

Year B, 5th Sunday after the Epiphany
February 7, 2021
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“Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?”

God is pretty hard to pin down, I mean like to describe or understand. Be it the Father/Creator aspect of God or the Jesus/Son of God angle. And the Holy Spirit part, forget about it. They don't even teach classes on that at Harvard (that doesn't mean she is unknowable, but if it surpasses Harvard's hubris, watch out). How do you describe God, to yourself or others? Who is Jesus, to you? What do you know Him to be?

It has always kind of perturbed-disappointed-frustrated me how elusive God can be, how hard it can be to define, describe, relate to God in Christ with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes I fear it is just me; that God's presence in the world is apparent to everyone else, but not me; that I am alone in usually not feeling that I have a friend in Jesus. Oh I know He is, but so often I don't feel it. And when I do feel it, those feelings are fleeting, at best, vague, indescribable.

Our passage from Isaiah is about this problem, how hard it is to know God. “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” the prophet asks Israel. “Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” Apparently not. The prophet says that God “stretched out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in...” I mean that is a pretty always and everywhere way to understand God. The technical term for this is immanent, meaning permanently pervading and sustaining the universe. Why, though, is God far too often so unknowable, or feel so unknowable. The technical term here is transcendent, meaning existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe. (Tip: God is always both, my point being both are hard to know).

This is not to say that God isn't active: the Divine saturates existence; God is the ground of being. As the collect tells us, it is God “in whom we live and move and have our being.” God gives power to the faint, strength to the powerless. “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not be faint.” But why doesn't anyone just tell it like it is? Why isn't the path to God easier to understand?

Even Jesus (maybe especially Jesus), so many of His teachings are in esoteric parables. He heals and feeds but doesn't explain why. He casts out demons, but then orders them to be silent. He does the same with many of the people He heals, "Tell no one." Or when He does teach, like in today's pericope, He slips away before folks get to ask the bigger questions. (He rarely answers questions from the crowd in the scriptural record). Some of Jesus' teachings are well-defined (sacrificial love, turn the other cheek, the first will be last), but He offers little clear guidance about *how* to do them, how to be His disciple in a day-to-day kind of way. Why aren't the teachings more clear? More direct?

And it is not just scripture that defies direct description. Have you ever tried to read the Church Fathers? Think Sts. Justin Martyr, Tertullian or Gregory of Nyssa? How about any of the mystics of the church. Have you checked out Sts. Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross, our beloved St. Julian of Norwich or the anonymously written 14th century classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*? Even modern mystics with modern language can be impenetrable. Think Howard Thurman, Simone Weil and Teilhard de Chardin. Why do they make God so hard to grasp?

I must say I am not a huge Jane Austen fan. I love a good English costume drama as much as the next Anglican, but Waugh, Maugham and Trollope strike my fancy better. (It is one of those Mars/Venus things, I'm sure). In any case, I was reminded of an exchange in *Pride and Prejudice* that sums up why God isn't more clear with us about God's self. The scene is one of those marvelous society balls, and Charles and Caroline Bingley, a married couple, are talking.

"I should like balls infinitely better," she (Caroline) replied, "if they were carried on in a different manner; but there is something insufferably tedious in the usual process of such a meeting. It would surely be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing were made the order of the day."

"Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I dare say, but it would not be near so much like a ball."

Why is God so hard to describe let alone understand? Because if it wasn't, it wouldn't be near so much like God. No it would not.

From the first revelation of the name of God to Moses on Mt. Horeb, YHWH, "I am that I am" or "I am becoming what I am becoming" God has been making us work for it. Why? "Great is the mystery of faith!" is the only answer we can be sure of when it comes to God. It is a mystery. It wouldn't be much like God if it were any other way.

But I won't punt this sermon. There is more to it than mystery. The process of knowing God is knowing God. It is something that we have to do; no one can do it for us. The journey with and to and in God does not lead us to an end, it is the end. As Thomas Merton wrote, "But O, how far have I to go to find Him in whom I have already arrived."

You can write the explanation of a koan. The sound of one hand clapping is... whatever it is. The answer, if you have not arrived at it yourself, is just information, it is not revelation.

I have had one true religious insight. I was on a 10 meditation retreat in Myanmar about 20 years ago. Silent the whole time. When I was not in the meditation hall, I was mindfully eating, walking, brushing my teeth, everything. It was exhausting. The insight I had, this is after 10 days of just about the hardest work I have ever done, was a question. We all have our inner voice, what we call our *self*. After 10 days of rigorous meditation, I had to ask, whose voice is that? That voice I had always assumed was the core of me, maybe wasn't me, or I wasn't it. It was an insight about the nature of the self, and it sounds pretty trite, pretty basic. It wasn't. Not for me and my relationship with myself, God and everything. But it couldn't/can't be explained. It had to be encountered.

