

WHY FAITH?¹

Five years ago, Oxford University scholar, Alistar McGrath, published a refreshingly optimistic book titled the Twilight of Atheism. Atheism is the belief that there is no god and a lifestyle that has nothing to do with a god or religion. In this book, McGrath, himself an atheist turned believer, asserted that the decline of religion, which everyone expected since the middle of the 20th century, hadn't happened. Atheism declined. Virtually died.

But that was a whole five years ago in our rapidly changing world. Today, atheism is back with a vengeance. The new atheists are not your Madeline Murry O'hare types who just want to be left alone by religionists. Today's atheists are on the attack. We've seen five books promoting godlessness reach bestseller lists in the last two years. Comedian Bill Maher produced a sly and funny documentary called "Religulous" which painted religion as laughable and dangerous. Another movie reaches theaters in days. Fully 20% of Americans describe themselves as atheistic or agnostic (which means they don't know if there is a god). So, for the first time ever atheism is actually making an appeal to believers not to believe in God and not to structure lives guided by faith.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on November 1, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

Less and less can you and I as Christians rely on the culture to squelch or drown out voices that challenge faith. We need to remember why it is that being people of faith makes a difference, why godlessness flattens life and misses too much. So, I want to offer you two of the most important reasons to be a person of faith. First, because faith gives meaning. Second, faith gives beauty.

Meaning. The core argument of the new atheists is not new. It is that science is the reliable way of knowing things. And science simply can't show that God exists. To persist in believing all kinds of things unprovable by scientific method is foolish at best and possibly a mental illness.

The problem with this thinking is that it credits science with having far more about life than it does. Kristen these days is engaged on a genuine scientific enterprise in Nepal. She's working to measure smoke in dwellings to see if smoke causes lung problems in the occupants. Like all scientific experiments it's arduous work. Measure amounts of microscopic soot in the air over time. Measure how much air people can blow into tubes. Put columns of numbers on the computer and use statistical analysis. In two years of work she might be able to show that the smoke is causing some problems. That's science. If you can measure it, count it, chart it,

attach numbers to it you can inch forward in understanding the natural world. And that kind of knowledge has gone a long way to making life rich and easier. Science is wonderful.

But so much of life is beyond the reach of science and always will be. You hike to a waterfall and you find yourself so touched by its beauty that tears brim on your eyelids. Science really doesn't have much to say about that experience. A husband quits his job and dedicates himself fully to the care of his dying wife. That's love and courage and self-sacrifice. It's important. And science is mute. You can't put courage on a computer spreadsheet.

So much of life, what's important in life lies in the realm of the mysterious realm that we cannot see or measure, but that we immediately know about. I'm talking about love and character and soul and purpose. I'm also talking about evil and despair.

This is where faith is important. Faith isn't believing stuff science says isn't so. Faith helps us navigate in the mysterious realms of life.

Let me illustrate. You read the story of the Hebrew people being released from slavery in Egypt and wandering in the desert. It just so happens that you are laid up with a frustrating health problem that keeps you in a wheelchair. It dawns on you that being in a wheelchair resembles the people's

wilderness wanderings. It goes on forever. It's uncomfortable. Something just clicks and the wilderness story enables you to see your own frustration with new eyes.

After my grandfather died we found a device in his workshop that attached to his band saw. It was beautifully crafted with high quality steel. It had moving parts. It was of his design and construction. The problem was we just didn't know what Grandpa did with that gadget.

Think. Life itself is like that device. It is brilliantly crafted and ingenious. And it is not altogether clear what its purpose is. It is on this important question of purpose—our purpose for being here—that faith, that God and Jesus Christ, that church gives us powerful tools to explore.

Atheism. No faith. No God. These dogmas confine life to the measureable. They flatten life to the dimensions of living in whatever way seems correct at the moment.

The second reason for faith is beauty. One of the ideas that seem a part of the new atheism is that religious belief, indeed God himself, is ugly. The religious fanatics who flew airliners into the twin towers are illustrative of the kinds of things people of faith just do. The new atheists lift up violence, ignorance, and judgmentalism as examples of a pervasive ugliness in religion.

I would submit that far more common is that people recognize a beauty in their faith that somehow originates from God. This beauty attracts us to God.

Let me tell you about the quiet philosopher and writer, Philip Hallie, who taught at Wesleyan University. Philip Hallie was fascinated with human cruelty and evil. For years as he studied human cruelty he became more and more depressed at the realization that there was darn little genuine kindness and love out there. But he came across a fascinating story out of the Second World War. It's the story of a French pastor and his congregation who provided haven and safe passage for 2500 Jews escaping the Holocaust. Hallie wrote a book about it: Lest Innocent Blood be Shed. Maybe more importantly Hallie's discovery of true kindness restored his faith that goodness could exist.

Something like this happens with us. There is something about beauty that draws us to God. Take for example Christmas. Have you ever wondered at the fact that there is so much really good music associated with Christmas. Half of my music collection is Christmas music. What's going on? Isn't it that the story of God entering the world in the care of a poor, traveling couple, Mary and Joseph, who must deliver their baby in a cattle stall, is unexplainably exquisite? Composers and

story tellers and decorators, and cooks respond to the beauty of Christ artistically. Beauty begets beauty.

The atheist asks can you prove that Jesus was raised from the dead, that he actually healed people, and that his teachings have been accurately preserved. The answer: "I don't know if I can prove this stuff. The reason I don't know is because I, frankly, never gave it all that much thought. And I didn't give it so much thought because I already decided that I wanted to be a part of the Christian story, the Jesus story, because it is so incredibly beautiful. It's good or morally beautiful. It's intellectually beautiful. God draws us to himself through beauty.

How do we decide who we want to marry? Do we plot qualities on a computer spreadsheet? Let's see, Mary's got top tax bracket parents, good genes for breeding, she's way up on the tennis club waiting list, has a pension and has had her current tetanus booster. Wedding bells! Of course not! Doesn't it really come down to. "I just like her. I think she's beautiful. I want to be with her." I submit the irrational reasons are really the best ones.

Same thing with faith. We just like it. It's the lump in the throat during the singing of "Here I Am Lord." It's the nearness to tears when we commission the college kids to work

with the impoverished children that, I submit is the surest indicator of truth, God's truth that we're going to get.