

“In Everything but Not Used Up”
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Deuteronomy 4:7, 20, 31-33

For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? ... the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now. ... Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them. For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived?

Acts 17:24-28

The God who made the world and everything in it, she who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is she served by human hands, as though she needed anything, since she herself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor she made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and she allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for her and find her – though indeed she is not far from each one of us. For ‘In God we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are God’s offspring.’

As part of my “Last Things” sermon series as I prepare to withdraw from pastoral ministry, today I share a part of my personal theology, something that has been significant in my understanding of God, the word and what God expects of me.ⁱ

Like many of you, I grew up hearing and singing about God’s character. I accepted much of what I learned while resisting other parts. Is God really omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient? I believe that “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). I accept that God is loving and just, compassionate and caring but is God good? What makes God holy?

Upon entering seminary, I learned that many people wonder about such things. Part of my journey was to determine, through my learnings as well as discernment, what I believed to be true to God. My theology. We each have a theology, things we believe about God, humanity, the world. And this shapes how we live even if we never think about it. Today, I will talk about twin attributes of God that helped shape my theology.

First, what do we mean when we speak of God’s attributes? An attribute is something true, about God or a person. God reveals Godself in many ways. Through these revelations, we begin to understand God’s character.

When we look at these attributes, we are seeking answers to questions like: Who is God? What is God like? What kind of God is God?

You and I have a beginning and an end, yet when Moses asked who was talking from the burning bush, God said, “I Am The One Who Always Is” (Exodus 3:14). We exist in only one

place and moment, yet the psalmist writes, “Where can I flee from your presence?” (139:7). The psalms sing of God’s attributes – of compassion and justice, love and faithfulness (103:8; 116:5; 145:8...).

God is omniscient. A.W Tozer wrote that “God perfectly knows [Godself] and, being the source and author of all things, it follows that [God] knows all that can be known.” Besides knowing everything, God is ever-present. The prophet Jeremiah records, ““Am I a God who is only nearby and not far off? Can people hide themselves in secret places so I don’t see them?”” (23:23-24)

God is loving. 1 John says, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (4:8). God reaches for us, chases after us. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). God is our rock, steadfast. Of course, this love is worth so much only because God is faithful. The world is constantly changing yet God’s faithful love and compassion are renewed every morning. (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Along with this love, God is gracious and compassionate. *Compassion* literally means to “suffer with.” God shares our struggles, our fears and pains. And God reaches out to us with comfort and caring.

Of course, God is holy, except, for a long time, I didn’t know what that meant. *Holy* means sacred but also set apart. *Holiness* refers to God’s otherness. God is unlike anything else. And, and this is a big deal, wherever God appears, like at the burning bush, that place is holy just because God is there.

Yet for all God’s attributes, and this is only a snapshot of some of them, for most of my life something seemed to be missing, especially as I observed other people’s lived theology. You see, I believe that God profoundly cares, not just for humanity, but for every being, every stone and star, every bug and weed.

In reading Sallie McFague’s book *The Body of God*, I found the path that connected my faith in God with my belief that all of life, indeed all of creation, is sacred.

To introduce this, I ask you, what would it mean if we saw Jesus as the model of God’s love for all that is bodily? Would we place more value on the physical world?

If we interpreted sin as the refusal to share the basics of life with others, in what ways would this change us? Would we love the least and the lost differently?

If we viewed creation, everything that is, as bodied from God and empowered with God’s breath of life, what would this mean for us? How much more would we work to save the Antarctic ice sheets and the orangutans?

If we saw ourselves as inspirited bodies, rather than souls wrapped in flesh, if we recognized our interconnectedness with all other bodied beings and things and accepted our shared responsibility with God for the welfare of this planet, what would we do differently?

Because it is. And we are.

God is both transcendent and immanent. Transcendence means God is beyond comparison. We can know what God reveals to us, in scripture, in nature, in life, yet when we think, “Now I know God,” we are fooling ourselves. God is beyond us in every way.

God is also immanent, living within us and every other created thing, connecting and interacting with all creation. God works through our lives and the life of the world to effect transformation. God is present, active and participating.

We might say that the universe *is* the Body of God. And, we are encouraged to see the creator *in* creation. This helps explain how we can feel closer to God in nature, looking at old dogs sleeping, listening to music and enjoying quiet conversations, as we gaze at the stars and dig in the dirt.

Within every facet of the cosmos, God is. God creates everything and, like any artist, puts some of Godself into that creation. So, every creature, every molecule, is part of God's Body.

And yet, God is not contained. God *cannot* be contained, even within the universe, even within our imaginations. "God is both within all things and beyond all things."ⁱⁱ

And yet, do you remember, in Exodus when Moses asks to see God? God tells him that he may see the back but not the face (33:23). So it is with us. Even with God all around us, we see only God's back. We can never know God fully. But the back was good enough for Moses; and it's good enough for us. In caring for each other and for the earth and all her other inhabitants, we can experience God's back.

Last week, I reminded us of Martin Luther King's words that "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." This is what he was talking about! None of us will experience justice or safety or peace until we all experience it. When we learn this, and live it, we will not be far from God's kindom.

We usually talk about God's incarnation at Christmas: Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us. This different understanding of God's incarnation will lead us to a deeper spirituality. In so much of our lives, we separate the sacred from everything else. There are the God-things and regular things. There is Sunday and there is the rest of the week. Church and the rest of life.

We do ourselves and God a disservice when we live with this compartmentalism. For God is in all things, in all moments, in all situations. Twenty-two times in the Bible, God assures us, "I am with you always." The psalmist asks, "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" Where, indeed.

I leave you with this last thought: If God is within all things, then truly all things are sacred.

ⁱ This message draws from ideas gleaned from Sallie McFague's book *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993.

ⁱⁱ Sallie McFague.