

Who Is Your God?

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Job 38:4-18; Psalm 18:1-16; Romans 10:5-17; Matthew 14:22-33

Who is God, to you? Or another way of asking the question: What is your God like?

Some years ago, while living in the Chicago suburbs, I met a K-Mart sales associate who had emigrated from India. We'll call him Ramesh (not his real name). Ramesh was from the part of India where the language is Gujarati. He was a hard worker who had two other jobs besides his K-Mart job. He drove a beat-up old car and lived, with his family, in a cheap apartment with very little furniture. Eventually, with his industry and thrifty life style, he was able to buy a newly built home in a suburb further out. Ramesh was grooming his son to eventually become a doctor. (I think that's a familiar story; how many Indian doctors do you know?)

Because we had befriended Ramesh, he invited us to meals in each of their sparsely furnished homes. The bedrooms contained only a bed. Ramesh's wife and daughter knelt on the kitchen floor to prepare our meal, which we ate sitting on the carpet around their coffee table. I vividly remember all of that, but one special thing I remember is that Ramesh invited me into another room where he and his son were going to "play their guard" — that is, pray to their god. In this room was a small shrine with the picture of a man depicted with the head of an elephant. This man had been a teacher in India, what we might call a "guru," a few centuries earlier but he had become a god, for Ramesh and perhaps for other members of his Gujarati community. He was the god to whom Ramesh prayed.

Ramesh's situation is not unlike that of the people the earliest Christians had as their neighbors, the people in whose midst they lived. The Roman world was awash in Gods: there was a god for your city, another for your trade or occupation. There were others for seamen, or for officers of the Roman army. There was a special god for your family. Most importantly, Caesar demanded worship as a god. If you didn't bow, or make an offering, or sacrifice to these gods, or take part in their festivals and celebrations, you were looked upon with disapproval and suspicion, regarded as anti-social and a poor citizen.

In the apostle Paul's letters he sometimes refers to "unbelievers," but these unbelievers were not the atheists of today who claim to have no religion. Instead, they were *hyper-religious*, worshipers of a multitude of gods. Christians, in fact, were called "atheists" because they had reduced their inventory of divinities to One. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords' — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:5-6).

Throughout the Bible's history of the people of God we witness a constant struggle to understand who God really is, or who really is God. I have only to mention the harsh words the Hebrew prophets have for the people of Israel and Judah, who were so easily lured into the worship of the local gods of Canaan, the many *baalim* of various locations or ethnic groups in the land.

Lately I've been reading through the Book of Ezekiel; perhaps no prophet was more vigorous in his condemnation of his people for their desertion of the one God, comparing Israel and Judah to prostitutes who had conferred their favors on lovers other than the Lord who had mercifully delivered them from Egyptian bondage and graciously entered into covenant with

them at Sinai. Throughout Scripture there is the constant reminder that, in the words of the Hebrew *shema*, “the LORD is our God, the Lord alone, and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The apostle John concludes his First Letter with one sentence: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

So let me return to my opening question: Who is God, to you? What kind of God is he? What is your God like? You see, Scripture tells us that God made us in his image. But we have a tendency to *make God in our image*. Or we fashion him according to our own desires. We want God to be *the god we choose*, whereas the Bible puts it the other way around: *God has chosen us*, and entered into an agreement with us on his initiative and not ours. That’s what Scripture calls *grace*.

The oft-repeated summary of this agreement, or covenant is, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” We don’t get to pick what kind of God he is supposed to be, nor what kind of people we’re supposed to be as his partners in the agreement. Scripture makes it clear that we have a mutual responsibility. God is supposed to do what a God does: to govern, to lead, to provide, to save or deliver. And his people are supposed to keep their end of the bargain by doing what his people are asked to do: to follow, and to serve, and to worship. When we reverse those roles — when we try to tell God what to do and what he’s supposed to be like, when we make him into *our* servant — then we’ve stepped outside the agreement. The god we think we believe in isn’t the same God the Scriptures reveal to us.

For some people, belief in God depends on their personal circumstances or ethical views. We hear people say, “I can’t believe in a God who allows such evil to occur,” or “I can’t believe in a God who allows suffering, like the way I’ve suffered.” In recent years, a famous scientist indicated he had abandoned any belief in God because he had been struck with an illness that left him almost completely paralyzed, unable even to speak except through a voice replicator he could operate with a few fingers. With all due respect for his brilliant intellect, it seems illogical to me to make the existence of the Creator of a universe of billions of galaxies depend on the circumstances of one man on a small planet in an obscure arm of the Milky Way. Some people seem to think about God as though he were “a big angel up in the sky” (to borrow Frank Turek’s phrase) whose job is to bail us out of difficulties and solve our problems. We need to think about God in a perspective much greater than that.

As believers we know God through Jesus, who said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) — Jesus who said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). When we think about God the Father, and our Lord Jesus, in self-serving ways we diminish him, so that he becomes like the gods of the Greeks and Romans whose sphere of influence was limited to a household, or a city, or a trade. We forget the cosmic scope of God’s interest in the universe he has made, how as the Letter to the Hebrews states, “he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3).

