

***“Immanence and Transcendence”***

***Acts of the Apostles 17.22–31***

***The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 8 May 2005***

Following on Sharon’s great sermon last week about the metaphors we use to describe God, I’m going to explore two of the ways we experience the divine.

In reading scripture, you may have noticed that sometimes God is described as a removed entity or force whose proportions and abilities are nothing short of cosmic. And at other times, God is described as being as close as our very breath. Sometimes these experiences of God are described right next to each other.

For example the two stories of creation in Genesis. In the first account, God does everything by fiat – just by saying “Let there be,” and voilà! “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.”<sup>1</sup> The second account of creation in Genesis is found in the following chapter, and God is experience as much more hands-on: “Then the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils; and the man became a living being.”<sup>2</sup> These accounts were written by two different authors, each of whom had a different experience of God.

Theologians call these perspectives immanence and transcendence. Immanence is not to be confused with imminent (ready to happen). If you look at the sermon title in your bulletin, you’ll see how it’s spelled differently. In fact, Marcus Borg deliberately mispronounces the word, “im-mawn-ence” to distinguish it. An imminent perception of God reflects an experience of God being right here, not out in space somewhere, but “up close and personal.” A transcendent experience of God is the idea that God is wholly other. See if these contrasting experiences of God make sense to you, in this immanent-transcendent framework:

The here

The beyond

The now

The always

The knowable

The ineffable

One of the interesting aspects of immanence is that scripture often uses the first person singular to describe such experiences of the divine. If you look at the unison prayer we read this morning, which is based on Psalm 139, you’ll see a very personal encounter of God in the first person: “You have searched me and known me.” That certainly isn’t a removed deity who is uninvolved in human affairs. But think, too, of the times we interact with God in the first person plural; the whole of the Lord’s Prayer is in the plural. “Give **us** this day **our** daily bread.”

And then consider the way the apostle Paul describes God in his speech on the Athenian Areopagus in this morning’s text. He is the almighty creator, not able to be contained in shrines and is the Lord of heaven and earth. And he uses a phrase from Greek Stoic poet Erastus: God is the force “in whom we live and move and have our being.”<sup>3</sup> That experience of God is echoed in the great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich, who described God as the ground of being, which might seem pretty intangible to some folks.

So, which way is the “right way” to perceive God? Of course, it’s both! Sometimes it depends on our personal need at the moment. In a moment of grief and mourning, we need a God who is close and knowable, a God who suffers with us. When we are filled with wonder at the glories of creation, we might experience an all-powerful God who “brings

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 1.3–4

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 2.7

<sup>3</sup> Acts 17.28

worlds into being.” Again, these perceptions of God function almost the same way as metaphors do: *they are like signs that point beyond themselves* to the true essence of God.

If you take both immanence and transcendence into account, and think that God is right here, but also out there and everywhere, you are a panentheist. It’s a really good option, but that’s a sermon for another day.



So, if you look at our order of worship, do you see immanence, transcendence, or both? Prayers of the people reflects the immanence of God, and even the pastoral prayer usually tends to do the same. What about the sacrament of baptism? What about communion? (solicit responses)

During Lent, we did a responsive chant of the kyrie. Did you take that as reflecting God’s immanence or God’s transcendence? How do you think we reflect an experience of God when we choir, clergy, liturgists, and acolytes process in at the beginning of the service? Do you notice what Sharon and I wear and how that differs from your average nondenominational church? We’re not wearing business suits, we wear either vestments (like this alb) or we wear academic robes, the traditional garb of Congregational clergy.

Our Taizé service is an interesting blend of immanent and transcendent worship. The extended periods of silence and repeated chants can feel very much in the transcendent mode, but it can also be an affective way to experience the holy.

Our theology also tends to reflect a more transcendent view of God. We tend to pray in the plural; we tend to focus more on collective rather than individual salvation. (Krister Stendahl is great scholar of Paul and the Lutheran bishop of Stockholm and dean of Harvard Divinity School. Somebody asked him what he thought of individual salvation, and his response was, “Individual salvation? Peanuts!”

Likewise if you look at denominational traditions, you find Pentecostals on one end of the spectrum with an almost exclusively immanent view of God and high-church Anglicans on the other with an almost entirely transcendent experience of God.

When I’m designing a service, I try to take into account a balance of the way you all experience God. Sometimes a service will emphasize immanence and others have a distinctly transcendent feel.



I don’t just want to talk about immanence and transcendence, because its also reflected in music, architecture, and art.

Music that reflects the immanence of God isn’t necessarily old or new, loud or soft, andante or presto, sung or instrumental. Even if you don’t think about immanence or transcendence in music, you probably get the feeling right away. When we sing, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” you get words and music that send a message about a perception of God. Yahweh isn’t a warm and fuzzy, tender-hearted God in this hymn.

