

WHO? GOD!

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Texts: Isaiah 40:12-31 and Hebrews 1:1-4

Within these walls, it seems like the answer to a lot of our questions could or should be, “God!” Who created all things? God! Who loves us without end? God! Who is our refuge and our strength in times of trouble? God! What is gray and furry, has a bushy tail, lives in a tree, and eats nuts? It sounds like a squirrel, but since we are in church it must be God. Well, no! Sometimes the answer is not “God!” but just “a squirrel” or “a Fighting Squirrel” for you Mary Baldwin fans. God is not the answer to all our questions, but God is the answer to many of our questions about life and death, creation and salvation, purpose and peace. Who then is this God who is the answer to so many questions that we ask?

Some years ago I asked a confirmation class that question and invited them to draw pictures that represented who God is to them. One boy, who had barely spoken in the class over several weeks, drew a picture of a huge eye with piercing pupils. “I feel that God is always watching me,” he said. Is that how you envision God – an ever-present, all-knowing presence watching your every move like the eye of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*? Or is your God more like Michelangelo’s portrayal on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, an old man with a flowing beard and strong right arm reaching out to humankind? Perhaps you envision a mother with open arms who draws you close, or a wise figure with a sense of humor like Morgan Freeman in “Evan Almighty,” or a presence without form like the Force of Star Wars. Is there any image that can capture who God is to you, or is God simply beyond your description or imagination?

Across the ages, theologians, scholars, artists, poets, saints and every day sinners have tried to shape answers to the question of that divine identity in ways that are meaningful. They have described God as the *Ground of all Being*, the *Creator of all things*, or the *King of Creation*. They have written words that have found their way into songs in our hymnal to or about

the Lord God Almighty,

the Eternal Father, Strong to Save,

the Womb of Life and Source of Being,

the Mighty Fortress,
the Immortal, Invisible, God only wise.

In Scripture we hear *God is Spirit* and *God is love* and *The Lord is my shepherd*. In our creeds we declare belief in “God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,” a God who is one God in three persons. All these images try to describe something of who God is, but all fall short, for we are human creations trying to describe the divine creator; we are limited by the constraints of human language or earthly arts so that whatever image we construct is somehow inadequate to describe who God really is and who God is to us.

When Moses encountered God at the Burning Bush, Moses tried to get God to reveal something of the divine identity when he asked, “Who shall I say is sending me?” From the bush that burned but was not consumed God replied, “Tell them YHWH sent you.” In that response God exceeds the limits of language with a name that defies exact translation but as you should know by now means roughly, *I am who I am* or *I will be who I will be*, but is perhaps best translated simply, *I AM*. I am God; you are not! Our God is the Great I AM who refuses to be limited by our language, our arts, or our imaginations. God is God, a divine mystery who is bigger than we can imagine, more gracious than we deserve, and more loving than any words or images can express.

Perhaps that is why God refuses to be captured in any graven image as the second commandment forbids. God refuses to be limited in any way, shape, or form as all graven images attempt to do. As Isaiah reminded the Hebrew exiles, idols are made by artisans working with metal or wood; idols are shaped by human hands and are wholly dependent upon the skill of the craftsman. They are unworthy of praise as gods when they are no more than artistic creations that cannot even stand on their own. While images in art try to capture some trait of God (like Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel) or call to mind a story (like Orthodox icons) they dare not cross the line from art pointing us **toward** God to idols claiming to **be** God. Who then is this God who cannot be wholly depicted or named or seen, this YHWH, and as importantly, who is this God to you? The questions are not one and the same. Who God is has to do with divine identity, but who God is **to you** has to do with faith. How can we know God without seeing God? How can we trust that God is even there for us anymore?

The exiles in Babylon were facing this crisis of faith in Isaiah's day. They looked around them and God was nowhere to be seen. The temple and Promised Land which were symbols of God's covenant with them were in ruins far beyond their reach. Those who directed their day-to-day lives were not God's chosen king or any prophets or priests of the Lord, but Babylonian captors who denied YHWH's existence. Prayers to the Lord seemed to be falling on deaf ears, if there were any divine ears to hear them at all. The Israelites were struggling to hold on to their faith in the face of what seemed like overwhelming evidence that the God of their ancestors had abandoned them.

