

SERMON TITLE- "Who Or What Is God?"

TEXT- Exodus 3:1-15

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Note to reader: Because we are also doing a series of Care Group lessons following the sermons there is far more material here than will be delivered in the sermon. Additionally, the first draft of the lesson plan follows below. Happy reading ☺

There are questions that we often move over, just assuming that everyone agrees. This is actually part of normal life and when we all begin with the same assumptions this saves a great deal of time.

But it can also cause all kinds of problems if we either don't understand each other or, even worse, pick up wrong assumptions that sound plausible. This is the sort of scenario that comedies thrive on.

When it comes to the matter of God, making assumptions is extremely easy. For those who gather at church, it is relatively safe to assume that we all believe that there is a God- after all God is the centre of what we do here is about. I don't think that this assumption is as bullet proof as we might think- but none-the-less we will assume that for the moment.

When we are in other settings, this assumption really begins to break down and we quickly realize it.

Today we are in a part of our CoF that deals with the matter of God- and given how central it is, it shouldn't surprise us that we will spend 3 weeks on it.

So, for today we are going to make an assumption that this is not a church but rather just one of the streets of Nanaimo and we are talking to regular people about God- and asking a couple of questions about God. To make this sense more real we are going to play a video we made more than 4 years ago when we did exactly that.

Play Video

What you discover from the video is that people's idea of God has far fewer connecting points than you might have assumed. People have all kinds of ideas about God.

When we look at our CoF, I think it will be helpful to try to answer the question- "Who or what is God?" not as if we are sitting around thinking we are assuming the same thing- but as if we are talking to one of the people in that video.

The Bible is extremely helpful in this- because it was written in a context where people had just as many odd ideas about God as the video showed.

One of the great stories about God comes in the Book of Exodus. It involves a man called Moses. We of course all know who Moses was. He was the Jewish leader that led God's people from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land.

But Moses was not always that great leader. In fact he began life as the adopted son of an Egyptian princess. As we will see in the story his idea of God was quite basic and probably confused. But Moses had a famous moment of discovery about who God is.

This is the story-

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. Exodus 3:1

Moses began his life as the child of royalty but things had not worked out and now this Prince of Egypt is a wandering shepherd **There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"**

And Moses said, "Here I am." Exodus 3:2-4

So far, I think we can all identify with Moses. We see a strange sight. We wander over and check it out. We hear a voice speaking to us from the sight. We look around to make sure no one is there- and we answer.

And it is God who speaks to Moses.

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. Exodus 3:5-6

God identifies Himself in the way we might expect. This is the God we are supposed to know- the God of our family.

And God gives Moses his famous commission-

The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." Exodus 3:7-10

And Moses gives his famous response-

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Exodus 3:11

God answers Moses-

And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." Exodus 3:12

But, from the question we are asking today- this is where it gets interesting-

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" Exodus 3:13

Moses thinks he knows who God is- and he is even in a conversation with Him- but Moses knows that when he talks to other people he will have to try to explain this. Sure there is a God- but what is His name? Who actually is He?

God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' " Exodus 3:14
God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, '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, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation. Exodus 3: 15

Notice that God gives Moses 2 answers to the question- First, "I Am"

Second, "The LORD, the God of your fathers." This is the famous, Yahweh or YHWH.

Let summarize the answers this way-

#1. God Is God

What is clear when you talk to people is- there is a sense that we are not all there is. I'm not an expert in all the world's cultures but I suspect that for all the variety of people around the world there is no culture that believes that we are merely random collections of atoms.

Oh there are people who pose that as a belief and that idea is not the least bit new. It was succinctly articulated by the ancient Greek and referred to in the Psalms but you don't have scratch very deeply before the cracks show in that idea.

But if there is one thing that God's answer to Moses makes extremely clear is-

#2. God Is Not Whatever You Want Him To Be

On the one hand we have a deep sense that there is something out there. On the other hand God is profoundly not- made in the image of man.

The story of the human quest for God is that and order set in the Scriptures is always being reversed.

The Bible makes a very specific statement-

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:26-27

This explains the longing that we have for God- we are created in His image. Augustine famously spoke of a "God shaped vacuum" in our hearts.

