

1st Sunday in Lent
10th March 2019
Selected Texts

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Deconstructing God

1 John 4:16: *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

Colossians 1:15: *Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;*

Exodus 3:13-15: *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 God’s name?’, what shall I say to them?’ God replied, ‘**I am who I am.** Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘**I am**’ has sent me to you.’ God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.*

From *Unbelievable* by John Shelby Spong: *“An evolving Christianity is not our fear, but our hope.”*

Every minister in our denomination has to write a statement of faith at least once, usually multiple times, throughout his or her career. It’s a requirement for ordination. It’s required if you move between Presbyteries. It’s required by churches anytime you interview for a job with one. Certainly the Pastor Nominating Committee here reviewed my Statement of Faith as part of our interview process, and I think they may have included it in the materials they shared with the whole congregation as well when you all voted to call me here.

We practiced writing those in seminary, too, and they were reviewed and critiqued by our theology professors. We learned they were supposed to include an exposition on 5 topics: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Church, and the Sacraments. My statement started off professing belief in a God who created and still creates. Or to put it another way, my statement of faith talked about what God does. The churchy term for that is economic theology. It's a focus on acts of God.

I share that with you to give you a little bit of background before I share this. Despite two decades of writing statements of faith, I was momentarily stumped by the Pastor Nominating Committee of this church when they asked me a question in an interview that no other church had ever asked me in interviews before. They shifted the conversation from economic theology to ontology and asked me how I defined the word God. Not about things God did, but

exactly what I meant when I used the word "God."

It was a very fair question, and a very thoughtful question. But it's a question I think many, maybe most, Christians take for granted. How do you define God? Even if you look back through the historical creeds, and you have a couple of them printed in the front of your hymnals - the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds - they talk about things that God does, but they don't ever define what they mean by the word God. And to be fair, that's pretty much how the Bible starts off as well. "In the beginning, God created..."

As I think about it, that's primarily how I define myself as well - by talking about things I do. "Hi. My name is Brian. I'm a pastor. I like to play tennis and brew beer and explore technology."

But my sermon a few weeks ago on Evolution Sunday and the Evolution of Religion has had me thinking more and more about how

Christianity might evolve in the century ahead. Because while the church that many of us remember from our childhood is most certainly dying, if not already dead, we are a people who profess faith in this thing called resurrection, in the belief that new life can come from death. Large primates, including all of us, exist today because of a mass extinction 65 million years ago ending the Cretaceous Period and making way for larger mammals, ushering in the Cenozoic Era. Death makes way for new life.

What does all this have to do with my statement of faith and the pastor nominating committee? I think the question they asked, intentional or not, raised an evolutionary question. What they really wanted to know, I think, is whether or not I thought “God” was capable of evolving beyond pre-scientific understanding.

Or maybe another way of putting the question is this...

can we use the word “God” to mean something other than “a being’ that dwell[s] outside the boundaries of this world, endowed with supernatural power and periodically intervening in history to answer prayers or to impose the divine will on life in this world”?

And while this may not be a question that gets asked very often in churches, we can be sure it’s being asked by a lot of people outside of churches. Nor is this a recent phenomenon. The idea that this theistic view of God is fraught with problems for people was expressed in 1882 by Friedrich Nietzsche when he proclaimed that “God is dead.” The more common terminology now, I think, is people who profess to be “spiritual, but not religious.” They recognize and acknowledge the existence of something greater than the self, but don’t find the ancient language or practices of the church helpful to expressing or accessing the spiritual.

And therein lies, I think,

one of the greatest hurdles the church faces, and can't seem to get over, when considering how Christianity might evolve into something new. If the only way the Church can talk about God is as a supernatural, theistic "being," then there is no room in the church for people who believe that things like physics and biology and cosmology offer compelling answers to life's great questions of how we came to exist and how we fit into the universe around us.

If you haven't heard me say it before, I am one of those people who not only appreciates the insights of physics and biology and cosmology for explaining the world around me, and even find science itself to fit my definition of miraculous and awe-inspiring, qualities I typically think of as associated with God. But physics can predict, with near perfect accuracy, events in the future. What trajectory will this baseball take and where will it land if I throw it from this location and this initial

linear and rotational velocity? We know it will follow an arc curving toward the earth with a downward acceleration of 9.8 m/s^2 . One hundred years before we ever observed them, Einstein's equations predicted the existence of gravitational waves that would ripple through the space-time continuum. In 2015, we observed that exact phenomenon from the collision of two black holes that happened 1.3 billion years ago, but whose gravitational waves just then reached earth. That kind of knowledge, that kind of insight into the universe produces, for me at least, the same kind of sense of awe and of wonder that many people, and even many biblical stories, describe as part of the nature of God.

But if we can only describe God as a supernatural being, then there is not room in the church for people like me. Yet I believe in God. I just don't find it helpful to talk about God as a being. A being is something that exists in time and space. But God is ulti-

mate, unbound. God is, to me, not so much a being as God is “Being itself.” I love the language that theologian Paul Tillich used when he described God as the “Ground of Being,” which is actually how he translates the name that God revealed to Moses in our first reading this morning.

