

One of the biggest challenges of being a progressive Christian is figuring out how to talk about God. We are keenly aware of the shortcomings of traditional dogmas – dogmas that often make God into little more than a cosmic policeman, an angry parent, Santa Claus, or an abstract force. We are rightly atheistic about those ideas of God, for they are unworthy of devotion. We know that human language falls short when talking about the Ultimate, God who is beyond being boxed in by words. We resonate with the idea that God cannot be known, but can only be loved. So often our theology becomes “To Whom It May Concern,” hoping that making the “sign of the question mark” <sign> is sufficient piety.

But one of the ongoing themes of scripture is that God takes initiative in revealing Godself to humanity. Moving through the Bible, you see a variety of understandings of God, some clear and some fuzzy, some that are discarded and some that endure. But as you move along, you see a distinct progression of understanding from the wild God of Abraham through the Lawgiver at Sinai and the Justice-seeker of the prophets, to the Christ revealed in Jesus and the Spirit who animates the church. God works to fill in the blanks.

And it is against that background we come to this story of the apostle Paul speaking in the center of Greek philosophy, the Areopagus in Athens. Paul had been preaching and arguing in the marketplace and had piqued the interest of some of the intellectuals in the city. “What is this babbler talking about?” they said (obviously not terribly impressed). “He seems to be proclaiming foreign deities.” The way they said this, it appears that they thought Paul was preaching about two gods: Jesus and Anastasia, a god Jesus and a god Resurrection. They were a bit confused.

So Paul ends up standing in the center of the council – imagine our city council chambers – to explain his teaching. He starts by finding common ground with his audience. “I see that you are very religious. In fact, I see that you even have an altar to An Unknown God, so let me tell you about this unknown God you already are worshiping.” No such altar has been found, but it does seem consistent with Athenian religion. Maybe the idea was “The God Above all Gods,” or maybe insurance, “Just in case we missed one.” Perhaps it was even “E, None of the Above.” Paul treats it as “The presence of the absence of God,” which we well know is a spiritual hunger that provides an opening for the gospel.

When we feel like God is unknown, it helps to start at basic things we can know. So Paul lays out several key points: God is the creator of the universe. (He doesn’t get into how God did it, just that God did.) In the book of Romans, he suggests that this fact alone ought to inspire humans to worship God. “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.” So obviously, he goes on, God cannot be confined to a human shrine or temple, and as Creator who is and has all, God doesn’t need anything from people – such as sacrifices.

Paul then turns from considering the wide world around us to human societies and personhood. He points out that all of humanity is related, despite having different countries and cultures. He appeals to secular knowledge, citing Greek philosophers, that “In God we live and move and have our being,” and that “We are his offspring.” The point being that God is not so far off in the heavens as to be unattainable, but as close as our own breath. The theological grounding of this is that since we are created in God’s image, there is a continuity between us and God, a basis for relationship.

All of this, Paul’s audience would likely have been right with him. Most educated pagans did not believe that the gods actually lived in the temples, or were identical with the statues and shrines. They could agree that you start with creation to learn about God. But the trick—for them and for modern people -- is not to get stuck just with nature.

UCC pastor and author Lillian Daniel wrote a famous essay a few years ago. Entitled, “Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me,” she talked about her fear of conversations with seatmates on an airplane. You’ve all been there: you introduce yourself to your fellow travelers, see if you have common ground for a conversation, or whether you should retreat into your book and headphones for the duration. She writes

I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is “spiritual but not religious.” Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

Next thing you know, he’s telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach. Sometimes I think these people never leave the beach or the mountains, what with all the communing with God they do on hilltops, hiking trails and ... did I mention the beach at sunset yet?

Like people who go to church don’t see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature. As if we don’t hear that in the psalms, the creation stories and throughout our deep tradition. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lillian-daniel/spiritual-but-not-religio_b_959216.html)

Now, I love seeing God in sunsets. I hike in the mountains, and look up at the crags soaring over my head and have a thrill at the majesty that created them. Or I lie down in a meadow, and try to count all the flowers within a few feet of my nose – 12, 15, 20 varieties, each delicate and unique, witnesses to God’s amazing creativity. I might not know much about that God, but I know that God is pretty amazing. But I also know that is but a starting point if that God is going to have any impact on my life, and here is where both Paul’s audience and Lillian Daniels’ seatmate wants to get off the plane. Paul moves from the general revelation of God in creation to the particular revelation of God in Christ. Back to Paul’s speech::

But having overlooked past ignorance, now God says that everyone everywhere must change their ways. God has set a day when he will judge the world’s people with fairness. And God has chosen the man Jesus to do the judging. God has given proof of this to all of us by raising Jesus from death.