But the story of people is the reversal of this- of creating God's that look like us.

God is not like us- the order is very specific and begins at the very beginning-

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. Genesis 1:1-5

So who and what is God?

#3. God Is The Creator- Vs 2 Creation Myths

That opening to Genesis is so familiar that even people who aren't Christian probably have some familiarity with it. In fact I don't think it is even controversial. But like many familiar things what it actually says- and doesn't say is easily lost.

A good friend of mine who has written about Genesis 1-3 often speaks about how radical and profound this is. It was extremely radical in the ancient world because most creation myths described creation in very everyday language. The world was born, the world was the result of a great conflict. What this meant was, God and Creation are one.

Myth #1- God Is Part Of Creation

There is nothing like this in Genesis. God spoke and creation happened. God and creation are profoundly distinct.

This said something that shocks anyone who lives with that kind of creation myth. It says that God is not part of creation and more or less than an artist is one with his painting.

The myth that God and Creation are one is NOT an ancient relic that no longer applies- this myth is alive and well today and we heard it over and over again in our video.

The idea that God is "other" from creation is a very strong statement.

There is another myth that Genesis 1 hits very hard- that too was an ancient myth. This one states that the cosmos is nothing more than a series of accidents. This is a myth that is very alive today and is called scientific. Very few people really hold it but it is a powerful myth because it logically holds together very well. In ancient times it was a reaction to the clearly bizarre creation myths that were floating around.

Myth #2- Creation Is A Random Accident

While it may be logically appealing it has very little sticking power within the human heart. It essentially states that there is nothing different between you and a stone. We are all "star dust".

Of course its an idea that the Bible actually spells out in Genesis. The Bible explicitly states that we are created from the dust of the earth.

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Genesis 2:7

The Bible also follows up on the logic of that. Yes we are "star dust" and this follows from that-

[you will] return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." Genesis 3:19

Of course the Bible fills this out- but those who believe in a random creation came to a full stop at this point. Very logical but the shear power of the logic shows its limits. No one can live by that myth.

And so the Bible confronts the 2 big creation myths and challenges them head on.

God is first, before anything else- the Creator. God is the "I Am."

But when Moses asked God how he should explain Him, God gave another answer-

#4. God Is The God Of Our Fathers

I believe that beginning with God the Creator is where we do well to begin. I believe it links us to the "God of our fathers." It is a picture of God that virtually everyone links up to.

It is where God tells Moses to begin when he talks to the Israelites. Many years later, when Paul was trying to make a connection with the philosophers in Athens he starts in the same place-

22Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

24"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Acts 17:22-28

Paul, in a very different context, begins in virtually the same place that God tells Moses to begin- where people are.

But it does not stay there. Paul pushes his listeners hard-
29"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. 30In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Acts 17:29-31

Just stopping at Creator is not enough. There is more. And frankly that's where the problems do come. Paul certainly experienced this.

32When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." 33At that, Paul left the Council. 34A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Acts 17:32-34

God is Creator. That is a huge thing but it isn't all. But God is also the LORD or Jehweh, the God of our fathers.

But even this is not the end.

Moses had an astonishing encounter with God but this was not just a random encounter. It was a meeting with a mission. We are a missional church who serve a missional God. God met Moses because He had a mission.

The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians . . . So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." Exodus 3:7-10

And this is next critically important aspect of who God is-

#3. God Is The Saviour

God the Saviour is the God of the Bible. This too is a radical claim and sets the Biblical God apart. The Biblical God sees that the world is a broken place and chooses to set out a rescue plan for people. This begins in the very beginning. Once humanity strays from God and creates chaos God begins setting out rescue plans for people.

It is God the Saviour that demands a response from us. He demanded a response from Moses and He will demand a response from the Israelites He proposes to rescue, He demands a response from Paul's audience in Athens, and He demands a response from us.

What is the response? It is the same response that we hear over and over again on the news. When a disaster strikes warnings will go out. For example a hurricane is coming our way so all those in the danger zone must get out. Those who hear the warning have a choice- they will heed the warning or not.

God the Saviour sends out the call, "I have come with a rescue plan. This plan demands action on your part."

