

Sermon Trinity Sunday Year A  
May 18, 2008  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

## Knowing God

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good....God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*  
Genesis 1

*The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*  
Matthew 28:16-20

There is a world of difference between having information about God and knowing God. Information about God is what we learn from variety of sources, and often in an eclectic, unfiltered way. It is second-hand knowledge—what other people think, or have come to believe, or have experienced for themselves about God. A faith tradition like Christianity in general and the Episcopal Church in particular is the result of people sharing their experiences, reflecting upon them, and drawing collective conclusions about the nature of God and how we ought to live in response to God. This is good and helpful to us in finding our way. All the great spiritual teachers recommend that when seeking first-hand knowledge God we should find an established spiritual path that resonates with us and follow it. But to know God is to move beyond second hand accounts and to experience something for ourselves.

It's not as hard as it sounds. When I ask people where and how they experience God, or when they feel themselves to be in a state of grace or touched by a power beyond themselves, most have something to say, born of their own experience. The responses vary greatly, but they generally fall into a few broad categories.

The first realm of experiencing God, and the one we speak of most, is through the natural world. It might be in the grandeur of nature in remote places or the simple loveliness of a flower; the thrill of being in the wild or the sense of creativity when digging in the dirt. Knowing God through nature can happen in particularly sacred place for you, perhaps a beloved gathering site for your family or at a spot made holy by the prayers and pilgrimages of others.

In countless ways, we can know something of God through the world God created. As God deemed Creation good, so do we. Through our encounter with natural goodness, we are in touch with the *source* of all life and beauty, and we know it as real. To encounter God through nature is one reason we send our young people on pilgrimages to remote and sacred sites, "thin places," as the Celts say, where heaven and earth seem to touch. That's why Jesus told his disciples to go to the mountain to meet him. The mountain was a place of rugged beauty, physical challenge, and breath-taking vistas, where he himself often went to reconnect with God.

The second general category of encounter with God is through the love and goodness of other human beings. One young man told me of the affection his grandparents still hold for one another, well into old age, and how their love reveals something of God's love to him. Others speak of the influence of mentors, parents, loved ones, all giving them a window, and indeed, an experience, of the love of God. Still others point to human accomplishments—the power of artistic expression, sacrificial love, and heroic effort. There is the sheer grace of a child's embrace. Again, in countless ways, we can know something of the love of God through the love of other people. Indeed, Christianity's great contribution to the world of religious inquiry is to emphatically state that we know God best through one person, fully human, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

A third category of encounter that people speak of is that of sacred ritual—be it in church like this one or some other spiritual practice. We gather as others have gathered across time and space. We go through the motions of ritual prescribed by others, and in that experience, we can come to know God. There is no guarantee that such an experience will happen, but our showing up is one way to open ourselves to the possibility of such a connection.

The final category of experience that I'll mention today is deeply personal and internal, a sense of presence, of God with us, inside. For some that sense of presence has been with them for as long as they can remember. For others, it comes as a dramatic awakening, and then remains a steady sense of presence thereafter. Both experiences give credence to Jesus' assurance, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." I think, too, of the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for your rod and your staff—they comfort me" Or of Psalm 139, "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and travel to the farthest parts of the sea, there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast."

All of these ways of meeting or being met by God are good, and real, and possible. Speaking for myself, I have come to know God through them all. But unfortunately, there is more to say—all the hard things that must be said that challenge all that I've described thus far. For while we can know something of God through nature, the graciousness and love of other people, sacred traditions, and an abiding sense of presence, it is also true that those very things—or the absence of them—can drive us from God or any sense of God's existence. This is the troubling and perhaps irreconcilable contradiction of human experience that we have no choice but to hold in our hearts.

In these last weeks, for example, we have witnessed once again the capricious and cruel power of the natural world, through which thousands lost their lives in a single storm and the shaking of the earth's foundations. How is God known in a cyclone and earthquake? When nature is cruel, there is no greater cruelty. When nature is indifferent, there is not greater indifference. At times the natural world breaks forth from its confines with annihilating power, and God does nothing to stop it. Then the inner atheist in all of us cries out: You *see*? How can you speak of God, or at least of a loving God, in the face of *this*? And at the heart of our defiant unbelief is, as one writer observed in the aftermath of the tsunami of 2004, "an authentic moral horror before the sheer extravagance of

worldly misery, a kind of rage for justice, a refusal for easy comfort, and an unwillingness to be reconciled to evil”<sup>1</sup> for the sake of belief in God.

