

“Questions for God: Who Are You?”
Exodus 3:1-15

We begin today a new sermon series about asking God some basic questions. Today we focus on who is God. In the church, we take the word “God” for granted assuming that everyone knows what we mean when we say God. But if we stopped for a moment to ask people around us, especially those who are not in church what the word means to them, we would be surprised at the variety of images and ideas people have of God. You don’t have to go very far. Just look in the movies and see how God is presented. (Second service: can you think of some of the movies and actors who portrayed God in film?) Here is a clip of some of those images in movies:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOHOyBchCHM>

Some of the images and ideas are hard to deal with, in that the word “God” has become loaded with negative baggage and associations. In 2011 there was a documentary film called “God in the Box” which explored what average people in the US thought of God. The filmmakers set up a small booth they called “God in the Box” and they took it all over the country. They invited people to step inside the box to see in their mind’s eye an image of God which they could then draw. The film also included interviews with some scholars and religious leader to help put the whole concept of God in historical perspective. Here is a little taste of this film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5pL04O8fPc>

What becomes clear to us as we watch this is that there are many ideas and experiences of God in the world. When we look at the different world religions or the secular ideas of the divine, one could get overwhelmed as to where to find the “true” answer to the question about the nature of God. As Christians, we often talk about God as the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which in itself is a difficult idea to comprehend or explain. For the Jews, God is so holy that the name is not even pronounced. For the Muslims, there are 99 names for God. Even in the Bible, we find a variety of images and ways to speak about God. Here are some examples (screen):

Warrior: Exodus 15:3

Husband: Hosea 2:16

King: Psalm 98:6

Father: Psalm 10:13

Midwife: Psalm 22:9

Mistress of a household: Psalm 123:2

Birth giver: Isaiah 42:16

Mother: Isaiah 66:13

I am not naïve to think that today within a few minutes we will get an answer to this very big question. In addition, I truly don’t believe that there is one “true” answer to this

question, at least on this side of eternity, as all of our human experiences and definitions are limited and can never capture that which is limitless.

Today's Bible story from Exodus 3 is about coming face to face with God and then not being able to name or limit the mystery of God. Moses was tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro. His life had come to a difficult spot. Remember the storyline of his life: Born at a time when Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, was trying to kill all the newborn boys in Egypt because he saw them as a threat, and then through an unexpected turn of events Moses ends up being raised by Pharaoh's daughter. When he became a grown man, Moses killed an Egyptian man who was mistreating a Hebrew man. As a result, he had to flee into the desert and like his forebears before him met his future wife (Zipporah) at a well. Moses then settled in the desert of Midian working for his father-in-law, a Midianite Priest. One day, as he was going about his work, tending the sheep of his father-in-law, he came upon a special bush that had fire around it but was not burning. The encounter with God was mysterious just like the plant. When we hear about the plant, we can already sense something paradoxical and mysterious that challenges our "normal" ways of living and being in the world. The burning bush was the symbol for the whole encounter. On the one hand, Moses heard God and was able to speak to God. On the other hand, he was not able to see or name this God experience. In fact, when God asks Moses to go and help save his people from slavery in Egypt, Moses asks for God's name. All the other gods in the area had names. This would have been a normal practice. Part of the naming process was knowing the essence of the God that is named. In that culture and time, people believed that a person's name revealed the very essence of the one bearing it. So Moses was asking to define God, to put a label on God which people would understand. If Moses was going to tell people that they were to follow him and risk their lives by leaving slavery in Egypt, he thought it would be important to have some proof to present to them. It would have made his job easier to go and tell the people about a specific kind of God they could relate to. But instead of giving Moses what he asked for, God sent Moses away with a very mysterious answer: "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." Instead of giving Moses a specific answer, God gave him a mystery. And the amazing thing is that was enough. Moses learned in that moment that he could not limit God to a human definition.

So, what does this mean for our faith? If we cannot prove the existence of God or give a clear definition of who God is, how do we go about our faith or how do we even worship?

I think that our images of God can help or hinder our faith and the more expansive and open our images are, the more open we are to God's work in our lives. In his book *Your God Is Too Small*, J. B. Philips challenges some of our misconceptions about God. Here are some these misunderstandings (screen):

- God: the resident policeman. Some of us seem to know God primarily as the source of scolding and guilt. This God is too small.

- God: the parental hangover. God is our parents magnified. God is our parents projected into heaven. This God is a hangover from what our parents were to us. This God is too small.
- God: the old man with a long white beard who has lived for ever. In his book, J.B. Phillips talks about a group of students being asked about a new thing that had just been discovered fifty years ago when the book was written – radar. They asked a group of students if they thought that God understood radar. The students said, “No! God is too old to understand radar.” This God is too small.
- God: the heavenly bosom. God: the one to whom we go for comfort and escape when life becomes too hard. This God is too small.
- God in a box, whom we turn to when we need answers and we don’t know where else to go for answers. This God exists only to answer questions for which we have no other explanation: God in a box. This God is too small.
- God: the managing director, whose job it is to coordinate and steer the universe and make sure everything comes out okay in the end. This God is too small.

So with these images in mind, I invite you to consider how you relate to God. For Christians, there is also the burden of understanding Jesus as the manifestation of God on earth. We often think that Jesus is easily understood because he was a human being just like us, but that is far from the truth. In fact, in the Gospels themselves we hear the disciples struggling to understand who Jesus is. In Mark 8:27-33 (screen) “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”²⁸ And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”²⁹ He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” So even our understanding of Jesus can be lacking.

So today I would like to suggest two things: First, we need to always be mindful that it is easy to make God in our image because we project our own images on God. (screen) God is bigger than anything we can ever imagine or define: God is not a being, God is the Ground of All Being (Paul Tillich). Second, we need to remember that what really matters at the end of the day is how we open ourselves to mystery, to the things of love, and the soulful things of life so that we continue to grow in our ability to love and serve as God does. (Screen: Open yourself to the soulful things of life) One of the people who was interviewed in the “God in the Box” documentary was Rev. Cecil “Chip” Murray

about his experience of God. I think such experiences are all that we can hang onto for our knowledge of God. They lead us beyond ourselves to serve others:

<https://youtu.be/Z0CxRWGC7wo>

In his book *Naked Spirituality*, Brian McLaren suggests holding a dynamic tension between God's transcendence and immanence, between seeing God as the one beyond our imaginings and definitions, and yet being the one who is also within us. To that end, McLaren suggests a prayer word of "Here." This is not an invitation to prove, define, control or reduce the divine, but instead it is an invitation to be present to the mystery of God to be standing with Moses on the Holy Ground of Life. So we are going to close this time with a prayer time of being here present to God and to one another. One thing that may help us today to enter into the experience of Moses of recognizing that he was standing on holy ground is to remove our shoes for the prayer. I invite you to do that only if you are comfortable. I know that this may be too cumbersome or uncomfortable for some of you, so please don't remove your shoes if that is going to become a hinderance for your prayer time.

Prayer:

Settle in your seat. You may want to close your eyes to settle into God's presence. As you feel your weight settle on a chair or on the ground, let the weight of your soul rest back on the presence and love of God. Take several deep breaths and allow space in your heart and mind for the divine presence to get your attention. You may say these words within your spirit: Here I am, God. Here you are. Here we are together. (repeat these words within your Spirit) Who am I, God? Who are you, God? Who are we together? (repeat these words within your Spirit). As you are comfortable, turn to a neighbor and share any prayers or experiences...Amen.