

4) God Part 1

The meaning of "God", and Images of God

In Theology 101 parts 1-3 under the heading: Epistemology, we focussed on how it is we claim to know when it comes to spiritual or theological truth. Today, we begin with a new heading in several parts. That heading is simply: "God." What can we believe and know about God? God is the word we Christians use for that great beyond, that mystery behind all that has come to be in our world. But what is God? How do we think about God? Do we think of God as a person or person-like, or more as an idea? Or is God more like an energy or force? Traditionally and biblically the approach has been all of the above rather than this and not that.

1. God as person or person-like. Much of the biblical picture of God images God in all kinds of person-like ways which include bodily imagery (hand, arm, feet) and emotions like sadness and grief, anger, joy, desire and even jealousy. Why? There are at least two reasons. First, we can relate to a person. Relating to God, talking and praying to God, yelling at God when we're upset and feel let-down, appealing to God for help, feeling God close as we do a lover, friend or caring parent... all of this and more is easier to experience when we think of God as person-like even when we cannot physically see God.

Second, though, to think of God as a person is to think of God as vulnerable. All the emotions of God in the bible have to do with God's feelings in reaction to God's human partner with whom God is bound by love. When God's people or a creature within God's creation including Mother Earth hurts, God hurts. When a part of God's creation is abused, God gets angry. When God's love is not reciprocated or when the human creature goes after other gods, God feels betrayed. God needs loyalty, faithfulness and love reciprocated. The whole story of the bible is how God will find a way to be reconciled with the human creature in particular who is the one big problem within creation who keeps causing trouble within creation. Freedom is a beautiful thing but it can also be the cause of great hurt and harm when poor choices are made.

2. God as energy or force in nature. God is imaged biblically within all kinds of natural phenomena used to describe the way God moves in and through all things. There is wind and fire, and the terror and beauty of natural phenomena all around, like a burning bush that continues to hold together (Exodus 3). God is also imaged as creatures of all kinds too (e.g. an eagle, a dove, a lion), and as a natural object (e.g. a rock, a fortress wall, a mountain). All these images communicate something of God's character and being.

3. Biblical Images of God:

A) God is like a lover who demands loyalty, faithfulness and passionate love from God's beloved. How will God forgive the failure of God's human partner to love God as God loves them? God must create a pathway to healing, reconciliation and transformation in the heart of the human creature. Humans need to grow and rise up in their character to become more

faithful in their love toward God and all creation to match God's faithfulness of love toward them. This means humans need to be given new chances again and again after they fail and fall and betray their love relationship with God.

B) God is also like a parent who cares and seeks to guide God's children through the many challenges human face. God must also help God's children as they suffer from the terrible consequences to poor choices. Such suffering is sometimes seen as God's way of disciplining God's children with the hope that they will learn and grow into better humans in their relations with each other and with mother earth.

C) Other human images include God as shepherd (caring for the human sheep), God as master builder of God's people, God as warrior (fighting for God's vulnerable people), but also God as a peacemaker whose vision is of a global kingdom where all God's creatures live in relations of reciprocal love.

D) Images of God as creatures include God as a dove (reflecting God's peace and God's Spirit moving), God as an eagle (under whose wings humans may find refuge), God as a mother hen (seeking to gather together and protect her chicks) and more.

E) Images of God as natural phenomena include God in thunder, lightening and a great cloud (Moses on the mountain receiving the 10 commandments and the cloud ahead of the people reflecting God's guiding presence always with them and leading them on their journey to freedom). But when the prophet Elijah escapes the king's forces seeking to kill him hundreds of years after Moses, he finds his way to the same mountain of God, and rather than thunder, lightning and a strong wind, he recognizes God in a moment of "sheer silence".

How have you experienced God close to you? What images are especially attractive to you? Remember, the biblical approach is an inclusive both-and seeking to inspire our experiential imagination. What relational images, creatures or natural phenomena reveal to you something of God and even open you up to see and experience God more deeply?

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