

Back to Basics: Who is God?

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Isaiah 42:5-9

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John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, said that there are only two sources of true knowledge: knowledge of God and knowledge of self. All wisdom comes from those two places. H. Richard Niebuhr, 20th century theologian, expanded Calvin's model to three sources. He said true wisdom comes from knowledge of God, knowledge of others, and knowledge of the self. Faith, then, is about a triangle – living life in relation to God and in relation to others, who also are in relation to God. When asked to name the greatest commandments, Jesus said you are to love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself, while elsewhere implying that God also loves your neighbor as God loves you. That's why these three things cannot be separated.

In a series of three sermons, I propose we go back to basics and explore this theological triangle through three questions: Who is God? What is love? Who is my neighbor? Today we're looking at the question "Who is God?" If you want my short answer, here it is: *God is the Holy One described in the Old and New Testaments, most clearly seen in Jesus Christ, the loving source of all life for all time.* Everything else I'm about to say is simply commentary on that statement.

Why is it so hard to speak clearly about God? It's simple: God, by definition, exceeds all our categories in life. Therefore we have no words or concepts capable of capturing the essence of God's infinite, eternal, mysterious being. As Barbara Brown Taylor has said, when we try to describe God, we are like oysters trying to describe a ballerina.¹ Despite all this, we still talk about God – a lot – volume after volume, sermon after sermon. We commonly use two methods to describe God, what's called in Latin a *via negativa* and a *via eminentia*. One method focuses on how God is the deep foundation of life, all those things which we are not – We are finite, God is infinite; We are changeable, God is unchangeable; We have power and potency, God is all-powerful and omnipotent. The other approach takes what we are good at and raises it to the highest degree – We are wise, but God is most wise; We show mercy, but God is all-merciful; We have moments of holiness, but God is Absolute Holiness. In the end, it is as if we've carved out a circle that contains the human experience and basically said that whatever exceeds that circle is what we associate with God. God is not like us in these essential things and is superlatively beyond us in these existential things. Such approaches use a lot of words but ultimately say very little about God.

The truth is if we wish to talk about God, the best approach is to talk about the incarnation of God, Jesus the Christ. In Christ, God entered into our circle so that we need not restrict God to the margins of our life. But as soon as we mention the incarnation, we broach the subject of the Trinity – how God is known in three ways, as

the Creator, the Savior and the Holy Spirit. One Triune God in essence who is known as God over us, in Christ God with us, and through the Holy Spirit God in us.²

The theological language I've just used is likely the best response to the question "Who is God?" But many people aren't ready to hear that language. It sounds too formal, too philosophical and "churchy." So today I'm going to offer you four other insights into the nature and being of God. Think of them as four places where you can stand as you gaze around you and ask "Who is God for me today?"

Place #1: The reason why it is difficult to talk about God is that all the information about God flows outward, not inward. It is like standing in front of a huge fan, blowing straight in your face; and no matter how hard you push forward, you never can get to the source of the wind power. God is not an object we can touch, someone we can directly encounter and fully comprehend. God is Other-Directed, always coming to us and accommodating Godself to our limited abilities so that we might be at peace at last. God comes to us in beauty, in nature, in words, prophets, deep silences, times of tears, and times of joy – blowing back in our faces in countless ways. As soon as we stop chasing after God, we stand still long enough to discover that God has been here all along.

Place #2: There are hundreds of titles you can use to talk about God: God as Mother, Father, Light, Wisdom, Higher Power, Spirit, Womb, Sovereign One, Love Eternal, Great Mystery. But the most common way God is described in the scriptures is as God the Creator. **Isaiah 42:5** – *Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it.* Once you name God as Creator, other voices want to squeeze their way into the conversation – biologists, physicists, Big Bang experts, scientific skeptics of all stripes. They concede that creation is a wonderful thing, but push us to show where God's fingerprints have been left in creation. When the evolutionary biologist J.B.S. Haldane was asked what we can infer about the mind of the Creator from the works of creation, he quipped "[God has] an inordinate fondness for beetles."³ Most debates about science and faith only give headaches instead of spiritual help. For me, the Christian ethicist, Bruce Birch, has given the best short answer to what it means to believe in God as Creator; namely God, the source of all being, is always on the side of life and goodness. In this mixed-up world of life and death, good and evil, God the Creator is the one constantly working on the side of life and good.⁴ I like that.