What keeps people from responding to God the Saviour? The answer to that question is essentially what the Bible describes from beginning to end.

I do however think that an answer is very close to us and we see it on the news every time a natural disaster threatens some part of the world.

People don't respond because there is a lack of urgency. They have seen storms come and go. They have heard lots of alarms that didn't require action. They believe that the warnings are too extreme.

Of course when the water is lapping at the door and rising, they are prepared to listen- but not when the sun is shining and the birds are singing.

And so it is that the Bible repeatedly makes a very blunt statement-

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Proverbs 9:10

This leads to the next statement-

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." Psalm 53:1

Anyone who has worked in the environment of great physical power knows that this is the case.

Those who dismiss the Creator of everything are simply fools. There is a great deal of mystery about God but nothing that should lead us to be cavalier about Him.

Out of this picture of God as Saviour all kinds of other images are given to us-

God the Warrior

This is one of those images that most of us don't know quite what to do with. Why does God have to come as warrior? The answer- Because His people need rescuing.

The most explicit picture of God as warrior is also in Exodus- **Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.**

The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.

The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. Exodus 15:1-3

God The Shepherd

The famous 23rd Psalm speaks about God as Shepherd. It is a gracious image of people who have walked away from God. Sheep are merely ignorant and not usual rebellious. Sheep need guidance.

Psalm 23, Ezek. 34:11-16, John 10:11-16

This leads to another image of God.

God The Teacher And Lawgiver

God did not merely turn people loose on earth. They came with an assignment Genesis 2:15-17.

God The Judge

For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us. Isaiah 33:22

God the Saviour has many images that fill the OT.

But there is one more major Biblical designation-

#4. God Is Our Father

Now here is an area where I made something of a discovery in preparing this sermon. Of course God is Father- that is what we pray aloud every Sunday. "Our Father . . ."

But as I looked for OT references to this I found very few. There was one in Psalm 89-

He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.' Psalm 89:26

And

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.

We are the clay, you are the potter;

we are all the work of your hand. Isaiah 64:8

While I did find these and a couple of others what became clear was that the normal OT reference to God was the way the Exodus text refers to Him-

I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Exodus 3:6

The primary language of God in the OT is as the God of "our" fathers.

What also became very clear as I went through these was that when Jesus came and began to speak about God as His Father, He was introducing a profound shift in the language of God.

The "God" of the NT still is the exact same God of the OT. He is Creator. He is Saviour. But with Jesus the language shifts predominantly to "our/my Father."

That is a huge shift in language and a shift that is at the very core of understanding the Gospel

This is a shift that we are going to explore further in the next 2 weeks but for today I want to close off with 2 thoughts-

#1. God Is An Awesome God

#2. God Is Our Father

Lesson #3. Who Or What Is God?

Read Exodus 3:1-14

Questions

1. Think about Moses trying to figure out who or what God is. If you had to explain this to someone how would you describe God?
2. What does “I Am” mean to you?
3. Aside from the “I Am” name of God, what other aspects of who or what God is come from His interaction with Moses and Israel in the Old Testament?

Read Genesis 1:26-27

Questions

1. It is often said that we create God in our own image, turning the Genesis text on its head. Reflect on this. Do we do this subtly or overtly or both? Give examples.

The Various Aspects of God In The Bible

God The Creator

Read Genesis 1:1-5

1. I have suggested that there are 2 alternative myths about God. First, that God is one with nature and works within it. Second, that there is no God and we are just cosmic accidents. Have you ever encountered either of these?
2. Do you see the distinction between the God of Genesis 1 and these alternative myths? What might some of the implications of the Genesis 1 description of God be?

God The Saviour

God the Warrior- Exodus 15:1-3

God The Shepherd- Psalm 23, Ezek. 34:11-16, John 10:11-16

God The Teacher And Lawgiver- Genesis 2:15-17.

