

Sermon Title: *This is my Name forever*

**Exodus 3:11-15** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?” God answered, “I will be with you, and this is the sign by which you will know that it is I who have sent you: after you bring my people out of Egypt, you will all worship at this very mountain.”

“But,” Moses said, “when I go to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ if they ask me, ‘What is this god’s name?’ what am I to tell them?” God replied, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you will tell the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God spoke further to Moses: “Tell the children of Israel: Yahweh, the ‘I AM,’ the God of your ancestors, the God of Sarah and Abraham, of Rebecca and Isaac, of Leah and Rachel and Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my Name forever; this is the name you are to remember for all generations.

**1 Kings 19:9-13** (*NRSV*)

<sup>9</sup>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”<sup>10</sup>He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”<sup>11</sup>He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake;<sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

**For Reflection:**

So when we talk about God we’re using language, language that employs a vast array of words and phrases and forms to describe a reality that is fundamentally beyond words and phrases and forms.

-Rob Bell, in *What we Talk About When We Talk About God*

The author of 1 Kings describes Elijah's encounter with God in a cave, when the prophet is at perhaps his lowest point – Here the God who created the heavens and the earth comes not in Gayle-Force winds, or an earthquake, or a raging fire – but comes in the sound of sheer silence.

And in the story from Exodus, we get another glimpse of God, when Moses meets God in paradoxical bush that is on fire but does not burn-up. Moses asks God, “What is your name?” To which God replies, “I AM WHO I AM.” Or, “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE,” or even, “I AM BECOMING WHO I AM BECOMING” – depending on your translation and thoughts of scholars.

Much later Moses has another encounter with God, where he is told to go and hide between the cracks of some rocks because God is about to pass by and Moses will get to see God's back. Of this encounter, some of the ancient rabbis have said, “perhaps the best we get is a glimpse of where God has just been.”

The Exodus story also envisions God as both a great cloud and a great pillar of fire – the Cloud of Presence that leads the people by day, the Pillar of Fire by night.

The Prophet Isaiah refers to God as the Great Potter, always shaping and working – always trying to smooth and form us who continually dry out, becoming less and less malleable.

Jesus gives us a different picture of God, at least that is how it often feels – Jesus speaks of God in numerous ways. One Dominant way Jesus refers to God is as his Heavenly Father – a seemingly much softer and more relatable image than we get in much of the Old Testament. Later Jesus compares God to a Mother Hen, who broods over Her chicks; who gathers them in for protection.



I think if we just meditated on this image of God, that would be enough for today.

These are just a few ways the writers of the Bible seek to describe who God is – to name a bit their experience of God. “When God is described as father or mother or judge or potter or rock or cloud or fortress or spirit or refuge or strength or lover or light or lawgiver, those writers are taking something they’ve seen, something they’ve experienced, and they’re essentially saying, ‘God is like that.’ It’s an attempt to put that which is beyond language into a frame or form we can grasp.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell’s chapter “With” from *What we talk about when we talk about God*.

And, these Words and Images – they point us to God; they help us understand the Divine, but they are not God. They are words. They are images. They are metaphors. They are stories. They are illustrations. They are vitally important *and* we must not let them become gods

So we begin a series this week on *God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit* – a time to unpack these largest and most foundational concepts of faith, in five short weeks. It is hard to know exactly where to begin when trying to speak for 15-20 minutes about God – we have a collection of 66 books which we call *The Bible* that only scratches the surface of who God is and is not – of how God works. And before I move into feeling like I might say anything too definitive about God, I have to give my standard preamble, in order to help me feel more at ease, knowing that you are listening with appropriate skepticism – if you have been here long, you may of heard me give some version of this preamble before.

As Herbert McCabe, one of the most beloved theologians of my 30s puts it, “Nobody who talks about God knows what they are talking about; the greatest theologian knows no more of what God is than the smallest child. We are all stretching out to a mystery far beyond our reach, far beyond anything that can be put into our words or our thoughts.”<sup>2</sup> So rest assured that the person you pay to speak about God each week, knows no more of who God is than the youngest among us. And To this, our friend Tony Campolo adds that, “All theologies are heresies. Meaning, what you believe may be partly true, but it is not completely true. We must

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<sup>2</sup> From Herbert McCabe’s book *God Still Matters*.

always be open to further insights that will give us fuller understanding of what God is all about.”<sup>3</sup>

There is of course much, much we don't know – God is mystery. For most of us here this is not too much of a shock. And, within the mystery that is God – we do know things – we know some things with every fiber of our being – they've been revealed to us, they seize us and they won't let us go. They haunt us, they change us, they capture us, they plant themselves deep in our hearts and they don't leave. So when we talk about God, we're talking about our brushes with spirit, our awareness of the reverence humming within us, our sense of the nearness and farness, that which we know and that which is unknown, that which we can talk about and that which eludes the grasp of our words, that which is crystal-clear and that which is more mysterious than ever. Sometimes language helps, and sometimes language fails.<sup>4</sup>

So for the rest of our time remaining, I want to share a few images and ways of thinking about God that have been part of furthering my own life of faith – my own personal heretical theology – a few brushes with the Creator in word form.

Again, quoting Herbert McCabe, “God is the label we give to the great mystery of why there is something instead of nothing, a mystery far beyond anything we can conceive or put into

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<sup>3</sup> From his chapter “Theology” in *Adventures in Missing the Point* (co-authored with Brian McLaren)

<sup>4</sup> Rob Bell, *What we talk about when we talk about God*.

words.” It took me a long time to come to be at ease with mystery – I still don’t like it, but I am accepting it.

