

November 12
The God I Have Come To Know
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Exodus 3:13-14 (The Message)

Then Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the People of Israel and I tell them, 'The God of your fathers 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.'"

Who is God to you?

Can you create a visual image in your minds eye?

What does your God look like?

A man with white beard and flowing robes sitting on a throne

A warrior on a great white steed going into battle

A mother cradling a child

Sunrise/sunset — Mountains/ocean

Something else

What does your God look like?

I would think that how you see God would influence this next question.

What is the role or function of your God?

Dispense judgement

Perform miracles

Be present

Why am I asking you this — because I have come to understand that many of us have many different visions — understandings about who God is and what God is supposed to do.

My understanding of God has changed over the years (as I bet it has for most of you).

When I was a little boy, I saw God in really two ways

- 1) Someone who was gonna get me if I did bad
- 2) Someone who I could call on to get me out of trouble and fix my problems.

In talking with many of you — I sense that many of you understood God in much the same way — and some of you still understand God that way.

And I am not trying to suggest that either of those understanding is wrong. I think they both have had their place within the life of the Christian tradition.

The Gallup poll, has consistently disclosed that approximately 95 percent of the American public says that they believe in God.

Now I will be honest with you — it's never been completely clear to me what that might mean. Because all I have to do is look around me and it is clear that God is not the central passion of 95 percent of our population.

How you could believe in God without God being your central passion just sort of boggles the mind in a way.

Another reason for not being sure what these polls mean — comes from the results of a national poll taken shortly before Christmas a number of years ago. In this poll, 64 percent of Americans said they are absolutely sure that Jesus was born of a virgin. Now, that's more people than there are Christians in this country. Not only that — and it will sound like I'm getting it mixed up, but I'm not — seventy-five percent in that same poll were absolutely sure that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Seventy-three percent were absolutely sure that he really existed.

In other words, more people are absolutely sure that Jesus was born in Bethlehem than are sure that he ever existed. So it's always hard to know what to make of those polls.

But by way of contrast, the percentage of people in England saying that they believe in God is much, much lower. According to Karen Armstrong the great British scholar, the number that believe in God is 35 percent. And, in some of the countries of northern Europe that figure is even lower.

I struggled for a long time on how to define God. And it wasn't until I discovered Paul Tillich, who was probably the greatest protestant theologian of the last century, that I had an answer. Paul Tillich defined God as “the ground of all being.”

Tillich once wrote:

*"God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence.
Therefore to argue that God exists is to deny him."*

That quotation summarizes his conception of God.

Tillich does not think of God as *a* being which exists in time and space, because that constrains God, and makes God finite. But all beings are finite, and if God is the Creator of all beings, God cannot logically be finite since a finite being cannot be the sustainer of an infinite variety of finite things. Thus God is considered beyond being, above finitude and limitation, the power or essence of being itself.

Tillich's point is that the word "God" does not refer to a particular existing being; rather, the word "God" is the most common Western name for ultimate reality, for "is-ness," if you will.

God is the name I use for the "more." Thomas Keating, the Benedictine teacher, when he's speaking abstractly about God, refers to God as "is-ness without limitation."

God or the Sacred is beyond all words, beyond all language. Our language can only point to God.

For me, the problem is, once you have named God, set God off from the rest of reality by categorizing God with a name, you are no longer talking about God. A contemporary thinker named Beldon Lane, in his book about spiritual theology called *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* says this about the language about God:

"We must speak, yet we cannot speak without stammering. Language about God stalks the borderland of the limits of language, using speech to confound speech, speaking in riddles, calling us to humble silence in the presence of mystery."

The God that I have come to know is God as the encompassing Spirit, the One who is all around us, as well as within us, who pervades the whole universe. The universe is shot through with this non-material More. Or to use language from the New Testament,

"God is the One in whom we live and move and have our being."

I know that this is confusing. But I think it is important. Listen to how the language works. Where are we in relationship to God?

We are in God.

We live within God.

We move within God.

We have our being within God.
 So God is the One who is all around us and within us, the One in whom the universe is, even as God is more than the universe, the mystery with a capital M who is beyond all names, even as we name this sacred Mystery in our various ways.

The God that I have come to know is a God that speaks to me. Now, I'm not thinking of oral revelation here or aural revelation, for that matter, or divine dictation. But I think God speaks to us sometimes dramatically in visions, less dramatically in some of our dreams or in internal proddings or leading.

The contemporary Christian writer Frederick Bueckner, has a marvelous way of putting this. Bueckner writes,

"Listen to your life. Listen to what happens to you, because it is through what happens to you that God speaks."

Now, don't get weird with this. It doesn't mean that everything that happens to you is the direct will of God. It doesn't mean that at all. And Bueckner continues,

"It's in language that's not always easy to decipher, but it's there, powerfully, memorably, unforgettably."

Is your God primarily concerned about personal virtue?
 Is your God primarily a law giver and judge, somebody you need to measure up to?
 Is your God a God of requirements and rewards?
 Is your God primarily a God of heaven and hell?
 Is your God mostly nice? Is your God mostly indifferent?
 Is your God a God of compassion?
 Is your God a God of social justice?

The point being, that it makes a difference how you see the character of God, for how you see the character of God will very much shape what you think the religious life, the Christian life, is about.

The God that I have come to know is the God of love and justice.

This way of seeing God's character appears frequently in the Bible. We see it in the prophets of Old Testament; Hosea, for example, speaking in the name of God, uses the language of love and seduction and marriage. Hosea, in the name of God, says to Israel,

"I will allure you and bring you into the wilderness and speak tenderly to you. I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in

righteousness and in justice and in steadfast love. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness.”

Isaiah 43 contains these wonderful words in which the prophet, again speaking this time to the Jewish people in exile, says in the name of God, “You are precious in my eyes and honored, and I love you.”

The God that I have come to know is not just the God of love, but also the God of justice.

For God loves everybody and everything, including the non-human world. It's not just that God loves me or you or us, but everybody, and the non-human world as well. To take this God seriously means to take justice seriously and to be aware that prolonged injustice has consequences. Societies collapse when they are marked by prolonged injustice. I don't think God reaches down to do it, but I think that's built into the very fabric of things.

What image of the Christian life goes with this way of seeing God's character?

Well, if you take the God of love and justice seriously, then the Christian life is about a relationship with God, about a relationship with the one who has loved us from the beginning, and that relationship transforms us into more compassionate beings and ideally into people filled with a passion for justice. In many ways, responding to God means participating in the passion of God, and the passion of God is justice.

The Christian message is an invitation to enter into an intentional and deepening relationship with God.

What's at stake in the whole question of God's character is your image of the Christian life.

Is Christianity about requirements? Here is what you must do to be saved.

Or is it about relationship and transformation? Here's the path. Follow it.

Both of these involved imperatives. But one is a threat, and the other is an invitation.