

God Is: Mystery

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Who is God?

This is the question I have been wrestling with in our current Sermon Series.

A lot of our language talks about what God does. God heals. God loves. But, I realized recently that we don't often talk about just who God is.

And when we do talk about who God is, a lot of the traditional images we have leave us wanting for something more. The old bearded man up in the clouds is just not holding up. But what does that leave us with?

How can we imagine who God is?

Last week, I offered one new image from theologian Paul Tillich. God is Ground. God is the ground of all being, God is the soil in which all that is is rooted. God does not just love us, God is the love. God is not somewhere way out there beyond us, but rather we live in God as the fish live in the sea.

As the apostle Paul writes: “In God we live and move and have our being.”

This week I want to turn to another image of God.

God is a mystery.

God is a name that is beyond all names. God cannot be held captive in any one of our images. God overflows the boundaries that we try to put around God. The nature of God is a mystery deeper than you or I can ever understand. The fullness of God is so different than anything you and I see or touch, that our language is inadequate to describe God.

So this week I suppose that instead of offering you a new image, as such, I am offering instead the reminder that whatever images we have of God, they only tell part of the story. The images give us glimpses of who God is, but just that, glimpses.

Remembering the expansive mystery of God is an invitation for us to not hold onto any one image too fervently.

The mystery of God challenges us not let our imaginations to become imprisoned by a narrow image of God.

And of all the images of God that I think the church through history has held too fervently, and too narrowly to, is the image of God as a man.

So many of our images of God are male. Father, Son, King, Lord. And it has long been the practice of the church to refer to God with male pronouns.

And this has the unfortunate consequence of cementing men and madness at the top of earthly systems too.

Now this was actually all news to me as I grew up and made my way out into the world, because the Congregational Church I grew up in had a very firmly-held practice of never referring to God by any gender-specific term. A practice called 'inclusive language'

Our doxology ended, Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost.

I was baptized in the name of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

We used the a hymnal which contained no male God imagery.

And they even went so far as to change words in pieces the choir sang, and our music director got very skilled at reworking the old songs into our modern commitments.

That's the environment in which my faith was formed. And so you may notice that I tend to not refer to God as He, or Father, that often. Mostly because that is what is natural to me.

But as the years have gone along, and I have been a part of many different churches. My thinking has evolved a little bit.

I am no longer such a fan of the wooden rules of inclusive language. Which would deprive us of such things as the Hallelujah Chorus' "King of Kings," not to mention most Christmas music.

Not to mention all the rich feminine images of God from scripture, like womb or mercy, that we miss if we decide to go gender neutral.

Instead, I am coming to appreciate what is often called "expansive language." Which is the intentional practice of using such a diversity of images and language in our life together that no one one image would ever become too fixed in our imaginations.

So that, for example, as often as we thought of God as a Father, we would think of God as our Mother.

Not because Mother is a better image than Father, but because if we can imagine God as both Mother and Father, I think that will get us closer to the mystery, than if we were to just have one image or the other.

Expansive.

That is how we reach toward a mystery.

Expand our images. Expand our language. Expand our imagination.

The mystery of God is always stretching us outward. It is always drawing us beyond the horizon, through the boundaries we thought were fixed.

God is a mystery. God is a name which is beyond any name.

Now the words that Job's friend offered might not have been offered with the best timing. But he speaks something so deeply true, challenging his friend:

‘Can you find out the deep things of God?

Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?

It is higher than heaven—what can you do?

Deeper than the depths—what can you know?

One of the most coveted things in the Scientific Community is observing time on the Hubble Space Telescope, which orbits the Earth peering out at the cosmos.

Scientists with burning questions often wait years for the opportunity to turn the telescope toward their chosen star or celestial body.

Which is why so many, found it so odd, when in 1995 astronomer Bob Williams used his time with the telescope to look at— nothing.

Just the empty space, between the four stars that define the bowl of the big dipper.

For 100 hours, observing time other scientists have said they would kill for, the telescope pointed at a small patch of empty black space.

When the lens closed, and the image rendered, people were amazed.

In a small patch of empty black space, no bigger than you or I could cover with our thumb, Hubble discovered 3,000 previously unseen, galaxies.

3,000 Galaxies.

Each galaxy containing over a billion stars.

That's 3 trillion stars. Now 3 trillion is a very hard number to wrap our heads around, but one way that can be helpful is to think of it this way.

Three trillion seconds is about 100,000 years.

3 Trillion stars. In a bit of space, that to you and me and everyone else who ever looked, looks completely empty.

On the very darkest night, with a clear horizon, if you looked up to the sky, you might be able to see about 4,000 stars.

Our tradition is full of images of God. Full of ideas about who God is. What God does. And we are imagining new ones day by day.

Our lives are punctuated by encounters with this God. Experiences of holiness and transcendence.

And indeed the tapestry of those images and experiences weave the most stunning sky you or I have ever glimpsed. Splashed with light, shimmering, flickering, twinkling, bright.

Held together, all that we know of God, is the most beautiful thing we might know. And indeed, it may be beauty enough.

But it would be the height of foolish pride to face that awesome array and think that we are seeing all there is. For there are whole galaxies of love, mercy, and hope shining in fields too deep for us to see. And we strive to feel the comfort of simply knowing they are there.

And so it is with this word 'God.'

This word we sing, and speak, and pray, day after day.

We use this word to try to touch something that none of us could ever fully understand.

We use this word, and so many other names and words, to try to touch a mystery.

To brush up against a vastness, a vastness beyond a glimmer which is already almost too beautiful to behold.

For whatever the strongest love is you can imagine, God is in that love, and God's love is stronger still.

For however much hope you can hold for our world, God holds that hope and God's hope is greater still.

For whatever grief you know in the face of loss, God sits in your grief and God's grieving is deeper still.

For whatever dream you dream, God's dream is surely wilder.

The mystery of God is in fact so unspeakably great, so unimaginably vast, so transcendent.

That you might even reach the end of a Sermon, which has been about that and nothing else.

And realize that you've scarcely even begun.