Then our romanticized and domesticated encounters with the natural world are revealed for what they are. As a young man, the poet David Whyte worked with a team of marine biologists studying the ecosystems of the Galapagos Islands. There he witnessed how frightening nature can be. “I saw animals living and dying according to some other mercy than my human mind can stand. It all seemed to paint a world in which there was no immunity or hiding place for anything from the great cycle of life and death.” “Though we profess to love nature,” he writes, “we like nature packaged according to our human desires. We do not look too hard at the natural world for fear of what we will find there...” What does it mean to know God through nature, when nature can be so cruel? How can the glorious spring weekend we have enjoyed speak to us of God, when at the same time people across the globe are struggling to survive in the face of the worst nature can inflict?

In a similar way we can down the list: in some instances, human love and kindness point to a greater source of love and goodness, but in many others, human beings are capable of horrific cruelty. What we can and often do inflict on one another challenges the notion of God working in and through humankind. At the very least, it calls into serious question the idea that we were created in the image of a good and loving God. So, too, with sacred ritual: ritual can be a means of knowing God, but it also be a tool of oppression, or an experience of mind-numbing boredom. And that inner sense of presence that some experience? What does it mean when others don't? What if there is instead a sense of abandonment, or worse still, of nothing at all?

I wish I had answers here, but I don't. And I don't believe that Christianity holds answers for us, either, at least not answers that satisfy for long. The Benedictine author Joan Chittister writes, “At its best, religion offers more than a list of answers designed to deal with the unanswerable; it tenders a way to deal the questions that plague our lives and puzzle our hearts.”<sup>2</sup> One of the great, puzzling questions we must hold is, “How can we come to know God in the midst of the world as it is?” For every bit of evidence we might point to, there is ample evidence to counter any assertion we might make.

Knowing God is both a mystery and a gift. We can't make sense of it any more than we can of our own existence. But once that knowledge is part of us, we can't let it go even when we can't use it to explain away all the things we don't understand. Faith in God, and knowledge of God, persists in the face of all that seeks to defy God's the very existence. It isn't as if we are the first ones to struggle with what it means to know God in the face of suffering and calamity. Christianity hasn't been handed down through the generations by people who somehow failed to notice the floods, earthquakes, famines, and genocides of their day. And when we are faced with overwhelming grief, we have no choice but to respond from the depths of pain, in stunned silence and shock.

Knowing God, then, is in some ways a choice to live one's life by the bits of goodness and grace we are given, the moments of inspiration and beauty that inspire gratitude and an assurance that there is more to life than what we see, that God, somehow, is with us. There's no guarantee that if pushed to the breaking point our faith

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1999), 2.

will hold, but knowledge of God, and faith in God can come through hardship as well as grace, or at the very least can help get us through the blows of life.

Yet in the end, it isn't belief in God that matters, but what that belief propels us to. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in one of his many books about God, tells of a conversation with a young man who assured Kushner that while he didn't believe in religion, he believed in God. Kushner asked him what he meant by that, and the young man replied that when he contemplates the beauty and intricacy of the world, he has to believe God exists. That's very nice, Kushner told him, and he was sure that God appreciated his vote of confidence. But, Kushner went, "for the religious mind and soul, the issue has never been the *existence* of God but the *importance* of God, the difference that God makes in our lives....a God exists but does not matter, who does not make a difference in the way you life, might as well not exist. The issue is not what God is like. The issue is what kind of people we become when we attach ourselves to God."<sup>3</sup>

If we have known anything of God that gives us some sense of goodness, love, and mercy at the heart of it all, then of course our hearts break when we experience great suffering or witness the suffering of others. At first, we can do nothing but hold the pain of it, and grieve how unfair and capricious this world can be. But then it's simply time to get to work and offer to help in whatever we can. It's up to us to show up in the places where God seems most absent with whatever we have that speaks of the loving kindness and goodness we have known. It's up to us to remember that, despite all evidence to the contrary, we are never alone. "I am with you always," Jesus said, "even to the end of the age." To whatever degree we have known and felt God as real, we have a choice to make—to live as if it were true.

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God?* (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 23.