

The following sermon contains ideas that are highly controversial in 21st century America. Listener discretion is advised.

Here is one of those ideas. The God who reveals Himself through the Holy Bible claims that He is the only true God. Consider our Old Testament lesson for today from Isaiah 44. There the Lord says: "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come—yes, let him foretell what will come. Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one."

Does that sound like a God who would say, "There's really no difference between religions?" If you're going to be intellectually honest in dealing with the text, you'd have to say "No. The God of the Bible is making exclusive truth claims." The God of the Bible says there is no other rock on which to stand when all other ground is sinking sand. And it's not like this Isaiah passage is an isolated verse.

In John's gospel Jesus famously says: "No one comes to the Father except through me." In the book of Acts, the apostles preach about Jesus when they say: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4: 12)" It is not hard to comprehend: the God of the Bible asks "Is there any God besides me?" And he answers, "No, there is no other rock."

It's not hard to comprehend, but for many people, it's hard to accept. This takes right to the heart of humanity's deepest problem. When God says something we don't like, we are prone to question it, ignore it, and openly defy it. We have the ability to react in all those ways. When we do that, we move God off the throne of our life, and we sit on that throne instead. And it seems like a good idea at the time. You may feel very smart and empowered, but any time a human being moves God off the throne of their life, the consequences are predictable. Eventually, there will be heartache, misery, pain, and finally, isolation and death. And everyone who does it thinks that they will be the one to get away with it. The Bible tells and retells the story of human beings trying to sit on God's throne and messing up their lives in the process. There's got to be a better way to live. And there is.

So often, Christianity gets criticized for being narrow. The claims of Jesus are disputed because He sounds so exclusive. But is being narrow and exclusive such a bad thing?

Think of it this way: Let's say tomorrow that medical scientists announce a one hundred percent cure for all heart disease. It's been tested and proven to work in every case. And the medicine will be available in liquid form, kind of like cough syrup. All you have to do is drink it down and your heart is healthy again! Now, would anybody call that cure narrow? I suppose someone could, but so what? It gives life! You want a triple bypass instead?

It's true: the message of Jesus is exclusive. It is narrow, because it is the cure that works. How is that so? It starts with this thought. Religion works one way, and new life in Jesus works another way, an entirely different way.

Every world religion gives you a list of things to do, and you do the list to earn God's favor. You do the list to improve yourself. You do the list to climb up a ladder to God. You do the list to achieve enlightenment. You do the list to make the world a better place. If you do the list well enough, there might be some rewards for you. But inevitably, people can't do the list very well at all, and it becomes a burden as they try harder. It becomes a terror to their conscience. Or they can be deceived that they are doing the list to perfection.

Only the Christian faith, with its focus on Jesus instead of the self, presents the way of grace; of God giving us what we could never achieve. Only the Christian faith says God climbed down the ladder to come and bless you. Only the Christian faith says that God chose you and adopted you, and you didn't have a thing to do with it except exist. Only the Christian faith says that someone else has paid off the debt that you owed God. Religion says you've got to work hard to get God to love you; the Christian faith says because God loved you, He worked himself to death to have you.

This is the life-saving medicine available to everyone. The way to take that medicine is to trust that Jesus is your substitute. When you take that medicine, you'll discover a love that has no limit, a power for living that never runs dry. It's the cure that enables you to love the God who went to the throne of your life by way of a cross. Don't you want that for yourself? Don't you want that for our world?