Paul manages to pack almost everything challenging about Christian faith into four sentences!

First, our connection with God has a definite ethical component, it shapes how we live. Even the general knowledge of God we get from creation puts some imperatives upon us: If I am hiking a mountain meadow, honoring the beauty of the place prevents me tossing my garbage around. If I believe that other people are the children of God as am I, then loving them as myself ought to be a given. But following Jesus brings other values to the fore, things that can’t be deduced from the world around me. “Blessed are the poor.” “The meek will inherit the earth,” “The greatest among you must be the servant of all.” “Love your enemies.” These bid us cross the bridge from being nice people to being disciples of Jesus.

Second, Paul lays out the prospect of a final judgement.

(Mark, are you sure you want to go THERE? OK, no I don’t really, and if it weren’t integral to Paul’s argument here I’d slide past it!)

Of all the doctrines liable to turn off modern people, judgment is probably about the top of the list! We’re leery of it because we know how often judgement is actually unjust: that the golden rule means that the ones with the gold make the rules, that the powerful use the legal system to oppress the already powerless. We have felt the sting of being judged unfairly, for how we dress or who our family is or where we work or who we love or what we believe or anything and everything else. We also know how easily we form unfair judgments of others, and then how tenaciously we hold them even when further facts prove us wrong.

OTOH, we *do* believe in judgment. Our very discomfort with unfair judgment signals that we believe in right judgement. We have a keen sense that the universe ought to be administered by a moral code, that evildoers should receive their just desserts and the good should be blessed. We are outraged when it appears that people in high places – hello Washington? – are acting unjustly, hurting people without consequences. We expect our officials to treat people fairly, to administer the law without partiality to race or riches. Our consciences have been formed by the Hebrew Prophets, who prophesied destruction to those who cheated the poor, dispossessed widows from their lands, who bent the law to favor the powerful over the people.

So if our problem isn't with judgment per se, but with who is doing the judging – Paul has an answer, he says it is Jesus who is the judge. The one who took children into his lap, forgave Peter for denying him, and condemned the Temple establishment who “devoured widows’ houses.” The one who gave his life to save the world.

Paul's audience is probably mostly still with him, most of them believed in an afterlife judgment, where the good were rewarded and the evil punished. But then there was the capstone of Paul's argument, and where he lost most of his audience. When he started talking about Jesus' resurrection, they were done.

Greek philosophy posited a complete disjunction between spirit and matter, with spirit as good and bodies as evil. So the idea of resurrection – that the divine Christ would be resurrected in his human body – was just plain nuts to them. Why would a good spiritual god want an evil material human body? For them, it was like a circular square, hot ice, or jumbo shrimp. Nonsense! The story says that when they heard him talk about the resurrection, some scoffed. Some said politely, “We'll talk about this more later.” But a couple of people did believe – not much of a haul compared to some other places Paul ministered, or the 3000 baptized after Peter's Pentecost sermon. Sometimes evangelism is just hard. That's probably one reason we have this story!

But resurrection, stumbling block to hyper-spiritual thinking, is where Christian piety becomes worldly, embodied, practical. Resurrection is the antidote to being too heavenly minded to be any earthly good. Following the Hebrew conception that God created matter, the universe, and human bodies, and called them Good, the resurrection is God's ultimate blessing on real life. Bodies and how we treat them -- our children's bodies, our parent's bodies, poor bodies, black bodies, sick bodies, vulnerable bodies, our own bodies, even dead bodies – are central to God's concern. Resurrection seals God's blessing on our commitments to health, to environmental sustainability, to just economic systems that take good care of everyone's body. It sees everyone as good creations of the God who is in, through, and beyond it all material creation.

Resurrection means that there is continuity between this world and whatever comes after death. It's at the edge of what human language can tackle, but it ensures a full orb, sensual, individual destiny as part of a redeemed, not destroyed, creation. Whatever heaven might be, it is no thin intellectual spirit existence, but as fully embodied as your best sweaty hike, the experience of childbirth (without the pain), front row center at the symphony or the most connected lovemaking. In the resurrection, we are able to plumb ever deeper into the being of the Creator, learning and feeling and experiencing ever more of God and God's universe, plunging ever towards that infinity.