Place #3: Where should we look for God? Most commonly we look for God up in the sky, in the heavens. That's what it says in the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father who art in heaven." That's where all the "St. Peter at the Pearly Gates" jokes put God, somewhere up on a cloud in heaven. If we don't locate God up above us, the next most common place is to look for God in nature around us. Mary Oliver just published a new collection of poems, in which she often speaks about how God is revealed in nature. In one poem she writes, "All day I watch the sky changing from blue to blue. For You are forever and I am like a single day that passes. All day I think thanks for this world, for the rocks and

the tips of the waves,/ for the tupelos and the fading roses. For the wind. For You are forever and I am like a single day that passes.”⁵

If your questions about who God is include questions about where God is, I'd suggest that God is not so much over and above us as God is most fully located in the space between us and within us. We do not dwell in the skies or deep in the oceans; we are terrestrial creatures, nailed by gravity to this earthly plain. And since we are here and God yearns to be in relationship with us, then this is the place we find God. God whose footsteps echo ours, whose breath is mingled with our breath, whose love and words and deeds are intertwined with all we say and do. Hear again Jesus' simple reminder: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40) What if He's not speaking metaphorically? What if He's speaking literally?

In moving to the final place I'd like to mention today, the last detail will be the most troubling. So far all I've said is non-controversial: God is Other-Directed, coming to meet us every hour of every day. God is the Creator, the eternal one always on the side of life and good. God is best located in the space between us, not sequestered far away in the heavenly stratosphere. These words, by being so easy to digest, mean they are also easy to dismiss or ignore. So as you ask "Who is God?", the fourth place to stand is this: God is the One upon whom we are absolutely dependent. God is the source and center of all being for all time, the One upon whom we are daily, utterly dependent.

Suddenly our egocentric brains and prideful hearts push back. We insist that we are free creatures, able to do quite a lot on our own, thank you very much. We're quite independent and self-sufficient; we can take care of ourselves by our own wits and wisdom and do it pretty well. It's a nice little defiant speech, one we're able to deliver quite convincingly. But listen to the opening speech in **Psalm 139**: *O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.* (Psalm 139:1-6)

That is God – the One who comes to us, the Creator and source of all life, the One near at hand, hemming us in behind and before, the One upon whom we are absolutely dependent. Before you push back on this theology, think for a moment: How would you live if this were true, if you knew without a shadow of doubt that God was the source of your daily existence, acquainted with all your ways, aware of every word before it's on your tongue and every thought before it's in your head? I'd wager you'd be a bit more mindful of God each day. Something in us would have to change in order to live in this way. Some level of egocentrism, of self-centeredness would have to be given up, surrendered, (dare I say it?) would have to die in us. Yet didn't I read somewhere that "those who lose their life for my sake will find it"? (Mt 10:39) And if this seems too hard, doesn't it say somewhere else that "my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness"? (2 Cor 12:9)

If asked, Who is God?, here's my reply: God is the Holy One described in the Old and New Testaments, most clearly seen in Jesus Christ, the loving source of all life for all time. God is Other-Directed Love, the Creator and Sustainer, the One best experienced in our relationships with loved ones and those we find it hard to love. And yes, God is the One upon whom we are utterly dependent. In coming to believe that, we also come to understand that – perhaps as seen in a mirror dimly, but glimpsed nonetheless. As you seek out places in which to stand and ask “Who is God?” know that God is both in the asking and the answering. For in life and in death we belong to God. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor (quoting Robert Farrar Capon), *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 1996, p. 31.

² Shirley Guthrie (quoting George Hendry), *Christian Doctrine*, p. 102.

³ Simon Conway Morris (quoting J.B.S. Haldane), *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*, p. 330.

⁴ Bruce Birch, *The Bible & Ethics in Christian Life*, p. 107.

⁵ Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, “*More Beautiful than the Honey Locust Tree Are the Words of the Lord*”, p. 32.

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