Or we may think of the Lord in personal and sentimental ways that diminish our sense of his majesty, the scope of his awesome power. Don’t get me wrong; I have been learning to think of the Lord as my dearest friend, a closer friend than any kind of human companionship. But sometimes, even as Christians, we describe this friendship in ways that aren’t true to how the Scriptures speak of him. Some of our songs express a sentiment that isn’t really appropriate when speaking of the Creator of the universe:

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

Really? Through all the centuries since Jesus rose from the dead has no other believer ever known the Lord in such a personal way? I find it distasteful to express my faith in such a self-centered manner, as though it involved just me and the Lord and no one else, no other members of the body of Christ through the ages and no other aspects of his creation, even the material universe. I am sorry if I have offended you because that was your favorite song, but I have to be true to what I understand to be the biblical portrait of our Lord and God.

That, finally, brings us around to where we connect with the lessons that have been read in our service today, because they present a picture of our God that calls into question some of our customary ways of thinking about him. Our Gospel lesson from Matthew, for example, shows us a Jesus who is not the one who “speaks, and the sound of his voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing.” No, this Jesus comes to his disciples on the water in the dark of night, in such a form that they are terrified. He raises Peter, who tries to come to him and, out of fear of the wind and the waves, begins to sink. He rebukes the storm with a word. The disciples worship Jesus, exclaiming, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:32). They ask themselves, in another incident recorded by Luke, “Who is this man, that he commands even the wind and water, that they obey him?” (Luke 8:25).

We want to know the Lord Jesus as our loving friend and helper, who never turns away anyone who comes to him for rescue and healing. And so he is. We want to be, as the apostle Paul says, one spirit with the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 6:17), so that we dwell in him and he in us, the “hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). But at the same time Jesus is awesome, fearful, mysterious. In his resurrection Jesus has come into another dimension beyond our ability to comprehend; he is not someone to be trifled with or treated in a casual and over-familiar way. We need to be careful how we speak of him in our songs, our prayers, our other expressions of devotion.

If this is true of the Son, it is also true of the Father, the Creator of all things. Theologians sometimes describe the attributes of God in fancy, polysyllabic terms: his *omnipresence*, he is everywhere at all times; his *omniscience*, he knows all past, present, and future; his *omnipotence*, he is all-powerful; his *immutability*, he does not change. But we need to be careful not to think we know everything about God and can put his actions and characteristics into categories of our own devising. As the prophet Isaiah declares, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Job found this out, as in our Old Testament lesson, when God confronted him with his presumption: “Where were *you* when I laid the foundation of the earth?” Okay, Mr. Know-it-all, you think you have me figured out. Then explain how I made this planet and regulated its rotation so you have sunrise and sunset. What’s more, explain what death is and what happens after that. “Declare, if you know all this” (Job 38:4, 18). We like to speculate about what God may be like, and Scripture reveals him to us especially through his Son Jesus. But some of the things we say about God tend to violate Paul’s admonition “not to go beyond what is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6). As Paul wrote to Timothy, God “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16).

In Christian circles there’s a popular saying: “God is good, all the time.” But let’s remember that Scripture doesn’t always portray the Lord as the harmless fuzz ball who only does nice things. The Psalm for today, Psalm 18, brings out another aspect of God’s nature:

*He parted the heavens and came down
with a storm cloud under his feet. . . .
The LORD thundered out of heaven;
the Most High uttered his voice.*

*He loosed his arrows and scattered them;
he hurled thunderbolts and routed them
The beds of the seas were uncovered,
and the foundations of the world laid bare,
at your battle cry, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.* (Psalm 18:10, 14-16)

The God Scripture reveals to us can be severe when he wants to be. As Paul states in his letter to the Romans, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18).

So who is your God? What is your God like? Maybe not the docile grandpa or the cuddly pal he’s sometimes made out to be. Maybe a God to be reckoned with: more mysterious, more tremendous, more formidable than how we’re used to speaking of him. Isn’t it wonderful, then, that through his faithfulness to his covenant with us, our God has made a way for us to come to him through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus — a way to appeal for rescue from the false values and harmful distortions this world culture would impose on us? A way to ask him for help with our needs, whether involving our health, our relationships, our responsibilities, or other circumstances?

Yes, through his Word, and through Jesus the Word made flesh, our God has revealed himself as the awesome, yet merciful, God we know and worship. As Paul writes, in our lesson from his Letter to the Romans, “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:8-9). Through Jesus’ death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead, we have a way to approach that awesome God, the Creator of this vast universe. So let us pray to *that* God: not the god of Ramesh, with its elephant head; not the cozy god of our favorite songs; not the god who is our cosmic errand boy; not the god we fashion in our own image thinking he’s just like us. Let us worship the real God who makes himself known through his Word, and in that worship let us be elevated into his presence.

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