

EXPERIENCING GOD AS THREE

2 Corinthians 13: 11-13, Matthew 28: 16-20

How do you experience God? How can you experience God? Is it God you are experiencing or a figment of your imagination? For centuries people have sought answers to such questions. From the beginning of time people have sought to connect with the sacred in ways that were life-giving and life-transforming. What happened with Jews and Christians was that we gave a particular name to the sacred. We named the sacred "God," and God was given particular content. Even as the God we imagined reflected our own heart, as God in us grew and evolved our understanding and experience of God's essence also grew and evolved.

From hate and revenge toward our enemies, to punishment and judgement of them and us, to the primacy of love above the failures and flaws of being human... this is who God became as we followed the journey through the scriptures, and for us Christians, all the way to Jesus and his Holy Spirit. It is all about love. And love, first and foremost is about compassion. Compassion yes, this is what love is all about - compassion that is able to forgive, compassion that is able to let go without seeking revenge, compassion that is able to fight for justice without humiliating or hating our enemy, compassion that seeks for peace, reconciliation where possible and human dignity even for enemies, yes compassion in all its fullness, this is what love is about and this is what God as love is all about.

Ok, fine, God is love and love is God and God as love is about compassion. But how do we access this kind of love? How do we experience God? How does God become real for us in the nitty-gritty and the messiness that is life in this world?

Three ways, yes, three ways - that is how we experience God according to the Christian view. God may be one, but the ways we experience God are more than one. Of course, in the truest sense there are as many ways to experience God as there is diversity among people with their own personalities, experiences and the unique mystery that make each of us who we are. But according to Christianity as it begins in the Bible, there are three primary ways God is experienced as the Love that holds all things together in spite of the chaos.... three ways.

First, God as love and love as God is experienced as transcendence, as a great beyond that holds the universe together. Whether it is through our marvelling at the stars in the sky on some clear summer night, whether it is marvelling at the beauty of the flowers in our garden, whether it is considering the intricacies of a tiny insect or the human body or the organic evolution and co-dependence of all living things on this planet, however it happens, we are drawn into experiencing the whole as beautiful, as determined by a grand,

benevolent force seeking to draw us beyond the mundane and every day to wonder, awe, reverence and reciprocity. For us Christians, this great transcendent other is named God. And God as the bible speaks of God, can be known and experienced in a personal way.

We experience God as a loving, caring parent who holds all things together in spite of the immediate circumstances of life that can turn us upside down all around. Often God is called father and mother too. The God who has created all that is and holds all things together, the God who is the source and energy of all that lives, the God to whom we pray for guidance, strength and providential care; throughout history people of faith have turned to God as transcendent other and found comfort, peace, and purpose entrusting their lives within a greater wholeness. Have you experienced God as transcendent other? Does this kind of image of God have meaning and significance for you and the way you pray to God? Do you find comfort and guidance in the image of God as father, mother, or do you prefer parent instead?

Christians throughout history have had powerful experiences of God as parent, creating and sustaining all things through love, and also, creating and sustaining all things to serve a life-giving purpose. Whatever the suffering or discouragement before us, and whatever the highs of life that may make us forget our fragile place in the universe, God calls us to experience God's presence as Lord of the universe. God calls us to experience God's presence as transcendent other, as loving, intimate parent, as Father - Mother. How have you experienced God in your living, your praying and your believing?

Second, God as love and love as God has also been experienced as a spiritual reality and force that can live inside us. Whether it is through an active conscience within us, whether it is through the kind of energy we feel when we participate in good things and offer compassion and care to others in a heart-felt way, whether it's that inner conviction to stand up and protest injustice, God has been experienced as Spirit, as Holy Spirit.

The Spirit inside gives us energy. The Spirit inside gives us hope. The Spirit inside gives us renewed capacity to love others, even those who sometimes disappoint us or stand against us. We do not justify or ignore their actions, but we address them with kindness, refusing to trample their humanity or humiliate them in our attempt to redress wrongs. The Spirit inside us is a living, growing thing when we consciously invite God to be a force for good in our lives. The Spirit inside us is a living, active movement that pushes us to go where we have never gone before in our relationships and commitments. The Spirit inside us fills us with a sense of purpose and peace that is eternal and therefore, able to resurrect itself even when we fall into discouragement and despair.

From the earliest days of Pentecost, Christians have experienced God not only as a great benevolent transcendent other who holds all things together through love. They have also experienced God as a spiritual force, a presence, a reality that lives inside and grows,

shapes, and moves life in transforming directions. Have you experienced God as spiritual presence inside you, through your conscience, as peace, as conviction to think, speak and act in ways determined by love and the love in justice? How have you experienced God in your living, your praying and your believing?

Finally, God as love and love as God has been experienced in and through a human being called Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, even though Jesus appeared on this earth as an ordinary human being like you and me, it didn't take long after his death before Christians were not only hailing him as messiah, but as living, resurrected Lord. More than this, Christians began praying to Jesus as they did to God as Father, Mother or as Spirit. Jesus became for them the living out of God in the world, the living out of how God would treat us and help us, the things God would want to say to us and teach us, the kind of healing God would want to give to us inside and out. Jesus may have been an ordinary human being from a small town called Nazareth, but before long he was being confessed as the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one sent by God into the world to save it out of love and for love.

Yes, we can experience God as a great transcendent other, as our Abba in heaven, and yes, we can experience God as Spirit, living, growing and moving inside us in a variety of ways, but we can also experience God and see God in Jesus as he is given us through the gospels and through his continuing presence in the early church as shown us in the New Testament.

Jesus Christ is a concrete image of what God is like and how God heals and makes whole, and sometimes, often times, we need a concrete image in order for God's reality to be real for us and accessible in our everyday, nitty-gritty, messy life where right and wrong are often blurred and truth is hard to find. Jesus makes God real for us in a human way. Jesus reveals to us how love is lived out in the everyday, ambiguous, and stressful life that is ours. This is why Jesus began his message by preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Because we are so conflicted and confused at times, because we struggle with guilt and shame, because we get hurt or discouraged by the way others treat us or how we are made to feel about others, God's love must be experienced as the conviction inside us to repent of wrong as well as the conviction that we are forgiven at every moment we take a step to be honest and surrender our fractured selves over to God. Jesus preached this message and he also embodied God's forgiving love and acceptance by the way he treated, healed, and received people. Jesus the living, human, child of God, the kind of spiritual presence that gives concrete shape and content to God, Jesus the Christ is also, finally, a way in which God has been and continues to be experienced by believers.

How have you experienced God in your living, your praying and your believing? God as transcendent other, holding all things together by love, God as Spirit living and growing inside your heart and soul, God as revealed and given concrete shape and content by Jesus the Christ - three ways in which God has been and continues to be experienced. May such

experience be yours today and, in the days, and years to come. May you seek God through every circumstance and situation in your life that can make you question where good may be found.

May you find God in the world, in your heart and in and through others. May God find you with an open spirit, in spite of all that makes you question yourself, your worth, or your place in God's salvation. May you experience God anew.

Prayer: Come to us eternal God... come upon us Holy Spirit... come and live inside us Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may bear witness to you through our living out of your love... Amen.