Many of us have had glimpses of the holy. When you have had those experiences, have they occurred on an average Tuesday morning on the way to work or at the store? That has not been my experience. Usually, something extraordinary needs to be going on.

Situations can do it. The term "Thin Space" is a gift of our Celtic spiritual ancestors. These are times of great movements in life. Have you given birth? Or witnessed one? Have you had deep moments of love-soaked intimate connection? God is unusually apparent in those moments. Instances of great beauty, sacrificial service, extraordinary courage or generosity, flashes of selfless connection to the creation enables/opens/makes real our connection to God.

These Thin Spaces can be tragic, too. God is present, for some most poignantly, in suffering, our own or in witnessing the suffering others. Death is one of those moments, for the dying and for those who care for them. Illness, trauma, even, can make us more open to the ever present reality of God. Tragedy, injury can also makes us feel utterly hopeless and alone, we don't have a lot of say over it, but sometimes, sometimes we feel drawn near to God in suffering.

God's presence is manifest in relationships we have. *Ubi caritas*. You know the chant. It is from a medieval poem that tells us that "where true love and charity are found, God Himself is there." In being kind, available, open to the love and light of others we become, or can become, open to the love and light of God in Christ.

We can also make an effort to encounter God. Scripture can be dense, hard to understand. So can theology and the great religious writings across the centuries. They take effort to read. We need to learn the languages and contexts. We need to take time and take notes. A professor of mine compared it to peering through a grimy window. Our efforts to understand a text are a cloth wiping, wiping away the dirt. Slowly, over time, it will become a little clearer and a little clearer. It is that effort, not just the text you uncover, that is can be a path to God.

I am speaking of this all today because Lent is near. Encountering God is by grace alone. There is nothing we can do to make God do anything. There is, however, a lot that we can do to put us in a posture to better receive God's graces. Practice, practice, practice is not just the punchline to an overused joke, practice is what we can do to open ourselves to God, to tune our senses to the still small voice, to get used to the tone and beat that God sings to us with.

Lent is a penitential season. It is a time to step up our religious game; to put in a bit more effort in opening ourselves to our transcendent God's immanence. Most of us think of Lent in terms of fasting; giving something up for the season. That works. Be it meat, chocolate, social media, the news, alcohol, sex, Netflix. I knew someone who gave up being snarky for Lent. We give things up first, to make a sacrifice to God, and offering, and second, to give us an occasion to remember God. When you want that before dinner drink, remember that you are not having it for God's sake. Fasts can be powerful.

As powerful as fasting is the practice of practice, of taking things on as opposed to giving things up. Starting (or intensifying) a prayer practice. Saying grace at meals is a great family prayer practice. Reading your Bible, daily, even. The Gospel of Mark is very appropriate this year. Study, reading Christian books is a very traditional practice. There is a small list of good ones in the bulletin. Or study together. Come to our Wednesday Seekers in Lent, a joint effort with the Congregational church, we will explore a variety of spiritual practices. Christian service, those acts of *caritas* from the chant, that's another very traditional practice. But really anything can be an action that makes you more receptive to the presence of God. Taking a daily walk, a session on the rowing machine, making bread, making art, playing an instrument or singing... anything you do with prayerful, God-ward intention is a fine practice to take on.

If there is one practice that I highly commend to everyone it is to say Compline each night before you go to bed. It is on p. 127, and the step-by-step directions are there in italics. It is not that there isn't a right way to say it, and adhering to strict prayer forms can be a helpful discipline for some of us, but truly God don't care how we pray, just *that* we pray. That said, we'll be going over

the right way to say compline at our Catechism class on Thursday at 5. (The “right way” quip is a joke).

Coming to church is baseline. It is our most basic practice as Christians. In this hard time, because it is hard, even as the vaccines increase and the numbers of infections decrease, the continuance of the pandemic is stressful. If getting on Zoom each Sunday is all you can manage, then have at it. It is like the widow’s mite. The relative effort, your personal best effort is what God desires.

If you mess up, you eat that chocolate bar, skip that prayer session, or that week of prayer sessions, it is never too late to get back on the Lenten wagon. Or if you don’t get started until the week after Lent starts, don’t worry! This is serious, and you should try hard, but don’t let perfection be an enemy of the good.

Encountering God almost always takes effort. Sure, Juan Diego was just walking across a field when the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to him. That kind of thing is so rare that he was made a saint. Encountering God, like most good things in life, takes effort. Not that we can earn an encounter with God. “Be good enough or pray hard enough/correctly enough and God will answer.” No, but we can make ourselves ready.

Lent is near. I highly encourage you to take this season seriously. Make a fast. Take on a practice. Do something with intention towards God. “...the Lord has pleasure in those who fear him, in those who await his gracious favor. AMEN.