

Hymns: We Praise You, O God (LBW 241)
For the Splendor of Creation

by
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For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will

restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (Jeremiah: 29:10-14)

Who wouldn't want to know how to find God? To a people suffering in exile and wondering where God had gone, Jeremiah brings the comforting message that God could and would be found once again, provided that the people would seek after God with all their heart. Great news! The path to God is through your heart. But what does this mean?

Certainly Jeremiah is not referring to the small muscular organ that beats inside our chest; he is using heart symbolically here, and we know that the heart normally symbolizes the seat of human emotion, for this idea is deeply embedded



in our language. An emotional person might be described as wearing their heart on their sleeve. A grieving person might be said to be suffering from a broken heart. Someone judged overly compassionate might derogatorily be referred to as a bleeding heart. The idea of the heart as the seat of our emotions is so ingrained in our culture that when we read these words from Jeremiah, we quite naturally understand Jeremiah to be saying that we will find God when we seek after God with all of the emotional energy we can muster.

Now, leave it to a Biblical scholar to come here today and tell you that what you thought this text meant is not what it means at all. But such is the case. The idea of the heart as the seat of the emotions is a specifically Western notion, not one that functioned in the ancient Israelite society of which Jeremiah was a part. In ancient Israel, the seat of the emotions was believed to be, to put it frankly, the guts or the innards of one's body, an idea that makes sense given that emotional distress can create very unpleasant physical symptoms in one's abdomen. For Jeremiah, the heart was not the seat of emotion; rather it was the seat of the mind or the intellect. Jeremiah, then, is telling the people that they will find God when they seek after God with all their intellect. This changes everything.

A little over a year ago, I was at a religion conference and attended a lecture by the noted Protestant theologian John Cobb. The title of his talk was very provocative: "Can the Church Think Again?" Of course by using the word "again," it is clear that in Cobb's estimation, the church is not currently thinking. And this was indeed his point. Somewhere along the line, according to Cobb, an anti-intellectual strand developed within Christianity that is increasingly rendering the church powerless to address the many pressing social concerns that we face today, sweeping concerns such as peace and justice in a fragmented and violent world or the increasing pace of environmental destruction. Christian faith, at least in America, has become increasingly privatized and subordinated to the structures of the global market. It can now be expressed in simple sound bites: Jesus is the Reason for the Season, WWJD, My Boss is a Jewish carpenter, and many others. I fear that Cobb is right, and that the further we divorce faith from thinking, the more the church becomes a mere follower, rather than a leader, of popular culture.

When I was in seminary, my Old Testament professor, Dr. McDaniel, used to like to stand before classes and make the bold proclamation: "I know that when I get to heaven, there will be a big, beautiful, wonderful library there." Students would frequently respond, "But how can you be so confident of what heaven will be like?" Without missing a beat, Dr. McDaniel would look the student right in the eye and declare, "Because if there isn't, it won't be heaven for me!" Dr. McDaniel had a well-earned but often misunderstood reputation. He could often be found at his office late into the evening pouring over arcane volumes like Arabic dictionaries trying to more deeply probe the sense of some Hebrew word in the

Old Testament. Often the insights he gained would be brought up in class the next day, and not infrequently these insights challenged the traditional interpretations of the Bible that most students had been brought up with. Some students expressed the opinion in informal conversations that Dr. McDaniel needed to get a life and get his nose out of his books for awhile and experience God. But as I came to know and appreciate Dr. McDaniel, I came to realize that for him, probing the depths of the language of the Old Testament through rigorous academic study was a deeply confessional exercise. It was in this intellectual setting that he had his experience of the divine. In Dr. McDaniel, there was no separation between faith and deep intellectual reflection, and because of this he became the most influential teacher in my life. He would have made Jeremiah proud.

You see, Paul had taken Paideia. Not only had he taken Paideia, I would venture to guess he got an "A" in it.

Of course, Jeremiah is not the only Biblical writer to recognize the crucial role of intellectualism in faith. In Romans 12:2, Paul writes: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your *minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Notice that Paul does not call us to the renewing of our hearts, but to the renewing of our minds. Paul knows whereof he speaks, since by all accounts, he was an extraordinarily well-educated person, someone who handled with ease the traditions both of Jewish and Greek learning. In Acts 17 we see Paul in Athens, debating intelligently with the Greek philosophers in the Areopagus. You see, Paul had taken Paideia. Not only had he taken Paideia, I would venture to guess he got an "A" in it. And this was not simply some academic exercise. (Note the dual meaning of the word "academic" which can connote something that is "scholarly" but also something of "no practical consequence," or a synonym of "moor.") Paul could never have developed his profound vision of a world unified as the body of Christ apart from deep intellectual reflection since his very language can be so easily traced to the Greek and Jewish intellectual traditions of his day. Faith was not simply a private emotion for Paul, it was an informed vision of a new world order that he risked his life to make a reality.

In more recent times we have been privileged to see what can happen when a deep and abiding Christian faith is informed and given focus by an equally deep intellectual reflection. Consider the following quotation:

I studied philosophy and theology at Boston University under Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold

DeWolf. Both men greatly stimulated my thinking. It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy—the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism's insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.

Who wrote these words? None other than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We gloss over those titles so glibly without reflecting on what they tell us about this extraordinary person. "Reverend" of course attests to King's position as an ordained pastor in the Christian church. But we often forget about the title "Doctor" that attests to King's successful Ph.D. studies at Boston University. By King's own testimonial, it was through the graduate study of philosophy that the vision that guided his "dream" came to its full maturity.

I mention this because I once had a student indicate in a paper that they would never take a course in philosophy because they knew it would destroy their faith. I was sorry to

hear this because short of destroying his faith, the academic study of philosophy helped to form in King a faith with the power and focus to move mountains in America in the 1960s. Of course, King paid the ultimate price for attempting to make his faith-inspired, intellectually-developed vision of social justice a reality. He paid with his life.

Perhaps this is one reason we so easily divorce our religious lives from our intellectual lives. It is a lot safer. If I can have my private emotion-centered faith and you can have yours, we can feel good about our religious lives while we go about our secular lives as agents of the status quo. But faith is not an object to be possessed and personalized: "I have my faith, you have yours and everything is fine." Faith is the human response to the unseen hand of God that is continually trying to push us out of our comfort zones to become agents of positive, structural change in a broken world. But we can't change a world that we don't understand. Faith must derive its vision and focus from learning, from deep intellectual reflection.

Academic study is not the enemy of faith as so many Christians today so passionately believe. Naïvete is the true enemy of faith, when that naïvete provides us with comfort and solace while our neighbor continues to struggle and suffer. If you seek God, you will find God when you seek God with all your mind. The church must learn to think once again. Agora