

August 27, 2006

Rev. Anne M. Rosebrock

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### One Size Fits All

In the early 1960s a clergyman from England named J.B. Phillips wrote a book in part because he felt that people outside the church looked at people inside the church and saw one of two things. He wrote that people inside the church spent their time strenuously defending an under developed conception of God or that they cherished a hothouse God who could only exist between the pages of the Bible and inside the four walls of the church. Phillips went on to say that childish conceptions of God cannot stand up to the winds, some of them gale forces, of real life.

The author felt the world in dire need of a God that can live out in the real world to bring hope and reconciliation, peace and justice!

The book itself is entitled, "Your God is Too Small." That title is truth for all of us. At the core of our faith journey is the exploration of God's nature, understanding more about the image of God, the very being of the Divine.

In the book, Phillips says, "The trouble with many people today is they have not found a God big enough for modern needs. While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static."

As Christians, it seems to me that we are in need of constantly reframing, reconsidering our understanding of God and faith so that we release God from a too small box that we have fashioned and free God to establish or re-establish God's self at the core of our being and at the center of the universe.

Though we may be fashioned in God's image, most of us spend a lifetime attempting to fashion God in our image.

Prayer: So often, our God, we settle for that which is familiar even if it leaves us dissatisfied and unfulfilled. Inspire in us this day a willingness to open our minds and our hearts to you that we might encounter you in a new and awe filled way this day. Amen.

I am sure that you have heard Pluto is not a major planet anymore. Just when you thought there was one thing in the universe you could depend on, poof, Pluto is out. I can remember back in elementary school making a solar system out of Styrofoam and paper Mache. Pluto was my favorite planet because it took the least amount of work. When asked about my project, I professed my love for the little planet, and now...Pluto becomes a dwarf planet. The very thing I loved about it turns out to be its downfall. According to the Wall Street Journal, this decision about Pluto has caused a frenzy in the astrology community. The Zodiac calendar may never be the same. As far as astronomers go, I heard one scientist declare that he had a folder full of hate mail on the subject.

Just when you think you absolutely know something, just when you feel utterly confident on a subject, a major wind of change blows by and leaves you confused all over again.

In a world that is ever changing, in a world where virtually nothing seems set in stone, we people of faith tend to reach for a God that we can understand, a God that we can conceptualize, a God that we can set in concrete and never have to reconsider again. This God, according to J.B. Phillips, is just too small.

Moses, the great leader of the ancient Israelites, encounters God in a burning bush in the ancient text of Exodus. God has heard the cry of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt and is sending Moses to lead them to liberty. Moses hides his face as he converses with the Most Holy. Yet at one point in the conversation, Moses asks, who will I say sent me.

Remember these words of the account. Exodus 3:13 and 14--

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The god of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

I Am. That is the sum total of God's response to Moses – say I Am sent you. I don't know about you, but I Am is just not enough for me. I want details, I want absolutes, and I want something far more substantial to hold on to when I am facing gale force winds in this life. I am not alone. Humanity has been trying to define the nature of God since the beginning of time.

Humanity has come up with a host of definitions for the image of God.

For some, God is Santa Claus in nature. The jolly giver of great gifts.

For others, God is more like an angry parent. Ever watchful and always ready to criticize.

For others, God is a benign being of little to no consequence in our daily lives.

For some, God is a mighty judge, sitting in judgment each and every day handing out convictions one after another.

For some, the cross and the flag have become a blurred image. God is a patriot, clearly American, who supports our every cause and influences our every victory.

Again in the words of J.B. Phillips, "we have captured and tamed and trained to our own liking something that is really far too big to be forced into little man-made boxes with neat labels upon them."

I Am is far greater than our wildest imagination, far greater than our narrowly fashioned images, and more than able to withstand the gale force storms and the constant changes of our time.

Who is this great I Am to you?

I spent part several days in Chicago recently at a gathering of over 1500 United Methodist Clergy Women from all over the world. It was an amazing three and a half days of worship and learning. Part of the reason we gathered was to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of women in what is now the United Methodist Church. It was truly an uplifting, spiritual experience for me. On the way

home from the trip, I heard a story on the news about Mary Lambert. Mary has taught Sunday school at her church in Watertown, N. Y. for 54 years. She got into the news when it was discovered that she had been released from her teaching duties because she is a woman. In response to questions, the pastor quoted from the epistle to Timothy in the New Testament, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

Now some of you might love a silent woman, I am sure my husband Randy has had that thought about me on more than one occasion, but this interpretation of the nature of God is too small. This image of God is too small.