Bill Carl has suggested that what the Israelites were suffering from is theological amnesia, something that is still a common malady today.¹ Like the Israelites we forget what God has done for us. When life is lousy and our prayers are not answered immediately, we forget what God has done for us in the past and what God has promised for us in the future; *life is bad and God doesn't seem to care!* When life is good and we don't need God at our beckoned call we forget God all together; *life is great – haven't I done well!* We selectively remember what suits us in the moment and conveniently forget what would divert us from sinful desires or self-righteous pity. We suffer from theological amnesia!

Isaiah's response has echoed in various forms across the ages as he recalls for the people the ways in which God is revealed across the ages – in the wonder of creation and in the specific acts of God. God is revealed to us in what God has done and in what God is doing in our world and in our midst. God's fingerprints are all over the vast expanse of the universe and among the twinkling of stars,
in the glory of a sunset and the thunder of ocean surf,
in the improbable flight of bumblebees and the songs of sparrows,
in the intricate twists of DNA and the simple act of love.

In all these miracles of creation and more, God is revealed to us. Astrophysicists, biologists, chemists, and other scientists help us understand something of how God has made all this happen across billions of years. The Bible doesn't begin to tackle that "how" question, but Scripture is unambiguous in declaring that the moving force in all creation is the One who is the Lord our God.

We may fail to see the signs of God's creative hand at work, take them all for granted, or get so wrapped up in ourselves that we cannot see the glory of God around us, but occasionally we are brought face to face with the wonder of

God's creative hand and are moved to whisper, "Our God is an awesome God!" *"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth!"* says Isaiah. We **have** known, we **have** heard, but we have forgotten! Lift up your eyes, look at the world, and remember: the Lord is the everlasting God who created all things – the One who created you! But it is not only in creation that God is revealed to us.

We see God too in what God does among us and especially in what God did for us in Jesus Christ. It is that story that is told throughout Scripture in God's covenant with Abraham, God's deliverance of the people from Egyptian bondage through Moses, the handing down of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, and the repeated call of the prophets to return to God when God's people strayed.

It is the story told in

the coming of a babe to Bethlehem prompting angels to sing their glorias, the miracles performed by Jesus across Galilee, the profound teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and in his crucifixion and resurrection.

In Jesus, God came among us and revealed in his life, death, and resurrection the depth and breadth of God's love for us. *"He is,"* says the writer to the Hebrews, *"the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being."* Which is to say, if you would know who God is, then look to Jesus. Look to the way he lived with grace, mercy, and expansive love; look to the concern he showed for the last and the least among us; look to the way he gave himself for us, dying on the cross; look to God's power at work in his resurrection, assuring us that God's power is greater even than death; look to his gift of the Spirit, assuring us that we are never alone, never abandoned, never forgotten by God.

In their misery, Isaiah reminded the Israelites of who God was and what God had done for them, not in order to chastise them because they had forgotten, but in order to give them hope – hope to renew their strength so that they might persevere day to day, and one day – soon – return home. We may not be in exile, but we may be little less anxious these days. In a world in which it seems like all the news is bad – wars and rumors of war in Ukraine, the Middle East, and so many other corners of the globe, immense suffering and displacement of people, weather events that are increasingly severe, and political

rhetoric that seems more intent on provoking conflict than solving problems, God may seem strangely absent. Not so, says Jesus. You are not forgotten, never forgotten! As bad as it may seem – in Babylonian exile, under Roman rule, in tumultuous times today, do not give up hope! Dare to believe! When you are discouraged, wait for the Lord! When you are anxious, wait for the Lord! When you are frustrated and angry and can find no hope on the horizon, wait for the Lord! Patiently, hopefully, lovingly, confidently, faithfully – wait for the Lord! For, the Lord our God is still with us, still among us, still stronger than any power in life or in death, and that God, that Lord of all still remembers you – always remembers you! Amen

¹ William J. Carl III, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol.1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor eds., Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008, p.317