One of the things that has helped me accept mystery is seeing the depth of own human limits. Jenna has heard me rant many times at theologians who seem so confident in describing who God is, or how God works; what hell or heaven is like – how do they know? How can they say it with such conviction? But, I get just as irritated at presenting some forms of science with the same certitude – when we were walking through the visitors center at Yellowstone and reading the description of how many billion or hundreds-of-millions of years old everything is – I found myself getting so annoyed. If they would only put a little *\*astrix* somewhere that says, “this represents our best thinking at this time.” It is likely that a new scientific dating method will be discovered someday, and we might find out we were off by a couple of million years. This doesn’t change the fact that these things are really, really old, but it is still a couple of million years.

I heard an amazing example of our limited knowledge from a scientist being interviewed on the podcast Radiolab a few weeks ago. Martin Uman *Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering at University of Florida* says that lightning shouldn’t exist. “People don’t have any good math for how lightning gets started in a cloud. We don’t know how it can get started. It shouldn’t be able to. Based on all the measurements that have been made it clouds.” And he continues – remember, a professor of electrical and computer engineering – “Almost nothing is understood. We are floundering around.”

This was, to me, both an amazing reminder of God's awesome and creative power as well as an recognition of the vast limits of our human knowledge. That in 2018 we still haven't made any measurements that say lightning should exist, and yet, in the mystery of God, it happens everywhere, all the time. We understand almost nothing, says the professor, I think this is important to remember.

Another way we talk about God more in recent years is the interconnection of all things – that God has created us to be interconnected to one another and all of the creation. And I love this concept, but I have to admit that I often struggle to grasp it on a concrete level – it makes sense to me in my spirit, but not fully in my head (if that makes any sense). Fortunately for me, in our Creation Care small group we have read some things throughout the years that have helped me better understand how we, in the mystery of God, are things all interconnected – each person and atom in creation.

Take, for example, the toast you had for breakfast. No long ago, its carbon was wafting about in summer breeze as CO<sub>2</sub>, until some leaf of wheat, by light of the sun, snatched it down, trapping it in starch. Later it was harvested and became bread. Soon, now, it will burn in your cells, maybe to fuel this very moment's thought, and then your lungs will set it free again. Once loose, the CO<sub>2</sub> may blow across lands, across oceans, maybe to enter a tropical palm, resting there until the wood decays, then to fly again, ending up perhaps in a rice field somewhere in Asia, from where

some smiling child will consume and then breathe it out again. And so the carbon atoms flit and twirl around the globe in endless dance to the rhythm of the sun.<sup>5</sup>

How can you not be amazed at your morning toast, seamlessly tied to the cadence of life all around? And most of us are here, at least in part, because we think there is something to that connection – something that intentionally made it so – why there is something so beautiful rather than nothing – that our toast did not happen to do this dance by chance. “And we call that God. When we talk about God, we’re talking about the very straightforward affirmation that everything has a singular, common source and is infinitely, endlessly, deeply connected.”<sup>6</sup>

I will close with a thought from Brian McClaren, who says “we (ought to) think of theology as an art and a science. . . . We have never heard an artist say, ‘I have finally finished the definitive landscape. All other artists may now put their brushes away now.’ Most painters know that landscapes evoke multiple artistic expressions, and an artist’s work is never done. If that’s true of a painted landscape, how much more is it true of the Creator of all actual landscapes, known and unknown?”<sup>7</sup>

And like art, scientific knowledge is hardly rigid and stable, but fluid, flexible, and dynamic. Scientists are constantly questioning and reworking traditional theories, proposing new ones, and over-turning last year’s models for still better ones. Just as new data requires

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<sup>5</sup> From H. Henry Janzen’s article “The heavens declare...” in the Spring 2008 article of *Vision: A journal for Church and Theology*.

<sup>6</sup> Again from Rob Bell’s, *What we talk about when we talk about God*.

<sup>7</sup> From his response to Tony Compolo’s chapter on “Theology” in *Adventures in Missing the Point*.

rethinking of old formulations, so our theological constructions must remain flexible, open to correction and expansion and reconception.

Thus, “every generation needs to articulate a theology that answers the unique questions and dilemmas they are faced with. New times need new theologies.”<sup>8</sup> Our questions and concerns are much different than the ones of Martin Luther and Menno Simons of 500 years ago – certainly the insightful writings of the past build part of the scaffolding upon which we erect our own current theologies, but they must be reworked, addressing new questions, and put into new language. There is no end of theologies, because there is no end of people desiring to understand their lives and struggle in relationship to God – to understand God’s role in their life and struggle. No end of people giving language to their brushes with the Divine. No end to adding our piece to the landscape of understanding God.

Finally, when we talk about God, we’re talking about that sense you have – however stifled, faint, active, or repressed it might be – that hope is real, that things are headed somewhere, and that that somewhere is good.<sup>9</sup>

And as we continue in this series, we will think about “God is for us”, in the person of *Jesus Christ*. And God who is out ahead of us, in the *Holy Spirit*.

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<sup>8</sup> Again from Tony Compolo in *Adventures in Missing the Point*.

<sup>9</sup> Rob Bell, *What we talk about when we talk about God*.

Thanks be to our great God of wonder, to the God that connects us to one another and even our morning toast. May we continue to seek and serve and love this God. Amen.