

LENTEN SERMON SERIES: THE BIG QUESTIONS:

LENT 2: Where is God? If God is in Heaven, where is Heaven?

Intro:

Well- Gee-Thanks- to the person who gave me the question “*Where is God? And, if God is in Heaven, where is Heaven?*” to answer in a 15-20 minute sermon...*I am scratching my head here.* And yet- Thank you. Really. It was an exciting task to whittle a life time of learning down to the bare essentials for this morning. Lets go ahead – with the caution – that this is limited wisdom from a limited human in a limited amount of time. And that the attempt to answer this question is comparable to a venture into the Mighty Rockies on foot– such as in the picture on the bulletin cover. A beautiful task, but not without danger. So let us begin with prayer: “*May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, Our Rock and Redeemer.*” (Psalm 19:14)

1. How can we make statements about God? How can we even speak about God?

“*My thoughts are not your thoughts....*” (Isaiah 55:8-9) etc.

There is so much caution, especially in the Older Testament. God is not Waldo.

While it may be tricky and take some time to find Waldo in one of the illustrated pages of the Waldo books- finding Waldo is easy, because we know clearly who Waldo is- a fictional male character in a drawing-and what he looks like: He always wears a red and white striped shirt, blue jeans, brown boots, red and white striped socks, glasses, and his red and white bobbed hat. No matter how crowded the scene, you will eventually find Waldo because you know exactly what to look for.

If people think they know exactly who God is, they only need to listen to a reading such as from today's Isaiah passage to caution.

Not only those who mistake statues for the divine are object of the Isaiah's comedy. We modern humans worship the idols of our minds or wallets just as frequently.

So, we must take our shoes off and tread carefully and barefoot, as Moses did in front of the burning bush, because even in the search for God, we stand on sacred ground.

Your question, unknown friend, was “Where is God?” - but do you

assume you know already who God is? Let us begin again there. Who is the God we want to locate? We must let God speak for herself/himself, right?

For who among you, say if we were asking "*just who is our organist?*" would not begin by asking her or him directly? It would be rude to define her without her or his input, over her head, we must hear her or him out first. How much more so with God.

But since God can not be directly asked, we must resort to the next best way, to what we would do if our organist were vacationing at the time we were asking: and that is to ask those who have heard her/him play, sung in Choirs with her/him, travelled with her/him, and have been her/his family. The witnesses to her/his life. The effects she's had on them. In other words, we need to listen for first hand words from the one we want to know, and to listen to witness accounts of those who have felt his impact.

The latin word for witness is Testament (testamentum) and so we turn to the witnesses we are beholden to: the Older ones in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Newer Ones in the Greek scriptures, and then of course we would also listen to people we trust throughout the centuries, up to this day, we would and we do ask them about their experience of God. You would only consult people whose way of life you trust, wouldn't you – say people whose way of life is kinda in tune with what you're seeking?

Because, could someone who is totally indifferent to music ever fully understand who our organist is?)

No appropriate statement about God then comes from a place of indifference towards God. Saint Anselm (1033-1109) was a Benedictine monk, Christian philosopher, and scholar who is recognized for many intellectual accomplishments, including his application of reason in exploring the mysteries of faith. But his best known statement is that *speaking about God, is always and must be always "faith seeking understanding."* (theo-logy= speaking -logein, about God -theo)

So we do not reason about God, where God is, who God is, in any detached philosophical manner; we can do this of course, and it has been done many times, but abstract reasoning is not appropriate to the object of our quest, to what we are seeking to understand. We need to let God reveal godself.

We are also cautioned to imagine that we could answer the God question by our philosophical speculation, our bright minds in physics

or mathematics.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) is another trusted witness for me as to where God is to be found. The French mathematical genius and God seeker surprised his friends when after his death the following scribbled note was discovered on a piece of paper. He had hand sewn the note into his coat: *Year of grace 1654, Monday 23 November, feast of St.*

Clement . . . from about half past ten at night to about half an hour after midnight, FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certitude, heartfelt joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. Joy, Joy... let me not forget...

The God of Abraham, Isaac...not of philosophers . The God of the stories. The wild, fiery God who refuses to be manipulated by humans ...

The God of the stories...the God of the old witnesses.....

Moses asks God” Who are you?” The response is “I am who I am” or, in another possible translation” I am who I shall be”. Again – a strong statement that God is Sovereign and free. God refuses to be contained by human names or imagination. God will be known in action, not statuary.

So, the first preliminary answer then we must give to the original question “Where is God?”: “God is where God chooses to manifest Godself.” God is free, and does manifest godself in action, . If Moses were giving an answer to our question: where is God? He would have said perhaps: One day in the dorn busch, the next day when I went to see Pharaoh and pleaded with him for the Israelites freedom, the week after when we miraculously crossed the red sea, the year after when we wandered in the wilderness in the search for the promised land.....And, he might to us today: So, based on my experience- for whose freedom are you pleading? Are you perhaps writing letters through amnesty? God is there. Who is pleading with the Pharaohs for peace right now? The high school students taking to the streets against gun violence surely must know I am there , Who is binding up the broken hearted? Surely God is in the Nursing Home where an extra kind helper massages the feet of a sobbing resident...

The second answer to “where is God?” has to be: God is not in a place, but God is in action.