God The Judge- Isaiah 33:22

Questions

1. How do these various pictures relate to God as Saviour?

2. Do you think that the idea of God as Saviour has an appeal today? Why or why not?

3. What sort of issues do you think of when “Saviour” is talked about?

God The Father

Read Matthew 5:5-15 [The Lord’s Prayer]

Questions

1. What do you make of the shift from God as “the God of our fathers” to “our Father”?

Read Luke 11:11-32

Questions

1. How does the picture of God as Father add to what we have learned about God so far?

The Canadian Conference Of Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith

Mennonite Brethren have their roots in the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement of sixteenth century Europe. Anabaptists regarded their confessional statements simply as a public testimony of what they believed, based on the Word of God. Confessions are used as an outline for instruction, church polity and discipline.

This document was updated December 4, 2001.

Article 1- God

We believe in the one, true, living God, Creator of heaven and earth. God is almighty in power, perfect in wisdom, righteous in judgment, overflowing in steadfast love. God is the Sovereign who rules over all things visible and invisible, the Shepherd who rescues the lost and helpless. God is a refuge and fortress for those in need. God is a consuming fire, perfect in holiness, yet slow to anger and abounding in tender mercy. God comforts like a loving mother, trains and disciplines like a caring father, and persists in covenant love like a faithful husband. We confess God as eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God the Father

God the Father is the source of all life. In Him we live and move and have our being. The Father seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth, and hears the prayers of all who call on Him. In the fullness of time, the Father sent the Son for the salvation of the world. Through Jesus Christ the Father adopts all who respond in faith to the gospel, forgiving those who repent of their sin and entering into a new covenant with them. God gives the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, to all His children. God's creative and redemptive love sustains this world until the end of the age.

God the Son

The Son, through whom all things were created and who holds all things together, is the image of the invisible God. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, Jesus took on human nature to redeem this fallen world. He revealed the fullness of God through his obedient and sinless life. Through word and deed Jesus proclaimed the reign of God, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. Christ triumphed over sin through His death and resurrection, and was exalted as Lord of creation and the church. The Savior of the world invites all to be reconciled to God, offering peace to those far and near, and calling them to follow Him in the way of the cross. Until the Lord Jesus returns in glory, He intercedes for believers, acts as their advocate, and calls them to be His witnesses.

God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, the Counselor, is the creative power, presence and wisdom of God. The Spirit convicts people of sin, gives them new life, and guides them into all truth. By the Spirit believers are baptized into one body. The indwelling Spirit testifies that they are God's children, distributes gifts for ministry, empowers for witness, and produces the fruit of righteousness. As Comforter, the Holy Spirit helps God's children in their weakness, intercedes for them according to God's will and assures them of eternal life.

Genesis 1; Exodus 15:2-3; Exodus 34:6-7; Deuteronomy 6:4-6; Psalm 8; Psalm 23; Psalm 139; Isaiah 55:8-9; Isaiah 66:12-13; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hosea 11:1-4; Matthew 1:18-25; Matthew 5-7; Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 4:18-19; John 1:1-18; John 14:26; John 15:26; John 16:7-15; Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-4; Romans 8:1-

17; I Corinthians 12:4-7; I Corinthians 13; I Corinthians 15:3-8; II Corinthians 1:22; II Corinthians 5:16-21; II Corinthians 13:14; Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 1:15-2:22; Ephesians 3:14-21; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; I Timothy 6:15-16; II Timothy 2:11-13; Hebrews 12:7-11; I Peter 2:21-25; I John 2:2; Revelation 5:5-6, 9-10.

ICOMB Confession Of Faith- Statement About God

God the Father sent the Son, Jesus Christ, to the world born of the virgin Mary. Jesus inaugurated the reign of God, proclaiming repentance from sin, announcing the release of the oppressed and good news to the poor, and calling disciples to follow his way as a new community. Jesus responded to the violent evil powers by taking the cross in order to die for the sins of the world and reconcile creation to God. Jesus gained victory over sin, death, and Satan as God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead and exalting him to God's right hand where he intercedes for the saints and rules forever.

At Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit, who had acted in creation, in empowering the prophets, and in inspiring the Scriptures. Through the Spirit, God established the church, the body of Christ, to proclaim God's reign and to give witness to the new creation. The Spirit is poured out on all who receive Christ, baptizing them and sealing them for redemption as God's children. All who believe and confess Jesus as Lord are born anew into Christ. Believers are baptized by water into the new covenant community in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. By grace they are saved through faith to live out God's peace and love in the face of opposing circumstances.