

Who is This, Anyway?

23 April 2006

Bible passage: Exodus 3:13-15 (*The Message*)

Then Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the People of Israel, and I tell them, ‘The God of your ancestors sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ What do I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I-AM-WHO-I-AM. Tell the People of Israel, ‘I-AM sent me to you.’”

God continued with Moses, “This is what you’re to say to the Israelites: ‘God, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob sent me to you.’ This has always been my name, and this is how I always will be known.”

Sermon nugget: Who is God, and what is God like?

Some of you probably remember, as I do, the old Bill Cosby recording of the story of Noah. According to this humorous rendition, Noah hears a voice telling him to build an ark, and Noah listens for a while, and then asks the question, “Who is this, anyway?”

Well, in a very real sense, that’s a piece of what’s going on in our Bible passage for today. You’ve already heard part of it from the clip from *Prince of Egypt*, and our version from *The Message* reads like this:

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This experience occurs after God has spoken to Moses and told him that he is to be the one to rescue the people of Israel from the cruelty of their bondage in Egypt. Moses figures that, if he is to go to the King of Egypt, as God instructs, then he probably should be able to tell the king and the people who has sent him on this mission. Therefore, he asks God’s name. Our version translates God’s answer as “I-AM-WHO-I-AM,” but others put it as “I-WILL-BE-WHO-I-WILL-BE.” It is from that rendering that the Hebrew name “Yahweh” comes. Actually, Hebrew did not use vowels, so the common spelling was “YHWH.” We sometimes call that Jehovah.

What, you may ask, is really going on with this rather strange response? Most scholars do not see it as an evasive response, but rather as an expression that God is the one who is, has been, and will always be. It reflects that God is the one

who is in the past, the present and the future; God is. Many understand this declaration as signifying that God is known in the dynamic interaction between God and humans, and in our active response to God.

Maybe this understanding of God is best captured in the words of a child. Eight-year-old Danny Button of Chula Vista, California, tried to explain God with these words: “If you don’t believe in God, besides being an atheist, you will be very lonely, because your parents can’t go everywhere with you, like to camp, but God can. It is good to know God’s around you when you’re scared, in the dark, or when you can’t swim and you get thrown into real deep water by big kids.” Danny seems right on target, because he understands that God is everywhere and in every time. That’s what our Bible passage is trying to express, I think.

When we ask the question, “Who is this?” we’re really asking what God is like. It would be interesting, I think for us to share our picture or images of who God is and what God is like, just as our kids are. Some of us adults might have some difficulty articulating that very clearly, although my guess is that most of us have some image in our mind of who God is and what God is like.

Unfortunately, I know that not all those images are positive and helpful. I have been in conversation with folks who admit that they have a very negative image of God—one that is of an angry, wrathful, vengeful, and even whimsical being. They often talk about the guilt and shame they have carried because of feeling as though they are not good enough, or worthy enough to be accepted by God.

I have to tell you that when I hear things like that, I’m both sad and angry, because my experience of God is nothing like that. It frustrates me that some of us have been taught to fear God, believing that God will strike us dead if we do something wrong. Frankly, it seems to me that those kinds of perceptions of God are more a reflection of the ones saying them than they are of the true essence of who God is.

I also have to admit that even trying to talk about who God is or what God is like is foolish on my part, and yours. After all, how could any of us even begin to explain God, or describe God? None of us is equipped or capable of capturing the essence of that which is infinite with our finite minds. Furthermore, language is always inadequate when it comes to trying to express God, or even our experiences of God.

Nonetheless, for centuries, people have tried to understand God, and to help others understand God. If we look through the Bible, we’ll find all sorts of images and words used to describe who God is. For instance, Jesus called God “Abba,” which would most correctly be translated as “Daddy.” That’s certainly not meant to indicate God’s gender, but rather to

imply the close, intimate relationship that Jesus had with God, and that we, too, can have.

If we look further, we'll also find that Jesus used the analogy of a hen gathering her chicks under her wing to help us understand what God is like. This is a feminine expression on the nature and essence of a God who nurtures and cares for us, of one who shields and protects us. There are many different passages that describe God in many different ways, as shepherd, father, mother, midwife, a woman in labor, an eagle, helper/deliver, light, sun, shield, creator, refuge, king, fire, word, spirit, potter, educator, water, love, friend, dove.

