

As One Unknown

The Book of Esther; James 5:13:20; Mark 9:38-50

Whitefish UMC

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- † Here's a Bible trivia question for you: which book of the Bible never mentions God, even once? Here's a hint: it's one of two books of the Bible named after a woman. Not Ruth, the faithful daughter-in-law, but Esther, the fiery and beautiful queen who plots to save her people from the Persian king.
- † It's tempting to regale you with the story of Esther, on whose courage the Jewish feast of Purim is based. But instead, let's focus on how an entire book of the Bible could evoke God's presence and still not attempt to describe God by name.
- † Perhaps there is wisdom in the book of Esther's singularity. Because as Daniel Clendenin says, "It's scary to consider just how idolatrous our ideas about God can be. We chop God down to size, create him in our own image, and imagine that he loves all the people we love and hates all the people we hate."
- † Do we want to be like the Psalmist in today's responsive reading and boast that God is on our side and will destroy our enemies? But aren't we uncomfortable when others do that? We react in horror as certain televangelists blame tragedies such as 9/11 and disastrous tsunamis on God, because God is punishing evildoers and enemies.
- † But how, then, can we begin to know God, who the scriptures say transcends all creation and cosmos, without putting God into our back

pockets where He remains until it's convenient to pull Him out when times get tough?

- † A recent article in the *New Yorker* by James Wood describes the spate of recent books written by scholars who want to counter the best-sellers by militant atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. These scholars rightly believe that these popular atheists make God into the caricature of who God really is.
- † But as James Wood notes, the new anti-atheists make the opposite mistake. They avoid blatant idolatry, but their alternate images of God are so obscure and inaccessible that they make no sense to most people longing for a relationship with the divine.
- † For these writers, God is more like “an aristocratic vapor,” a rarefied God whom no one, other than people like them, actually believes in. For them, God is more like an academic formula: “The Highest One=the Outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of Existence Itself.” Whew.
- † So what are we ordinary folks supposed to think and believe about God? Do you remember the wonderful movie “The Gods Must Be Crazy?” In it, a Kalahari bushman is as surprised as the rest of his tribe when a Coke bottle, thrown from a passing plane, lands in the middle of their village.
- † This “gift from the gods” proves to be a mixed blessing when the tribesmen fight over it and eventually use it for a weapon. To keep peace in the village, one tribal member is assigned to take the bottle to “the ends of the earth” and throw it back to the gods.

- † Meanwhile, back in urbanized South Africa, a young woman, fed up with her office job, takes another position teaching Kalahari children. En route to the bush, the young teacher is asked, “So, are you going to do an Albert Schweitzer in Botswana?”
- † The questioner refers to the great, Nobel Prize winning theologian and doctor who gave up his position and material comforts to help the poor in Africa. The young woman goes off to the Kalahari, and, along with other quirky characters, proves that indeed God is indescribable, except through acts of love and service.
- † As Schweitzer famously wrote in his book, The Quest for the Historical Jesus, *“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time.*
- † *He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is.”*
- † I love those words, and I believe with all my heart that it is through the ordinary relationships of our lives, the ordinary ones that become extraordinary, even holy, that we come to know God. How is that possible? It seems almost too obvious.
- † It’s as if Schweitzer were thinking of the words of today’s scripture from the book of James when he wrote that beautiful reflection. As paraphrased in the Message, hear this passage as if and because it is meant for you:

- † *Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you've sinned, you'll be forgiven—healed inside and out.*
- † *Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with.*
- † There are a couple of key components of relationship here, aren't there? Well, actually more than a couple. But two of the most important ministries of Jesus, God incarnate, are at work: healing and forgiveness.
- † Healing and forgiveness were two of Jesus' most concrete ways of demonstrating God's love, and nature, to humanity. Speaking of concrete, here's an interesting story:
- † A child psychologist moved into a new area. He had a particularly irritating habit of correcting parents in the neighborhood for their bad parenting. When he saw something he didn't like, he would come out of his house and say to the parent, "That's not the way! Love's the way, love's the way."
- † After a few months of this, the local residents were getting decidedly annoyed. Then one day, the psychologist was pouring a new cement sidewalk in front of his house. A teenager came careening down the street on his mountain bike, lost control and went plowing through the wet cement.

