

Who Is God?

**Psalm 139:9-12; I Corinthians 13:9-12
(Nominated by Eugene Worely)**

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I had a hard time getting the sermon started this week. Just where do you begin a sermon titled, “Who Is God?”

I found myself pulling volumes from my shelves that I’ve not touched in years—philosophy books, systematic theologies, and others. Long ago Aristotle answered the question of who God is. He said that God is the Unmoved Mover. His argument goes something like this. Movement exists in the world. The universe is in motion, and we all observe it. Since there is movement in the universe, something had to start the motion. It is irrational, Aristotle said, to think that movement has always existed. It cannot be infinite, so there must have been something to cause the first movement. And that initial cause itself cannot have been moved. That initial cause was God, Aristotle said, the Unmoved Mover.

Doesn’t that just warm you all over? Doesn’t that inspire you to pull up stakes and be a missionary?

Who is God? Or should the question be, what is God? Yet that just seems too impersonal. However we frame it, it’s one of those questions we tend to assume, like the air we breathe. We all breathe in the air, but few of us spend much time pondering the air, trying to figure out what it is or what it means. For most of us, air simply is.

Eugene Worely nominated this final summer sermon topic. I’ll not blame the title on him; that’s mine. I made a comment some months back about God expressing emotion in response to what we feel. For example, if we feel deep sorrow, what is God’s response to our sorrow? Obviously God does not always intervene and take away our sorrow. So what is the response of God to the deep sorrow of God’s children? I suggested that God feels sorrow with us. Rather than take the bad away and make things all better for us, I suggested that God enters into that pain with us, feeling our pain, hurting as we hurt, much the way a loving parent hurts with his or her

children. Eugene is wondering if that is really true. It sounds nice. That's the way we want to think of God, but is it *really* true? If God exists fully in the realm beyond this temporal realm—call it the Kingdom of God or Heaven or something else—if God exists in that realm beyond which there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, how then can we say that God feels sorrow with us? It seems contradictory, doesn't it? This and many other possible contradictions Eugene has raised I've chosen to address under the question, "Who is God?"

Here is where I finally concluded we must begin this sermon, this conversation about who God is: *God is not a man*. God is not a human being. We are. What we tend to do is ascribe to God human qualities. That's what we know. That's what we understand, so we speak of God in human terms. The ancient Israelites would say that with a "mighty outstretched arm" God delivered the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Of course, God did deliver them, but God doesn't really have an arm. We do so we project that onto God. It is called anthropomorphism, ascribing human qualities to the divine, or in other words creating God in our image.

We're confronted here with what theologians refer to as "the problem of language," and they have wrestled with it for ages. How do we talk about God? Whatever language we employ, whatever images or symbols we use to talk about God are drawn from our human experience and cannot fully describe the divine. All of our images and symbols are finite, and the infinite nature of God cannot be stuffed into finite language and symbols.

Look at some of the images the Bible uses to describe God. The writers of the Bible used words that were accessible to them, like the word "shepherd." "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," they said. That was a culturally accessible word for them. It communicated things: provider, protector, guide. But we don't have shepherds anymore. Apart from the influence of the Bible, we would not use the word shepherd to describe God. We would find a word that is accessible to our culture. Those of you who have read the book *The Shack* know that Young uses the image of a large, loving African American woman to depict God. We understand that. The biblical writers also used the word "king." It connotes power, authority. The Bible also uses words like "king," "father," "rock," "fortress," "friend," and many others. While all these words are useful in talking about God, not one of them fully captures the essence of who God is. It's like trying to pour the ocean into a milk jug. God is more than a shepherd. God

is more than a king. God is more than all of these symbols. The best these symbols do is give us an approximation of who God is. But aren't they better than Unmoved Mover?

Now, we have to be careful here because the next logical step is to say that God cannot be known. If all our symbols ultimately fail us, then maybe we just cannot know God at all. One theologian goes so far as to say, "Only God can know God."

Enter Jesus of Nazareth, whom the theologian John A. T. Robinson called "the human face of God." Is that who he was? Was Jesus indeed the human face of God? He was, and as such he gives us a picture of who God is.

So who is God? Take a look at Jesus. One day a father brought his son to Jesus. The boy suffered from epileptic seizures. The dad said that when his son had a seizure, the son would fall to the ground and become rigid. As the father explained his son's condition to Jesus, the boy suddenly had a seizure and fell to the ground. In an intimate, touching conversation Jesus then asked, "How long has he had this?"

"From childhood," the boy's father said. And he went on to explain how the boy sometime would fall into the fire or into the water. He asked Jesus for help, and Jesus asked him if he believed. In a moment of desperation, with some of the most honest words ever spoken, the man cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Jesus healed his son.

Who is God? We may be certain that God is One who cares about children with disabilities.

One day a crowd followed Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus was teaching, they were listening, and everybody lost track of time. Suddenly the people were hungry. Jesus discovered that they had five loaves of bread, two fish, and about 5,000 hungry people. With those five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus fed that multitude of people. Everyone ate until he was satisfied.

Who is God? We may be certain that God is One who cares about people who are hungry.

On another day, Jesus walked alongside the Sea of Galilee. Again a large crowd gathered around him. This time they brought the sick folks with them. People who couldn't walk. People who were blind or couldn't talk. They brought all these people with health care issues and placed them at the feet of Jesus, and he healed them.

Who is God? We may be certain that God is One who cares about the physical health of people.

Jesus, the human face of God, shows us a picture of who God is. Read through the gospels and observe what was important to Jesus. Every time we do, it becomes clearer and clearer who God is.

The old preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, had a summerhouse on an island off the coast of Maine. His church in New York City allowed him to spend the summer months there preparing the sermons he would deliver the rest of the year. By the way, I like that model. Fosdick loved the ocean. But he admitted that he knew only little of it. He had never seen where the Amazon River poured into the ocean. He had never seen the Antarctic. While he loved the ocean, most of it was still unknown to him. But he said this, "I know the sea. It has a near end. It washes my island. I can sit beside it and bathe in it and sail over it, and be sung to sleep by the music of it."

And then he said, "So it is with God." God is so vast that we can know only a little of God. We use the symbols and images we have. We use language that is wholly inadequate. But we can know God because God has a near end that washes upon our lives. We call him Jesus. While we may marvel at the vastness of God, we may love the near end of God.

The apostle Paul seems to have understood this too. "For we know only in part," he said. "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

God is the One we will not know fully until *that* day. Until then we can trust that we are known fully by God. We can understand the life and

ministry of Jesus. And we can trust that when we love and serve him, we honor who God is. Eugene, thanks for the challenge of diving into the deep water this morning.

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, Good Shepherd, King of Kings, our Rock, we humbly bow in your presence. We are grateful for the witness to your son, who shows us who you are. Help us to be faithful to what we know of you. Amen.