“God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale” is a bit more immanent, but still has echoes of the great creator God. At the end of the service, we’re going to sing the spiritual, “There Is a Balm in Gilead,” and if that’s not immanent, nothing is. There is also a carol we sing every Christmas Eve that really reflects the immanence of God coming into the world in human form. Let’s sing the first verse of “Silent Night.”

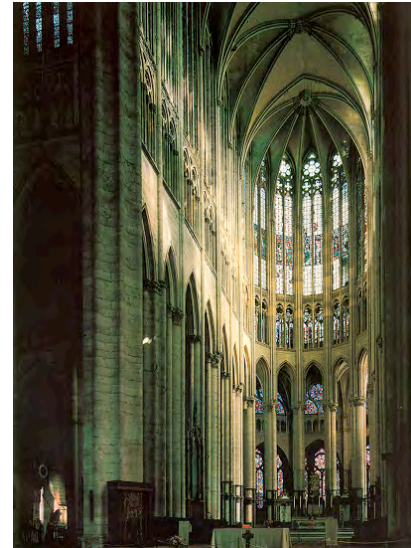
Listen to this and tell me how the composer experienced God and wanted to convey the divine in worship. [Play J.S. Bach’s Toccata in F Major.] It soars! One of the things that the organ can do is to create an experience of transcendent. But, the organ can also reflect a very personal experience of God, as well. The wide array of sounds it can produce is one of the real strengths of the organ, and one of the reasons it is used in churches. Like our

worship itself, the instrument has a huge emotional vocabulary: it's not always jubilant or triumphant. Sometimes it can be reflective and somber. It can be transcendent or immanent.

Two weeks ago, I was up in Dillon and did a workshop with Karen Armstrong and Marty Haugen, a UCC composer from the Twin Cities. There is a wonderful hymn with words by Brian Wren and the tune by Marty, and it's printed in your bulletin. Let's sing "God Remembers."

Even though that's a liturgical setting with a cantor part, did you find it to reflect an immanent vision of the divine? Modern church music isn't all immanent, though. If you were here last fall, you may remember hearing our choir perform this piece. [Play Rutter *Gloria*.]

Worship spaces also say a lot about how a congregation is meant to experience the holy. How would you experience God if you were worshipping in the Cathedral at Chartres or Beauvais? Do those high arches and clerestory windows keep you focused on yourself, or do they draw you upward and beyond? The original labyrinth that you see here is in the Cathedral at Chartres and is becoming a widely used tool for exploring the spiritual journey.



Contrast that with the auditorium-style megachurch. Even though it's easy to feel anonymous in such a space, the emphasis is on individual experience of God, not on an experience of transcendence.

In terms of immanence and transcendence, size doesn't matter. Even here at Plymouth, we have a very warm-feeling sanctuary,

but those high arches say something about how we experience God.

This is the interior of a Congregational church that has been restored at Sturbridge Village in western Massachusetts. How would you experience God worshipping in this setting?



This is an eighteenth-century UCC church in Boston (The Old North Church of "one if by land, two if by sea" fame.) What does its tall spire say to you about how its members see God? Also note that atop the spire is a weathervane, not a cross.

That's how you can tell Episcopal from Congregational churches in New England; early Congregationalists thought the cross too popish and iconographic.

Because the Hebrew Bible forbids making graven images of the divine, there haven't always been paintings or sculpture of God. And those that we see often portray

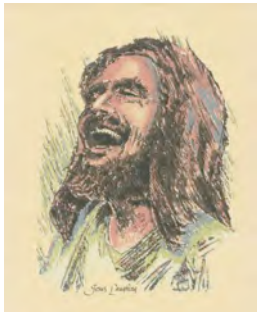




God almost like Zeus: male, old, powerful, and with a long beard. William Blake the English mystic poet painted this image of God as the divine architect creating the universe. It's a pretty transcendent image, isn't it? But Michelangelo tries to connect that far-removed image with humanity in this famous painting on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling. [Then George Burns and Alanis



Morrissette.]



Jesus, of course, is a different case. As God in human form, Jesus the man was very immanent, whereas the cosmic Christ can be quite transcendent. And images of Jesus reflect how people apprehend Jesus: more fully human or more fully divine.

*S.S.S.*

When I'm putting a service together, I spend time thinking of mood and style, immanence and transcendence. For a funeral,



immanence is more appropriate, for a wedding transcendence is usually more fitting. Christmas Eve and Good Friday services tend to reflect God's immanence, while Easter reflects God's transcendence. As I said before, we need a wide emotional vocabulary in the church to reflect not only our human experience, but also our experience of the divine.

When do you need an immanent God? Is it when you are suffering and need sustenance? When you are in need of forgiveness? Is it when you need to be more intentionally aware of God's presence in your life?

When do you feel drawn to a transcendent God? When you acknowledge that you aren't the center of the universe? Is it when you act for justice and peace? Is it when you feel moved to offer God gratitude or praise?

God is bigger than our experience, closer to us than we are to ourselves. Thanks be to God! Amen.