God will no longer be distant, God will no longer be “the Unknown God.” No more, “To Whom it may concern,” we worship the God the risen Jesus shows us. Amen.

Call to worship (from Psalm 19, 2 Tim. 3:16, John 1:14, Acts 17:28)

(One): “The heavens declare God’s glory, the sky proclaims God’s handwork!”

(Many): We sing God’s praise!

“All scripture is breathed by God, useful for teaching and training in righteousness.”

We learn God’s ways so we may be equipped to serve!

“The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.”

We follow as Jesus’ disciples, for he shows us God.

“In God we live and move and have our being.”

We dance in step with the living Spirit of God!

Opening prayer

Self-revealing God, we look in awe at galaxies spinning above us, peaks in the distance, and flowers beneath our feet, and we feel your creative power. We open the pages of scripture, and see you leading our ancestors in faith through wilderness to promised land. We grieve over their unfaithfulness and thrill when you bring them home from exile, knowing that our own story with you is but little different. Often you seem so distant, but now you reveal yourself in Jesus, one of us, showing us what a life filled with your love can accomplish: the redemption of the world. So we dedicate this time to worship you: to praise you, to lift our prayers, to hear your Word, to share our gifts, to feel your presence, to know you better. Show yourself afresh to us now, that we can live lives fired by love. Amen.

Prayer of dedication

Risen Christ, you have showered us with blessings both spiritual and material. We are refreshed with your presence in prayer and song, comforted and challenged by your Word, strengthened and touched by our fellow worshipers. Out of gratefulness, we open our hearts, minds, cupboards and pockets to give ourselves to you and our neighbors. Thank you for the opportunity to share your blessings. Amen.

Pastoral prayer

Most gracious and loving God:

You are to be praised for the beauty and wonder of all your works. The world around us testifies to your creativity and your glory, and our hearts are filled with awe. You have created us as your children in your own image, gifted with curiosity, intellect and the capacity to love and be loved. You have set us into relationship with one another, and working together we have created societies that, at their best, maximize the human capacity you have made us for. We also know that at times we abuse these gifts, hurting and hunting and hating our sisters and brothers, and that we sometimes wreck unspeakable harm on every aspect of your world. Yet you are a God whose capacity for forgiveness and new beginnings, so we rejoice to repent and start afresh on the path you lead us upon. While you are a God who has made yourself known in dreams to Abraham, thunder on Mt. Sinai, sheer silence to Elijah, and ultimately in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Christ, it is most often through relationship with other people that you reveal yourself to us.

So today, we want to thank you for certain people in particular. All through our lives, you have taught us by way of women and men, elders and peers, people who dedicate their time and thought and energy to not only knowing you, but to sharing you with us. Some of them serve in our congregation, teaching children, youth and adults in our Formation programs. Some we have met other places. Each of us can name before you a teacher, a coach, a scoutmaster, a parent, a pastor, a guide, an advisor, a friend, a counselor or even a bartender who was instrumental in showing us how to live in you and without whom we would not be who we are. (pause) Thank you for them. Bless them. Let them know that their efforts make a difference. Continue to lead them into greater knowledge and wisdom. Give them joy in their work, sustain them through challenges, and may they know how deeply we appreciate them.

Hear, O God, our prayers: All we speak aloud and all that we nurture in the depths of our spirit. Grant us patience through affliction, reconciliation from estrangement, and courage against injustice. We pray all these things through our Savior Jesus Christ: Amen.

9 am & 6 pm communion prayer

Epiciclesis (based on BCP Rite 2, prayer C)

God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise.

At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home.

From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another.

Again and again, you called us to return. Through prophets and sages you revealed your righteous Law. And in the fullness of time you sent your only Son, born of a woman, to fulfill your Law, to open for us the way of freedom and peace.

So remembering him today,

We ask you to send your Holy Spirit upon these gifts from vineyard and field

And upon us

That as we share this sacred memorial

We may be strengthened at heart
By Christ's resurrection life.

Amen.

Benediction

Go forth today:

Thanking God for all who have taught you and shown you the way

In the name of

God who created you in God's own image,

Christ who redeemed you to make the whole world God's realm,

And the Spirit who sustains you through anything