

The Mystery of God and the Cloud of Unknowing

Isaiah 6:1-5; Isaiah 55:8-9; Luke 9:29-9; Luke 9:33-36

Today I begin a series of sermons on “Living the Questions.” A joke comes to mind. What do you get when you cross a Unitarian Universalist and a KuKluxKlanner? Answer: Someone who burns a question mark in your front yard. This fall we put the question marks forward. Today, “The Mystery of God and the Cloud of Unknowing.”

I began thinking about this series a few months ago when Sue read to me this writing prompt by a writing teacher: “Write what you don’t know about what you know.” So I began thinking: What do I not know about what I thought I knew!

Then I remembered the poet Rilke’s advice to a young poet:

...Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves...The point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday, far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live yourself into the answer.

So , the adventure begins.

I

Today our questions are about the God whom we know and do not know, the God who is Mystery always beyond our full knowing.

There was a 14th century British spiritual classic called *The Cloud of Unknowing* by an anonymous author. One way the author referred to God was as The Cloud of Unknowing. Our un-knowing of God is a way of knowing by not knowing. The author writes: “We cannot think our way to God.” An authentic spirituality is, I think, one that says: “I know you and I don’t know you.”

In the history of spirituality there are two paths, each important to the other. The first path was named in the Greek *kataphatic*, or with images, later called in the Latin *via positiva*, the positive path, by which we know God in images, thought, concepts. The other path was called *apophatic*, or without images, the *via negativa*, the negative path, the way devoid of images, words, thought, concepts. Spirituality and theology need both. Western Christianity has largely ignored the *via negativa*, concentrating solely on what we know about God. This has produced a faith based on the illusion of certainty (I’ll talk more about this later this Fall).

But Eastern Orthodox Christianity lets the *via negativa* have its crucial role: to preserve the Mystery of God and promote a truer reverence. In Eastern

Orthodox icons, for example, God is pictured sometimes as a black sun in the sky, rimmed with color. Sometimes God is pictured in darkness, beyond our seeing and knowing.

The poet John Keats said that poets need what he called “negative capability”, a curious term. “Negative” here as before in “via negativa”, does not suggest something bad. It’s more like the dark side of the moon. He described the poet as one who,

...is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

Let’s emphasize the word “irritable”. It describes our obsession to know everything fully. Now!

But there is a state of being where we learn to live with uncertainty, mystery, doubts. We don’t have to know everything. Not knowing is a path that leads to a truer way of life, one that recognizes both what we know and do not know.

II

All this applies to our understanding of God which combines what we know and do not know.

The religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are examples of what some call a “revealed religion”, that is, based on what God has revealed to us. But God has not revealed everything to us. Our human minds could not contain it. Even in Jesus God came to us partly revealed and partly concealed in human flesh.

Our two Hebrew texts from Isaiah offer us a picture of a God we know and do not know. In Isaiah 6 Isaiah was in the temple when God revealed God’s self to him in a vision. God was seen and not seen. Smoke filled the temple and the heavenly creatures, the seraphim, flew around him blocking his full view of God. “Woe is me”, cried Isaiah, for at that moment he felt the difference and distance between God the creator and himself as creature.

In Isaiah 55, God reveals God’s self to the Hebrew people in Exile. They are scrambling for some kind of meaning in a terrible time. God says:

For my thoughts (or plans) are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways. For as the heavens are high above the earth so are my ways above your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Sue says “My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways” should be part of the wedding ceremony! That’s not entirely facetious, in that there should be a reverence for the mystery of another’s sacred personhood too.

Now let's move to the New Testament and the scene in Luke we call *The Transfiguration*. Jesus took his disciples up the mountain. He was transfigured in dazzling, blinding brightness. Then Moses and Elijah joined him. God said to the disciples: "This is my son, the chosen, the beloved, listen to him." That was the revelation part. But something else happened too. As Luke described it: "a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud." (Luke 9:34).

There was the revelation of God's word and there was the impenetrable cloud. God in the Cloud of Unknowing. They experienced the holy fear called Awe, and they said nothing about it for days.

And one more, the cry of the abandonment Jesus felt on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" At this moment Jesus felt the terror that the God he thought he knew, his loving *Abba*, was not God at all. We might call it a theological dislocation, a spiritual disorientation. The moment passed—later he prayed "*Abba* into your hands I commit my Spirit"—but at that moment, Jesus experienced it as terrifyingly real. He could not understand God, nor why he was on the cross.

We can have such moments. Scriptures talk about moving "from faith to faith" and, to me, this means moving from one system of belief to another, from a less adequate to a more adequate understanding of God and faith. But in

between, that journey can be troubling, even frightening. The ground under you may seem to shake. One doubt opens up a world of doubts, and we may feel lost, adrift at sea. One person living through this told her therapist, “It’s like changing religions”—from one that bound her to one that freed her, from a God of fierce codes and penalties to a God of love.

God is leading us from faith to faith, from a lesser to a truer, more adequate faith. And because it can live with uncertainties, mysteries, doubts it is a more durable kind of faith, one that encompasses both knowing and unknowing.

Theologian Paul Tillich helped me as he wrote about what he called “the God beyond God”, the God beyond our full knowing, the God beyond the one our religions have created with their images, words, concepts of God. The ancient Hebrew altar had no images on it, lest we confuse an image with the God beyond our images.

III

Seeking to preserve the mystery of God, Christian and Jewish theologians have taken two paths. The first, aligned with the *via negativa*, has stripped language of any personal, human dimensions. God is One, or Mystery, or Ground of Being, or Cloud of Unknowing. No human constructs of God.

The other way, akin to the *via positiva*, preserves the mystery of God through a *multiplicity* of images. To form our God out of one image or one concept is to create an idol, a graven image of the mind, for example God as Father, or King.

But we can preserve the Mystery by a multiplicity of images. The mystical form of Judaism called Hasidism created an endless stream of images for God, not just a King or a Father, but also a Queen, a Bride, a River, a Well, a Tree, a Mountain. They called God *ein sof*—which means “the Endless”.

A journalist and writer friend in Charlotte who goes to Caldwell Presbyterian church has just finished a spiritual memoir entitled *The Church of I Don't Have a Clue*. She discovers important clues along the way, but needed along that way the Church of I Don't Have a Clue. I think we might need a Church of I Don't Have a Clue, alongside the Church of These Things I Know. As Emily Dickinson wrote:

...We both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps
Believing nimble.

What do you think?