While the Hebrew expression of God’s response in this story is made up of four letters--yod, heh, vav, heh--a symbol to which many academics have added vowels and casually throw around as the word “Yahweh,” in Hebrew those are considered four unpronounceable letters that serve as a stand-in for that which is ultimate, holy, and real. It is the sound of breath as we inhale and exhale (inhale: yod, exhale: heh, inhale: vav, exhale: heh). So for our Jewish forebears, it represented a God who could be experienced but never defined.

Now, it’s easy enough to say that God isn’t a “being” sitting up in the sky. One of my

seminary professors, Shirley Guthrie, any time he caught someone in theology class use a male pronoun for God, would respond with the gentle reminder that God is not just a big phallus in the sky. And we get that. Yet we have all these stories, all these images, that most of us have grown up or heard over and over, that make God out to be in our image, like a person.

God takes an evening walk through the Garden of Eden. God speaks to people like we might have a conversation with one another. Jesus often refers to God as “Father,” and even setting aside the gender of God, that describes a person. The Bible talks about God sitting on a throne. And you have to have a rear end to sit down on a throne. That’s another one of those things that kind of makes God sound “human.” Even our Trinitarian language makes it hard to escape this idea of God as a person, talking about God as Father or Mother, Jesus, and Spirit.

So I do think it takes some brain gymnastics to really move beyond seeing God as “a being.” But I also think there’s a great deal to be gained by putting in the effort to consider how we define God, especially if we come together as a church with the intent of worshipping God.

To begin with, rethinking how we define God is an important step to move us beyond an anthropocentric understanding. Wallace and I were talking the other day about the possibility of other life in the universe. I explained the Drake equation to him, a probability thought argument with which you may be familiar. If you aren’t, it just poses a series of questions, like what fraction of stars have planets, how many of those planets are in the habitable zone, how many of those develop life, and then how many develop intelligent life and so on. With a very rough estimate of something like 10^{24} stars in the universe, it’s extraordi-

narily difficult (some might say “sinfully arrogant”) for me to imagine that we humans are the only (semi) intelligent life form that has ever existed now or in the 13.8 billion years since the Big Bang. Since really large numbers like that are difficult to visualize, think of it this way. If there is a one in a trillion chance that a civilization could evolve on a habitable planet, then it still means that’s happened about 10 billion times in our cosmic history. So all of that means that if we are talking about a God who exists beyond us, who created the universe and stars and planets and life, then how can we possibly imagine that out of all that vastness, God is going to somehow resemble our bodily form?

Picturing God as “a being” limits our own imagination as well, and ends up with some dangerous consequences. Even if we recognize that God is not an old man sitting up in the sky, just thinking about God as a being introduces an

impossible to resist temptation to imagine that God must be like we are, at least in some ways. And if God is like we are, then God is not like that other person who is different than I am. God is not like the other creatures that inhabit our world, not to mention our universe. God is not like the inanimate objects that make up the panoply of creation. And that all leads to giving us license to look upon those other people or creatures or whatever as somehow being less in God's image than we are. And we know well the damage that kind of arrogance causes: racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, environmental destruction, human caused extinctions, and that list goes on.

Caught off guard and unprepared for the question the Pastor Nominating Committee asked me, I answered with the first response that came to my mind. Nearly three years after that interview, though, I'm not sure I would change

my answer. The response I gave that day was to say "God is love." I know you're used to hearing original and awe-inspiring rhetoric from me, but I need to confess I didn't actually come up with that on my own. I probably read it in a book somewhere.

As you know, the Bible is full of minority voices... writings that coexist with the majority opinion but always want to push back against that opinion, to challenge it, to invite us to see things from another perspective. I think First John, or really the Johannine tradition, is one of those minority voices. Because John doesn't write that God tells us to love. John writes that God is love, that the best way to define God is the way we behave toward others, our attitude toward not only other people, but everything that exists. So to talk about Jesus as being in the "image of the invisible God," as the writer of Colossians does, means that we see God not in who Jesus

is, but in what Jesus does, the way he loves across borders and boundaries.

It's been a long, long time in my own life since I've worried about things like heaven and hell or God judging me or how I needed Jesus to die and save me from God judging me. Frankly, if that really is how God works, then I blew my chances of heaven a long time ago. But if God is love, or at least if love is maybe a better way of talking about God or thinking about God, then my best shot at experiencing God, at experiencing the holy, is

to be found by loving what's around me. If god is love, then in fact I cannot not love someone else for any reason, because to not love is to not worship.

This is a different, indeed very different, way of thinking about God than anything I grew up with, and quite honestly, than I ever really encountered in seminary. But how we talk about God is a critical part of the evolution of Christianity. And I once read somewhere that an evolving Christianity is not our fear, it is our only hope. Amen.