theory aided by evidence and eyewitness accounts can solve every murder. Every mystery is temporary. Every detective story is a lesson in rationalism for non-scientists. We are taught that the rational scientific method, which works so well for building planes and bridges, should apply to every aspect of our lives. Including religion. If religion defies rationality, we set it aside, and most people have. Only 20 percent of Canadians now attend church services regularly.⁵ Most people have closed the Bible and walked away, often in the name of being rational.

But there's a problem with this approach: it assumes that people are capable of being rational most of the time.

This pandemic suggests that people are not very good at being rational. Early on in the crisis, public health experts told us how to beat the virus. When covid 19 enters a person's body, it remains infectious to others for about 2 or 3 weeks. After that, even if the person is sick, they stop shedding much virus. So, to defeat the virus, all we had to do was keep it contained in people who were infected, and make sure it couldn't reach anyone else. The way to do that was simple: everyone should wear masks, practice social distancing and wash our hands a lot. That way, the virus would get stranded in the sick, and die out. Last year, Robert Redfield of the CDC declared that abiding by these rules could end the pandemic even without vaccines.⁶ That was the rational approach to defeating the pandemic.

But what happened in practice was that people balked at wearing masks, and they refused to stay home. Politicians and others went on trips, and people found it really hard to wear masks consistently. Some people flat out refused to wear them, protesting against the limitation of their personal freedom. Most people have worn the masks, but not always rationally. We forget to put them on, or they slip beneath our noses and we don't pull them up. This is still a common way to wear masks, even now after a year's worth of training. Or, friends gather with people they trust, unprotected. But the virus knows nothing about trust, and infects people anyway. If we were rational people, we could have ended this pandemic months ago, like New Zealand did.

Now, you could argue that this just means that rationalism is weaker than selfishness, but it isn't that simple. At the same time as some citizens were acting selfishly, and others negligently, there were people who were acting with wild disregard for their own safety by helping others. Think of what happened at the beginning of the pandemic in places like New York City and Italy. The outbreaks were severe in the hospitals, and the medical personnel lacked proper PPE. Yet they went to work anyway, risking their lives every day to save complete strangers. Many died doing this. The rational thing to do was to call in sick, or refuse to work

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/01/5-facts-about-religion-in-canada/>

⁶ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/covid-face-mask-protection-vaccine-cdc-director/>

until there was enough PPE. But people are not just rational. We humans are capable of feelings and actions in our love for others that go beyond rationality and logic.

That's what we need to keep in mind when we hear scripture passages like the one X read today. We may wish that if God speaks, we will all hear that voice clearly, and understand the meaning of what God is saying. But the fact is that not everyone experiences God in the same way. Some hear a clear voice, others hear thunder. The variable in the equation is not God, but us. Some people serve only themselves; others go beyond themselves to care for others. Still others see beyond the moral realm and sense a greater cosmic whole, if only for a brief few moments.

Over the years, I have met many people who believe they have experienced God directly. One old woman told me that when she was 12 years old, she and her grandmother were in church, sitting in the pews when they saw Jesus standing at the back of the church, smiling at them. No one else saw Jesus, but they did, and they stared at each other in wonder and delight. Another man told me that God spoke to him once so clearly that from that day onward, he didn't need faith, he just knew God was a fact. Another woman told me that she sensed God when she gave birth. As she held her newborn, she realized that if God loved her even a fraction as much as she loved her child, then that divine love was incredible, and her mind was blown.

You may have had these experiences, too. Perhaps when sitting on a dock watching a sunset, or while doing drugs in your youth, or just caring for another person. Studies have found that between a quarter to a half of all people sense the presence of God at some time in their lives, a mystical glimpse of a greater cosmic reality.⁷ It may not happen to you until the day you die. Impossible to know. But what is clear is that people all over the world, throughout time have had these experiences. They often become the foundation of new religions.

The evidence is clear: we are not just rational beings. Indeed, our better instincts of care towards each other, the land and the Earth as a whole is rooted in non-rational experiences, which people have always had. Our devotion to rationality *limits* our appreciation of these higher levels. This may explain why it is our rational society which poses such a danger to the planet. People don't get excited about rationalism, and right now, we need to get excited and passionate to solve many of our global problems, such as climate change. We need to love beyond ourselves, and that is hard to do by relying on rationalism alone.

The wish that the voice of God should be straightforward and easily understood by everyone is a rationalist fantasy, not a wise understanding of who we are as humans. Both rationalists and fundamentalists want God to be a straightforward moralist. But the people who wrote the Bible knew better. When God speaks, it is our heart, not our calculating brain, which shapes what we hear. Many will just hear thunder, and walk away, deciding that there is no deeper meaning. Others will hear angels, and some, the voice of God. God is there the whole time, what varies is our willingness to listen, our ability to hear. At Easter, we are confronted with the least rational

⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2009/12/29/mystical-experiences/>

event in history – a man rising from the dead. It defies logic, but if faith is an invitation to go beyond rationalism, then an illogical event seems necessary. It is an open door to higher understanding, not a fairy tale that should be dismissed.

This year has shown that the world won't be saved by selfishness. We will need to find ways to think beyond ourselves for the sake of human civilization, and the Earth as a whole. Even if at first we may hear only thunder, let us not lose faith that greater truths and ways of being are possible, and each of us is invited to hear the voice of God. Indeed, as our hearing improves, with God's help, we may inch towards becoming the humans we were always meant to be.

Amen.