

What do we mean when we say “God?”

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 3:13-14: Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I am who I am.”^[1]

Psalm 139:1: ¹O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

1 John 4:8: ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

What I want to ask today is *what do we mean when we say the word “God?”*

I realized it might be a good idea to talk about this after stepping outside of the NDPC bubble on sabbatical. Traveling in Scotland, hearing bits and pieces in the media about what some American evangelicals are saying about God, even talking to my kids after they got back from the youth conference at Montreat, I remembered that outside of this room, God is actually a very popular thing to talk about. The world is full of *different notions about God*. And some of these are funny, and some are wise, and some are novel, and some are ancient, and some ideas about God that are out there in the world are toxic.

I was finally provoked into this sermon by a comedian on Instagram...

(show Pete Holmes video clip)

It's not that I don't want to get your information about God from the road manager of AC/DC or even Pete Holmes, who seems like a decent guy, but it did make me decide that we should at least spend a little time talking about what we mean when we say “God.” This may also feel like comedy because I'm going to do it in about 12 minutes.

What is God? Is God a thing? A person? A force? The fact that this isn't immediately clear shows how strange this conversation is. Sometimes it's easier for people to say what we're pretty sure God is *not*. What is the dominant cultural image of God?

(show Michaelangelo image): An old, bearded white man who lives in heaven. Is this God?

It's *an* image of God. But poke at the idea that God is an old dude hanging out on a cloud, and you realize this may be a façade.

- 1) Why would God look old? Does God age?
- 2) Why is God white? If God looked like most people made in God's image, God would be brown.
- 3) Would God be a man? God doesn't need sex organs for reproduction; God almost certainly doesn't have a culturally-specific gender identity.
- 4) God may very well not look like a person at all.

Really fast, we begin to realize that **all images for God are imprecise**. All language we have for God is non-specific. It's metaphor. What's a metaphor? It's using one thing to describe another thing. God, Scripture says, can't be seen. So the Scripture uses hundreds of metaphors to talk about God. We could be here all day listing metaphors.

- God is a Father... God is a Mother who will not leave her nursing child
- a Shepherd who takes care of the sheep, a rock, a fire, a light.
- Jesus is Christ (that's a metaphor); so is Lord, Savior, Bread, Way, Living Water
- Holy Spirit is wind, fire, tongues.

We have a superabundance of images and metaphors for God because God looks different to different people. God appears to us differently in different contexts. It's almost like God is a multiplicity, rather than a singularity--which, if we wanted to talk about the Trinity (which I won't even get into today) God is.

The reason why I think this is important--to realize the persistent, beguiling diversity of God, is that it should keep us from relying too heavily on any one God image. We need the whole witness of God's people to get even close to God's full image. This is why diversity matters to the life of the church.

And even if we were to get something like a full witness of God's people, we're still left with the fact that our language--all of the images--we have for God are "imprecise." God is elusive and this isn't a bug--it's a feature. God will not be pinned down like a frog in a high school biology class. Moses asks God, "tell me your name so that when you are freeing your people from pharaoh, they will know who you are." God says to Moses... four letters that can't be pronounced. Scripture translates this name as, "I AM." A better translation is "I AM the one who is becoming." An even better translation is, "I won't be named, because when you people name things you think you can control them, and I won't be controlled by you."

The elusiveness, the hiddenness, of God is an invitation to you. Come, be a part of the community of metaphor-makers. Dig into your own experience of holiness; find the metaphors that describe the God you know. Be imaginative. Be serious. Be playful. You can't get any weirder than what's already in Scripture. It's a great adventure to try and describe God--to put words to our own experience of divine presence--and to do it in a way that others can hear and recognize it.

The second thing I want to say about what we mean when we say "God"--grows directly out of the first. While it's true that each of us has to plumb into our own lived experience to describe God, always beware of the persistent temptation to make God in our own image. The greatest modern critic of religion is this guy, Ludwig Feuerbach. (*show picture*). Feuerbach began by studying theology, but he gave it up after he had an epiphany. He basically said, "what we are calling God is really a projection of our own mind. We have basically made up this God character, and we put all these different attributes onto God that tell us more about us than they do about any so-called 'God.'"

Feuerbach could be right. It could be that when we talk about our “experience” of God, what we’re really doing is fishing around in our own sub-conscious mind and creating a divine being with the attributes that we wish God had if God were real... attributes that we wish we could have. We won’t get deep into the nuances of Feuerbach today, but it’s safe to say that too few churches and too few followers of Jesus take him seriously enough. Is there a test? The writer Anne Lamott says, “you can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

Ask yourself, regularly, “have I curated my own bespoke God?” Does God drive an EV? Own weapons and practice self-defense? Support free markets or favor re-distribution? Is God gender non-conforming? Will God condemn me to hell if I don’t go to church or if I don’t share my resources with the poor? Does God grant wishes--can I “name it and claim it”? , or does God ever ask me to sacrifice? Is God absent in when I’m suffering or is God present in my suffering? This is the work of theology and no, you can’t ignore it.

The other thing that should be clear from Feuerbach’s critique is that if we are to have any hope of knowing God, we’ve got to know ourselves. How else will we differentiate God from wish-fulfillment? To open your life to God, to say, “I believe in God” is also to be engaged in work that opens your biases, explores your hidden motives, and interrogates your idolatries.

A beautiful thing happens when you go inside yourself. We saw this when we spent time with Howard Thurman this fall. When you drop down into yourself, you will very likely, at some point, encounter a presence that is not you. This presence is benevolent. The Psalmist says: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me.” This presence knows us better than we know ourselves. We do not know God, yet we are known by God.

This feeling of being known leads to the last thing we should say about what we mean when we say “God”: **God is love**. As mysterious, and elusive and unnamable as God is, one thing we say about God without hesitation or qualification is that God is love. God is the bond between parent and child. God is the trust that joins good friends. God is the transcendence of parochial differences--overcoming enmity, rivalry, revenge--God is the expression of concern and care for another living being. God does not count the cost of love; God is not equality, not this-for-that. God is going the second mile. God is giving up your coat to the person who has none. God is laying down your life for someone else.

The writer of 1st John says, “the person who doesn’t love doesn’t know God.” God is not a cognitive reality; God is an embodied relational activity. Maybe we could say that we don’t study God, we perform God. God exists; but not as a concept in our heads, but in the spaces between two living beings when they vibrate with affection.

The next time you hear people talking about God--your evangelical neighbor, or a comedian, or the road manager for AC/DC--you can join in. You can say, "Oh, God... you mean

- The One we know through a brilliant, diverse, ever-evolving set of imprecise metaphors, yet who is never fully known and controlled by human thought?
- The One whom we are always misrepresenting by projecting our own un-reflected ego needs and calling it God, who nevertheless inhabits the deepest parts of our being and gently calls us into deeper levels of self-awareness and integrity?
- Oh... you mean the God who is here, right now, between us, drawing us into an inescapable bond of mutual belonging?