2. God in action in the universe, or 'The Creation as Witness' (or ""Book")

There is a way God in action has chosen to make godself known to all of life and all humans no matter when they lived and where they lived. Nature is a source of permanent awe and wonder. How come there is something, and not nothing? People of all times have wondered. Beings who are conscious in a different way from us may feel that they are part of a greater whole. In Jewish\ Christian poetry we say the birds praise their maker with song. Nature itself points to God. Nature is not God, but God permeates all of nature. Nature is Life and death, immense diversity and wonder - all of it sacred because its of God, in God. How do we know its not just a meaningless accidental happening (Stephen Hawking)? We don't know. We have a decision to make.

“Here are only two ways to live your life: as though nothing is a miracle, or as though everything is a miracle.” Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955) Physicist & Nobel Laureate said this.

For humans a decision is to be made about nature. If we see it as complete randomness, we choose a worldview. If we see it as witness to God, we choose a worldview.

The nice thing is that when we see nature as Creation, we can have our cake and eat it too. We turn to science to ever go deeper in an understanding of its unfathomable energies and expressions and functioning, that are nothing short of an endless string of miracles. God is in nature, but whether God is identical with nature, or “above” nature as a separate being who made nature like an artist creates a piece of art – there have been in Christian history many answers to the question of just how God is acting in nature.

Since we don't have much time this morning, I will just say two things: God can only be known by us as “God -in- action”. Not as a “remote being”. We can not know God separate from-in- action.

Thus the appropriate way to talk about God is in telling stories about how humans experience God's actions and in celebrating God in loving, poetic images (metaphors) related to those actions, such as- Fire, wind, rock, eagle, mother, father., son, dove daughter, bride and groom etc..

3. Is God in Heaven?

Some of the Older witnesses have passages that picture the God-in action they've met

say- as “enthroned above the heavens” enthroned above the earth', or,

above the floods”

Psalms, Isaiah. Early peoples did picture God above the stars, even as they experienced God in action on earth. When they said “God enthroned above the heavens” or “the floods” they meant: Divine power in a realm beyond what we scientifically know. These early peoples' science was of course still very different from ours.

In the New Testament we have Jesus talk a lot about heaven, “*our father, who art in heaven*” or “*the kingdom of heaven*” is at hand.

Where is this heaven?

In our common use of language,

(as biblical scholar Marcus Borg points out in his excellent book “Speaking Christian- why Christian words have lost their power and how they can be restored”)

heaven is understood as a blessed afterlife, somewhere where we go after we die. And the opposite is hell. But, in the bible, Heaven has several meanings most of which have nothing to do with an afterlife.

Heaven is that domain where God is alive both in and beyond the physical world and our human condition. -Heaven is not a place with geographical boundaries, not even a place that might be found thousands of years from now if we could venture to the furthest galaxy in another universe. Heaven is the realm where God is active being unrestricted and fully God.

So-is God in Heaven? YES, absolutely.

“Our Father, *who is in heaven*”... that refers to the realm where God is fully God.

“*Your will be done, on earth- as it is in heaven*” illustrates that understanding.

We need to pray this because human will is not in tune with “Heaven” that is... God's full being in action- We pray that our earth too will become a place where God is fully embodied, acted out...

(By the way, In the gospels, the words “Kingdom of God” or Kingdom of Heaven” mean the same thing. The same parables of Jesus are about the Reign of God in Luke and the Reign of heaven in Matthew.,

(because, being Jewish and writing for Jews, Matthew does not wish to use the word “God”.)

4. God is Loving Action

Time is running out and I hope that you feel that we have made some

progress in understanding. Where is God? Where is Heaven?
Where “God” is acting in the way that God's witnesses have taught us
we can recognize that its God and not something else.

(Some have said, “God” should be a verb.

While this has some merit, the problem with that is, that we experience
“God” with character, as someone who addresses us in a specific way,
calls us, guides us, etc. This is why we speak of God as “person”.)

“God” is not in just any action. We had seen from the Older witnesses
(OT) an emphasis on the God who liberates, guides, and has a passion
for actions of kindness, uprightness, fairness and fairness. (if you
wonder about the passages that sow division and witness to a god of
hatred, please see my first sermon in this series , Feb.18th)

The most powerful witness for Christians, of what kind of action God
is present in, is in the actions of the person of Jesus of Nazareth and in
what happens in Jesus' death and after.

Given these actions, the most trustworthy witnesses who have
encountered God (in New Testament times) declare that “God is
love” (*evangelist John, apostle Paul*) Jesus of Nazareth's story becomes
the key witness to the kind of action God is.

Read the Gospels under this aspect – it may open your eyes.

This is why after Easter, in the combination of Jesus' life, death and
especially in what happens at Easter, the witnesses of that time
understood: In that man 's life, death and resurrection God's action is
embodied fully –. Jesus was God's reign, was God-in action- in love.
And this is why the Jesus stories are really God stories.

Dear unknown friend,

I hope this has been helpful. “Where is God? Where is heaven?” you
asked. Each question leads to more questions, that is normal. But for
now, let me summarize today's answer with this one liner:

*God is Love...No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God
lives in us, and God is brought to full expression in us. (1st John 4:12)*

Texts: Isaiah 44:9-20, 24-26 God is in action – not in objects and idols

Psalm 22 *Sense of abandonment-sense of trust* Voices United pg. 744 (1st&2nd Paragraph)

The Gospel reading: Luke 17:20-21 Kingdom of heaven in your midst Isaiah

Next week: Will Christianity survive?