

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Vocabulary of Faith: God”
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Ex.3: 9-15; Acts 17: 22-28

Joanne Blair recently shared a story about a seminary professor who always asked, “What do you mean?” Joanne went on to say that this was one of the most important questions she heard. And it stays with her to this day. Joanne went on to say, “No matter what you’d say, this professor would respond with, ‘What do you mean by that?’ We, as seminary students, would often be left stymied at times. And yet I’m so grateful,” reported Joanne, “to be pushed to more fully articulate my own vocabulary of faith. “

Today begins a new sermon series called “The Vocabulary of Faith.” What comes to your mind when you hear the words, God? Jesus? Holy Spirit? Salvation? This First Sunday in our explorations of our Vocabularies of Faith we’ll explore ways in which God reveals God’s self. How do we begin to articulate what God means to us?

If we asked people today, “What do YOU mean when you say, ‘God,’ what do you suppose they would say?” Are we referring to a particular name? Or do we refer to a particular characteristic of God or what? If we took a poll, we’d hear many different responses. A Supreme Being? Creator? Energy Force? The life-giving Jesus as the Face of God? A Spirit? Love? Light? What would YOU say?

We also would acknowledge that God is so beyond our human comprehension that we cannot comfortably fit God into a convenient box and talk about God casually. We worship a holy God of mystery, yet a God who is closer than our breath. The God who names you. Claims you. Calls you by name and seeks to be in relationship with you. We can only sense the paradox.

Let’s look at what God revealed to Moses in the story that Katie Blair read today in Exodus 3. In this setting God is speaking to Moses through the burning bush. God gives him the mission to free the Hebrew people from Egyptian captivity. Understandably, Moses has some concerns, the main one being how he will convince his fellow Israelites that this really is a mission from (and blessed by) God. (Oxford Annotated Bible) Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” - Exodus 3:13-15

“I AM who I AM” or YHWH is here introduced as God’s personal name for the first time. This is ambiguous and points to the mysteriousness presence of Israel’s God. Scholars have puzzled for years over its meaning. It could mean “I am who I am” or it would mean “The One who causes to be.” Here we sense a timeless Presence that cannot be held in the space of our own measures of time, yet is working in human lives and history. Notice that in verse 15 God also says, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. Here God then restates God does not hesitate to identify the divine self with displaced and oppressed people. This holy name is associated with marginalized people. (The New Oxford Annotated Bible)

This revealed name of God was considered so sacred that the Hebrew people would not pronounce the name itself, but referred to God as Jehovah, Adonai, Elohim, or LORD. As we can see here, God will not be completely understood, not confined to a conceptual box. As Joanne Blair says, “God is so much bigger than any of these; if we think that we can easily begin to define God then we are probably on the wrong track. God is so much more than our human comprehension.” Yet in the story of Paul at Athens we see that Paul first uses comprehension and logic to open the minds

and hearts to God as revealed in scriptures and in Jesus Christ Paul here is portrayed as the first Christian philosopher, using Stoic and Jewish arguments (Oxford Annotated Bible).

He says to them, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown God. He uses recognizable tenets from both groups and points to God as the creator, an idea common to Jews and to Greeks. That God is near to all people is a Stoic belief as well as Jewish. Then Paul quotes another Greek philosopher whom the listeners would know, “It is God in whom we live and move and have our being.” He then adds that people can know the true God through Jesus Christ.

Theologians often refer to God as a Trinity—God the Creator, God the Son, Jesus, our Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit, the Sustainer. This Vocabulary of Faith series will explore these in greater depth. Stay tuned!

And yet even though God is so far beyond our human understanding, scripture still bears witness to God. The Bible contains almost 1000 references to God ‘s name or various characteristics of God. (www.Biblestudytools.com). Many of these point to a way that people have personally experienced God—as their Deliverer. Their Redeemer. A Light. A Shepherd who leads us beside still waters and restores our souls. The One who is with us. So what are we to say in all this? One clue comes from what the Psalmist wrote: “Be still and know that I Am God (Ps.46:10).”

This approach calls for the kind of knowing in a relationship; not necessarily based on logic or rational thought; but a deeper kind of knowing as you would know a family member or a close friend. There’s something about the essence of that person that you know that you can deeply trust. You know that they will be there for you and with you. There is respect. Love. A mutuality. People refer to this kind of knowing as those personal God moments in their lives. What was it like for you when something has turned out so well and good that you sensed that you could not have orchestrated that yourself?

A strong God moment for me happened when we were living in Florida. Our son Thomas had just been born. My father and mother had just moved to Texas from Michigan. I thought that we’d never see them—or so seldom since travelling long distances wasn’t easy with an infant. And then, Tom was transferred of all places in the United States to the Houston, Texas area. My heart and mind opened in wonder. It hit me that there truly is such a supreme benevolent force that is working for the good in ways so beyond our imagination or control.

I began to experience God as the “fount of every blessing.” And the more we sense those unmerited blessings and love in our lives, the more they want to pour out into others. What kinds of God moments have you experienced throughout the years? Something so good happening that you know you could not have caused it by yourself, yet you knew it was so right and better than what you could have possibly scripted yourself? You knew that somehow God is with you and blessing you?

So while we may not have easy definitions for God, we human beings, in our own humble ways can point to the goodness of the timeless, eternal One at work in our lives. And so, our challenge today is this: Recall a God moment in your life that has made an impression on you. Take time to wonder and relish that. Rest in it. And ask God throughout the week so open your eyes to other God moments that are happening so that you move closer to knowing the God who is. The richness and fullness of God’s perfect love await.

Let us pray: Holy God, You created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. And yet you reveal that you are mindful of us. (Ps. 8) Keep awakening us to your loving Presence so we may grow in our faith, hope and love and share that vocabulary with others. In Christ’s name. Amen.