

Monday, April 14: Margaritas at the Mall

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<https://open.spotify.com/track/6EJ24umBSZ6sxmWm8AjHNe?si=3d1f4538d97e4eab>

One of my favorite continuing education events that I've attended recently was a "Seminary for a Day" event sponsored by the United Methodist Church's Northern Virginia District. This event is designed to help pastors dig deep and think theologically – and for a nerd like me, it's just a ton of fun.

In 2024, the speaker for the event was Dr. Andy Root. Dr. Root is a teacher at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis who specializes in so-called "practical theology" – thinking and writing about how God shows up in and through the real-life experience of "doing church."

Dr. Root's presentation was about what it means to live in a world that no longer assumes that – or operates as if – God exists. What does it mean for us, as people of faith, to live in a "secular age" – and how do we learn to relate to a world that finds the story we have to share irrelevant or, at best, as an interesting spiritual "product" that can be consumed to help deal with the difficulties of life in late modern capitalism?

In particular, Dr. Root talked about what it means for all of us to live in a world in which we assume that God is not still speaking and God does not still act. The assumptions of secularism – assumptions that make modern life and science possible – include the assumption that God does not intervene in our world, but that the world is instead a "closed system," in which everything can be explained by – and faced with the tools of – processes and systems internal to the natural world. In other words, our world assumes that everything that happens can be explained without reference to God and, by implication, that God will not (cannot) intervene in our lives to save us from what happens in this world.

In order to help us understand this modern presumption, Dr. Root played us a song called *Margaritas at the Mall*. The song wrestles with the malaise and despair that come with facing life in our modern world. The chorus asks the key question of a secular world:

*How long can a world go on under such a subtle God?
How long can a world go on with no new word from God?
See the plod of the flawed individual looking for a nod from God
Trodding the sod of the visible with no new word from God*

This is not a song by a so-called "Christian artist." The songwriter was not a Christian. He believed the modern world's assumption that God is not speaking, that the world is a totally closed system, that the only hope we have is in us and this world. But, he found this belief thoroughly depressing – if this is all there is, how can we go on? How can we move forward – how can we face life – if there is not a God who speaks? How can we put one foot in front of another if God is, as we have

been told, silent? The songwriter has complaints – and questions – about this world, is longing for hope to lead him out of hopelessness. As he puts it in the second verse, “*What I’d give for an hour with the power on the throne.*” We need God’s help, because we cannot save ourselves. If our only hope is in natural processes and scientific advancement and capitalist promises of never-ending growth, then we are certainly doomed. If all that is true – if God really is silent, if God will not intervene, or if there is no God at all, what can we do? The songwriter’s answer is bleak:

*We’re just drinking margaritas at the mall
That’s what this stuff adds up to after all
Magenta, orange, acid green
Peacock blue and burgundy
Drinking margaritas at the mall*

In other words, in the face of such a hopeless situation, our only hope is to dull the pain, to distract ourselves, to anesthetize ourselves from reality with low-grade alcohol and consumerist escapism. Buy stuff, drink, and try not to notice that the world is hopeless and that God has gone silent.

This song does a great job of naming the problem we face: we live in a world that assumes that God is not at work. We live in a world that assumes that “no one else is showing up to save us,” and that we must solve all the world’s problems on our own. That’s not just how non-Christian people think – even those of us who have been raised and formed within the church have also been trained by our world to believe that “the way the world works” is that God is a nice idea, but that God can’t actually change anything.

But the Good News – the story we tell, and the story we need so desperately these days – is that God has not abandoned us. Our God is not so subtle as this song imagines. Instead, God has invaded our world – becoming one of us in Jesus Christ – and refuses to leave us alone. We think that God is silent – that there’s “no word from God” – but, in fact, God is still speaking, God has spoken definitively in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God’s ultimate word – God’s ultimate message – about who God is and who we are. God speaks to us in Jesus Christ. God speaks to us through the people with whom Christ has identified (the poor, the immigrant, the marginalized, children, the oppressed, the hungry, the persecuted). God speaks to us through the church that Christ has established. God speaks to us through prophets calling for justice and faithful people showing up to do the work of love even when the whole world seems set against them. God speaks to us through people who come together to offer mercy and comfort that is deeper and longer-lasting than margaritas at the mall.

We fear – we have been trained by our world to believe – that God is subtle, that God is silent, that the throne of the universe is empty. But the Good News is that God has entered into this world to prove otherwise – to show us that God is with us and for us in Jesus Christ. God still has something to say. God is still at work in our world. We are not alone. Our hope does not boil down to margaritas at

the mall. Our hope is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, God's word of love and act of intervention in our world. The world is not a closed system. We do not have to save ourselves. God has broken into our world – God is breaking into our world – to rescue us and bring us into new life. Thanks be to God.