I remember years ago, when our daughter was in an all day kindergarten in a private Christian School. On her first day of kindergarten she brought home a paper informing us of the school discipline policy. The policy stated that at the breaking of a school rule, (you know the rules at school: no random talking in class, no running in the hallway, no tardiness) the first time a rule was broken the name of the child would go on the board and that Jesus would be very sad to see a name on the chalk board. If the rule was broken a second time, there would be a check mark by the child's name and Jesus would be ashamed of the child and the child would have to miss recess. If the rule was broken a third time, the child would be sent to the principal for punishment. At the bottom of the policy statement there was this sentence, "At 5:00 p.m. Jesus forgives all children of their wrong doing." At the end of the kindergarten year, our daughter went directly to public school.

This image of God is too small.

I taught a class at a church last Labor Day weekend. The Katrina disaster was unfolding before us, and one of the participants in the class stated, "this happened in New Orleans because there is sin in that city. This is God's punishment to those people."

This image of God is too small.

It is not my intent this day to say to you that my highly personal, deeply individualized image of God is better than yours. It is my intent for all of us to open our minds and hearts to the possibility that we have enclosed our image of God in a too small container. It is my intent that all of us, including me, might again reframe our faith; reshape our understanding to enlarge our particular concept of the mystery of the great I AM, of the mystery of God.

I love the movie Toy Story. I recall that I did not really want to go see it, but I gave in and went and I laughed and laughed. One of my favorite moments is when Buzz Lightyear the space explorer superhero toy introduces himself to the other toys and declares that he can fly. Well, the most beloved and now jealous old cowboy toy, Woody is confident that this new intruder, Buzz Lightyear cannot fly. So Buzz steps up onto the bedpost and leaps into the air. He dives onto a ball on the floor that propels him onto the running track for race cars which then loops him around and throws him upward toward a light fixture that then swings him back over the bed and he lands safely. He has flown, not exactly unassisted, but he was flying all the same. When he steps to the bedpost for his initial leap into the air, he yells out, "To Infinity and Beyond."

What a great line, "To infinity and beyond." Now that is a mind expanding thought. Seems to me if we could all broaden our mindset to consider God as able to soar to infinity and beyond then we might just begin to step toward an understanding of the great I Am.

The great I AM is as close as your next breath. The Divine permeates all things. God is in all places, at all times. God is persistent and tenacious in loving humanity. Maybe understanding the image of God is far less important as understanding that we are known by God. We are known and loved. Moses was known by God. Mary Lambert is known by God. You and I are known, truly known by God.

We do not have to protect God from science; we do not have to shield God from controversy. We do not have to hide God from injury or insult. God is. Allow the presence of God to permeate our thoughts, our words and our actions. Life is to be lived in the presence of the Holy. God expects to get down in the dirt with us. God yearns to be in the midst of our celebrations, but also when we feel like a failure and even when we feel a sense of shame. When we are talking infinity and beyond, we are talking about the presence of God as close as your beating heart and as far away as Pluto, official planet or not, 3 billion miles away.

Moses led his people to freedom. The journey was difficult, it was not what he expected, and it was full of challenges, but he was never alone. He traveled with the Great I AM just as you and I do this day. Moses was a partner in creation with God, just as you and I are this day.

Moses calls across the ages to us this day reminding us that:

The Great I AM is eternal

The Great I AM is loving you forward this very day

The Great I AM is going to bring you no harm

The Great I AM is as close as your next breath

The Great I AM knows you inside and out

The Great I AM is with you always

The Great I AM yearns to be in partnership with you.

My image of God is still far too small. My relationship with the Divine is an ongoing attempt to grow and expand my understanding of Yahweh. Like Moses, there are days when I am overwhelmed by the power and the love of God so that I want to cover my face and not be consumed. There are other days when I am gladly consumed by such radical love. It is a love that reaches as far as Pluto and as deep as my soul/your soul. It is a love that calls us from despair to hope, from war to peace, from mourning to joy.

Who shall we say sent us into the world this day? Tell them that I AM sent you and know that I AM is great enough to meet all your needs.

Embrace the essence of life not as external to your being, but rather as inseparable from the depth and center of all that is. Reach for the wholeness offered you by the presence of God that you might feel loved and experience the sense of God's empowerment. The God of life lives and invites us to an encounter that will be life changing. Let God out of your self made box and free God in your life to inspire your living. You are the beloved children of the Great I AM. Breathe in that life force in this very moment and be willing to let God take you to infinity and beyond!

For additional copies of this sermon or of others please visit our website at [www.msumc.org](http://www.msumc.org) and click on 'sermons'.