

A God Who Comes Near

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Where is God? It sounds like a child's question. Maybe during bedtime prayers, or perhaps after coming home from religious services. The earliest answer we learned was simple, certain, reliable: God is in heaven, smiling down at us, taking care of us.

But it really is not a child's question. Many people ask this question. It arises in the wake of troubling events—after a school shooting; in the collapse of the World Trade Centre on 9/11; as people die in New Orleans and Haiti and Japan; as warlords and terrorists torture people and enlist child soldiers. Where is God in the middle of this brutal war in Ukraine in the bombing of hospitals and shelters? Where is God when people are murdered for the crime of being different—being black, or indigenous, or gay, or transgender, or a different faith, or (in some societies) for being a woman?

People ask the question in personal crises—an unexpected diagnosis; the death of a loved one; a child lost to addiction; the loss of a job; the prospect of homelessness; a pandemic which leaves us feeling lonely and isolated; in times which stretch us to the limit.

Where is God in this mess?

What good is God—in—heaven when the problems are here?

Why doesn't this benevolent God stop human suffering and fix everything? If God is supposed to love and care, where is God?

That first simple, certain, and reliable answer no longer works. The problems and pain seem almost insurmountable. As a result, many people have stopped asking the question at all. They conclude that God is an ancient myth which is no longer relevant.

Yet this theological question refuses to go away. It continues to surface in a chaotic globe.

Some religious leaders hang on to the old answer with a dogged determination. The loudest among them seem to think they can read the very mind of God: God is judging an unfaithful world, they say. Mostly what they are doing is proclaiming their own personal hatreds and prejudices—abortion—on—demand, or the “gay agenda,” or the breakdown of the family. They seem to think that “their will [should] be done, in heaven as on earth.”

They proclaim that the world is ending. Jesus is coming back any day now, and true believers will be drawn up into heaven while unbelievers will be cast into a pit of eternal fire. At this moment, they claim that the war in Ukraine heralds the end of the world and Putin serves as a new antichrist.

Like hundreds of people who prepared for the end of the world in earlier times, they are wrong. Many of the answers of the past no longer persuade; they no longer make sense.

But that doesn't mean the question will simply go away. I believe it is one of the most consequential questions of our time, and we must come to terms with it.

The old answers arose in the ancient understanding of a three-story universe: God was at the top in Heaven; the demons dwelt at the bottom in Hell with the ongoing possibility of eternal punishment; and we humans muddled about in the middle level on Earth.

In such a universe, people agreed that God was unimaginably distant. Human beings needed mediators to connect with a distant God. In the Christian understanding, mediators included

Jesus, Mary, the saints, the church, prophets and preachers, sacraments, dogma, rules, and rituals. They were supposed to teach us to learn to do what is good, right, and holy.

But science has taught us to see the universe differently. Telescopes help us see farther than we ever could before. People went into space and claimed not to see God. Life and the universe are much more complex than we ever had imagined.

It no longer makes sense to think of divinity living “up there.” Indeed, there is no “up there” in this beautiful blue ball spinning in the vastness of space. If we hang on to the old answers, it becomes perfectly logical and sensible to say that there is no God.

I suspect that’s why agnosticism and atheism are on the rise, and why more people are leaving conventional forms of religion. They haven’t given up on God. Poll after poll shows that people still believe in God and identify as “spiritual but not religious.” People are rejecting a particular conception of divinity, and they are still trying to locate where God might be found in their lives.

Where is God? Not up there in some mythological “heaven.”

Rather, God is right here. With us. In us. In our neighbour. In acts of love and compassion. In moments of utter stillness. In times of loud celebration and laughter. In the meal where all are welcome around the table. In communities of people seeking to do good. In acts of inclusion and welcome. In sunsets and seashores and gardens, in good food and good company, when we eat and drink and make love.

Some call it a “revolution of divine nearness.” I don’t think it is a revolution. Rather, we are doing what theology has always done. We are finding new answer to old questions and seeking new ways of describing the indescribable.

Not a distant God, but a more intimate presence, in which millions experience God as more personal and accessible, a God who is robustly present in the chaos and confusion all around us. This Spirit invites us to save the planet and make peace with the whole human family. This One invites us to partnership in creating a hope-filled future.

Where is God?

The only God that makes sense these days is a God of compassion and empathy who shares the life of the world, a grounded God who grounds us in hope and love.