

Why Am I Here?

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, dear God, our rock and our redeemer.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says, "Everyone . . . who acknowledges me before others I . . . will acknowledge before my father in heaven. But whoever denies me before others I . . . will deny before my father in heaven." Pretty direct.

Okay, I acknowledge God . . . that about wraps it up, thanks for listening – great singing boys . . .

If only it were that simple. In that same reading, Jesus said declaring faith was like sending sheep into a pack of wolves and that those acknowledging God would be brought before kings for punishment and cause family members to betray each other. It was a capital crime to be a Christian in First Century Rome.

It was also risky business to be an Old Testament Jew, and all of today's readings speak of suffering when your faith is acknowledged in the world. The psalmist suffered reproach and shame and Jeremiah cries out that the word of the Lord has become a "reproach and a derision", and Jesus was ultimately crucified. Today, even in this bluest of blue states it certainly isn't fatal to be a Christian, but it can cause anxiety. I don't know about you, but most people are surprised and maybe a little shocked when they find out I believe in God. Just like first century Rome, there are not a lot of social benefits to acknowledging your belief in God in 21st Century Connecticut.

Then why am I doing it today?

Between the ages of two and fourteen I was fully filled with WASP Episcopalianism, (I even wanted to be a priest when I was five - I thought it was pretty cool to work only one day a week.) Once confirmed, however, I did not go to church for the next ten years. But then I met Liz and she wanted a church wedding. . . It's all her fault!

Truth be told, the time away from church was not an angst-filled decade. Unlike the prodigal son it was not ten years of blinding debaucherous pleasure (well, most of it wasn't. . .) During that decade, I was preoccupied with playing football, becoming obsessed with buildings, and discovering - (boys, talk amongst yourselves) – women.

While I was trying to survive architecture school, a crazy love life, and, later, deep sea scallop fishing, I knew that I would ultimately have to deal with a large, looming void in my life. I had virtually grown up in a John Cheever short story. Somehow I knew the same God I prayed to when I was six for peace in my family was still out there.

During this early '80's time I found myself identifying with movie characters such as Kevin Costner's Ray Kinsella in Field of Dreams who had done everything God asked

him to do, including plowing under his corn to make a baseball diamond, and all he wanted to know was “what was in it for him” – only to reconcile with his long dead father minutes later.

Or, more ominously, in Tender Mercies, Robert Duvall’s Mac Sledge, the down-and-out country singer who finally found his voice again (as well as the love of a good woman) only to have his only child die senselessly in a car crash. Having been given his life back, a life he loved was taken away. At the movie’s end he’s left chopping at the earth in his vegetable garden railing at his inability to understand why anything happens -good or bad, and dedicates his life to avoiding hope, only to later find it in the love of his stepson.

If there is anyone who could be expected to give up hope, it would be someone who had lived through the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel says he got hope from his fellow humans, and did not lose his faith in God despite the nightmare he lived through. “I have not lost faith in God.” Wiesel noted “I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I’ve been closer to him for that reason.” I doubt any of us here have had the challenges that he has had – and perhaps that’s why so many people have so little connection with God in their lives.

But how do I react to the polite prejudice of those who think less of me because I acknowledge God? How do I deal with the patronizing of dear friends who treat my belief in God as a quaint tradition, an aesthetic hobby of lovely words and music based on ignorant fear of the unknown? Like Fredo in the movie *The Godfather* I sometimes feel compelled to protest that “I’m smart too!” and defend my faith in God by showing empirical evidence of His existence.

I could try by citing Michael Behe, a molecular biologist who believes that the 127 separate chemical sequences needed for blood to clot are irreducibly complex and defy conventional explanation.

Or I could cite a PBS interview where the director of the entire Genome Project, Dr. Francis Collins, the rare world class scientist who acknowledges God –bases his faith on the wholly illogical reality of a conscience present in almost all humans - the desire to do the right thing, even when the right thing works against our own interest. Like confessing to a crime or returning found money.

I could bring out the heavy artillery of dozens of stats presented by former atheist Professor Patrick Glynn in his book, God: The Evidence –where near death experiences, scientific anomalies and philosophical inconsistencies are woven into a multi-buttressed thesis of faith justification.

But those arguments are based on the very thing that makes all organized religion so easily mocked, rejected, and feared – especially in Blue Land. Despite divine inspiration, every church ever built, the Prayer Book I so dearly love, and every translation of the Bible are human acts -all intended to bring us closer to God, but being human means we

get it wrong a lot of the time. All of our human efforts don't mean much when life hits the fan. Despite science and the rule of law, fear lurks just around the corner for most of us. Marriages fail, jobs are lost, and even a sweet, smart thirteen-year-old choirboy can die of leukemia.

If reason could trump tragedy those who survive life's horrors would be proud like the winners of a Reality TV Show. Taking credit is what we are taught to do and are paid for. But I've never heard the survivors of the Holocaust or a war or alcoholism brag about coming out alive – on the contrary, most are humbled by it. Most know their own survival was due to an unmerited act of grace.

In the face of these seemingly irrefutable factoids, my atheist friends are quick to conclude that just like astrology or aromatherapy, belief in God is a self-fulfilling faith – creating positive results by immersion in a psychological do-loop. But dismissing or accepting God on the basis of deductive reasoning puts faith in our ability to know what's real and what's a rationalization, and human-based reason always falls short.

If you need evidence of our fallibility, realize that about 10 years ago the explosion in computer modeling and new data from the Hubble telescope revealed a small problem. If current theories held, 90% of the universe had gone missing. Rather than admit a rethinking was in order, “Dark Matter” was born –you cannot see it, or measure it by any reality other than its absence, but it is now the working model for fudging our inadequate understanding.

Like Paul Zahl, Dean of Trinity Theological Seminary, I would not be a Christian if the Resurrection had not happened. The distractions of this world are far too compelling to center my life on some dead first century philosopher. My non-religious friends are bemused by my belief in a non-videotaped reality. But I ask you, which is more plausible – Dark Matter or the Resurrection? –or for that matter Weapons of Mass Destruction?

Most of us just live our lives playing by the rules and expect the rules to work for us - but, just as in Tender Mercies, bad things still happen. But all those rules were written by us – the inmates do run the asylum here on earth. Man made rules prevent many tragedies, but they don't prevent death, addiction, or the Holocaust because they are our rules and can only govern what humans can control. Our lives prize control. My life as an architect is spent controlling materials, labor, land, and the creative muse to build shelter. People can try to control things, but the rest of life means more.

Why am I here? Because in the world where rules and logic fail, where “the rubber meets the road” for most of us, I know I have no control, and like Mac Sledge precious little hope of understanding. In the worst times of a troubled childhood, Grace happened. I didn't earn it; I did not design, plan, or create it. I just prayed. The minute I knew that again, and acknowledged God after my ten-year vacation from Him, I felt a palpable presence. Not a voice in a cornfield, but a still, small voice -a wordless voice that I could not and cannot ignore.