- † In a fit of rage, the child psychologist started screaming at the teenager and threatening to destroy his bike. The boy's Mom, watching from her window was almost jumping for joy, as she dashed out of her house, looked the psychologist in the eye and quoted back to him his own words: "That's not the way! Love's the way, love's the way." To which the psychologist replied "Ah, yes, but I was talking about love in the abstract, not in the concrete." I don't know about you, but I find it much easier to talk about forgiveness in the abstract than in the concrete. (Peter Perry)
- † The difference between the abstract and the concrete is this: Abstract is when we are talking about you, and concrete is when we are talking about me! It is relatively easy to talk about love and forgiveness, and often very difficult to put it into practice. It is hard to forgive. It is hard to love those who do not love us.
- † And it is hard to pray for healing, to pray with all our hearts, and to sometimes not get the answers we want. A young woman with Lupus writes a moving story about just how she believes the Lord rescued her from sickness, even though her Lupus still remains.
- † She writes: "Sickness can make your relationship with God strong in the strangest of ways. Sickness can give us permission to be mad at God. We can scream, yell, and kick our legs until we are blue in the face. The great thing about getting mad at God is that he is big enough to take our anger....God is big enough to take our sorrows and empathize with our pain. He takes anger and finds ways to show us love."
- † She goes on: "My favorite wildflower is Queen Anne's lace. Its beautiful, big, white blossom has a small red dot in the center of it.

- The rare thing about this flower is that it cannot blossom unless it is first infested with bugs. It cannot become all that the Lord created it to be unless the bugs come and coerce the blossom to open.
- † We are like Queen Anne’s lace. We cannot become all that God has planned for us to be if we do not allow the ‘bugs’ in our life to help us blossom.”
 - † I don’t know about you, but I’d rather blossom without the bugs, thank you very much. But sometimes it doesn’t work out that way, and yet God is even in the bugs.
 - † My friend Esther Angel, former pastor at Polson UMC, died this summer. Named after the biblical heroine who rescued her people, Esther, even before her three-year bout with stage-four ovarian cancer, bloomed rather beautifully. She was funny and wise.
 - † But nearly everyone who knew her realized that Esther became even more graceful and radiant with God, despite and perhaps because of her illness. A dancer, there was nothing more moving than her fragile body dancing for a group of women at the Walk to Emmaus to demonstrate God’s grace even in the midst of suffering.
 - † In her dancing, in her witness, in her frustration, even her anger in her illness—Esther, surrounded by the prayers of those who loved her, reflected the face of a loving and suffering God. Her death brought grief, but the confidence of her new life with God brought joy and peace. All of us who knew Esther grew to know God better through her.
 - † How to come to know the One who comes to us unknown, without a name? Through prayer, healing, praise, confession, and forgiveness.

Through the messiness and pain and joy of relationship with equally fragile and flawed human beings.

- † My friend Peter Perry remembers an old story, perhaps from an old Bergman movie, similar to a story from the prophet Hosea. The story takes place in a circus. A clown is married to a beautiful highwire trapeze artist, of questionable reputation. She is having an affair with the lion tamer. Their plans for a tryst are overheard by another circus worker, who tells everyone (except the husband), and they follow secretly behind the two as they go down to the beach and make love.
- † The husband wonders where the crowd is going and follows. The big group jumps out from behind the rocks to surprise the two lovers caught in flagrante. The lion tamer walks proudly away with a smile on his face. The trapeze artist is shamed in her nakedness, with everyone laughing and pointing. The husband breaks through the crowd, still wearing his clown suit and big clown shoes. He stumbles quickly across the rocks, falling and bloodying himself repeatedly; he reaches the woman, wraps her in some of his clothes and leads her back through the crowd to their tent.
- † It is a story that strains our credulity... how could one be so forgiving... or is it foolish...or is it so stupid? The poor clown is mocked by the crowd, who has witnessed his wife's insult. And yet, the ugly images of cheating and debasing are driven out by the beautiful images of love, love that intends to restore and revive and revitalize the broken relationship, love manifested in a supreme act of forgiveness.
- † How do we come to know God, even without using God's name? We know God through our acceptance of God's healing, even when the

disease remains. We know God through confession of our worst sins, and even the petty ones, and our desire to change.

† We know God in our acts of forgiveness, even if we look stupid, and in our acceptance of God's forgiveness for our stupidity and hard-heartedness. Without even speaking God's name, He comes to us in concrete acts of love.

† Will you welcome Him, receive Him? Then offer yourself and do likewise.

† Amen.

Sources:

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