The ways in which Bible writers, theologians, philosophers, and even ordinary people like you and me have depicted God are endless. For example, Margaret Atwood has written, "God is not the voice in the whirlwind; God is the whirlwind." The Catholic priest and author, Henri Nouwen, once said, "The unfathomable mystery of God is that God is a Lover who wants to be loved."

Bearing in mind what Denise Lardner Carmody said... "God is always more unlike what we say than like it," I'd like to share a few of my own thoughts from my own experience about who I think God is and what God is like. Each of us has to ponder this on our own, but I'll share with you some of how I understand God, if we can use such a word.

Theologian Sallie McFague refers to God as Lover, and that's one that resonates with me. God as Lover is a radical and powerful image for me, because it means being affirmed, accepted and loved just as we are. I don't know about you, but this is the image of God I most want to embrace. God as Lover is really what I once heard a five-year-old call "the huggy God." I like that because I think it captures what it might be like to feel loved in the best hug we've ever, ever experienced. That would be an overwhelming and profound experience, and honestly, that's my most common experience of God's presence in my life—the sense of being totally loved, when there are absolutely no grounds for it.

Another image of God that I have is that of God as Creator. That's how the Bible starts, with the words, "In the beginning, God.." By that, I understand that God was before anything else. God is the starter-upper, the beginning point, creative energy, and the source of all life and all possibility. What I think that means is that every time we get a new idea, or have an insight into a plaguing problem, any time something new or fresh comes into being, that's the Creator God at work.

Yet another way I'd describe God is that of Seeker, because I believe that God is always seeking us out, trying to connect with us. Maybe a better term would be "Relater," if there is such a word. That's because I find God to be a God of relationship, the One who desires connection with us, and will go to all extents to help that connection come into being.

For me, what is immensely clear is that God is not some distant being a remote deity, "out there" somewhere. Rather, God is very much a part of who we are and with how we live. The spirit of God is as close to us as the air we breathe—the

air that's all around us and gives us life. The theologian Paul Tillich suggested that we must abandon the image of an external God who is far removed from us, and replace that image with one of God as the inner center and ground of our being.

Those are some of my thoughts about who God is, and what God is like. In some ways, I feel a little like a little girl who was playing on the beach. She went back and forth from the water to the shore, and with each trip, she carried a little shovel of water and emptied it in the little hole she had dug. Someone asked her what she was doing, and she answered that she was trying to empty the ocean into this little hole. I guess I'm trying to do the same thing—crowd this Infinite God into my finite mind. Sebastian Moore was undoubtedly right when he said, "God is the one reality that cannot be defined."

Even though people have been trying for ages to do what I have been trying to do, I have to say to you that, ultimately, none of my thoughts really matter. What really counts is the experience you and I have of the holy in our own lives.

Let me share an experience that I may have shared with you before. It was of something that happened several years ago at a gathering of clergywomen. We were in the midst of a Native American worship service, and in the course of that service, two women walked around the room, one of them carrying a bowl that had something burning in it. The other carried a feather, which she was waving, sending the smoke wafting into the air, around and over us.

As this was happening, someone began singing a song that begins, "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me... spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me." My experience of God took on a whole new dimension in that moment. God was not external "out there," but rather in and around me. I'm not sure I have ever felt so connected with God, before or since.

I wonder if experiencing God isn't a little like listening to our favorite music played through a magnificent sound system. We can't touch or see it, and it can't be confined to one place. It permeates everything. It's very real, and touches us at the core of our being. I wonder if that isn't more what God is like.

Well, there you have it, a few thoughts of my thoughts on who this God is—a God I believe to be both big enough and small enough. What are your thoughts?

Closing:

I really like what Carlo Carretto said about his experience of God when he said, "Human experience is already experience of God. Our journey on earth is already a journey to heaven. Seeing a sunrise or a flower is already seeing God."

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us experiences the God who goes before us, behind us, above us, below us, within us. We are a part of God.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.