

What is God? Who is God?

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Someone asked me recently, “Do you see God as a personal being?”

I thought immediately of the Westminster Shorter Catechism from 1647, which I learned as a Presbyterian. The fourth question and answer asks, “What is God? God is a spirit; infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”

That way of thinking about God makes it almost impossible to see God as a personal being. The catechism describes God in terms of Greek philosophers, using abstract philosophical abstractions such as infinite, eternal, unchangeable. Can humanity really be in relationship with such a God? I would say no. It’s hard, if not impossible, to relate to One who is all-knowing, all-powerful, or omnipresent.

The Bible speaks differently about the God of the Christian story. Ancient people of faith tell stories about a God who relates to humanity. God is not enthroned in some distant heaven, distributing doctrine for us to believe and rules for us to follow. God comes among us to be in relationship with us.

Walter Brueggemann, a preeminent Old Testament scholar, names it as “the strange God of fidelity.” He says that God is a real character in the story of the Bible, a God who acts, sends, delivers. We meet this strange God on every page of scripture.

This God is not an abstraction. Rather, God is embedded with a particular people. God chooses to become vulnerable. God is willing and open to change for the healing of the world, with which God is intimately involved. God’s name is “Love,” and this God chooses to love all living creatures.

Furthermore, God is not some impassible force who is incapable of emotion. Rather, ancients fell in love with a God who is capable of a range of emotions. God shows love and compassion. God knows anger and hate and even violence. God enters into the pain of God’s people and resolves to heal.

This “strange God of fidelity” is faithful and can be trusted. This is a God whose affection can be truly life-giving. When God makes covenant to be with us, God is creating a relationship that God will fight for. God is creating a people who will interact with God, rather than cursing an immovable, abstract, universal force.

God establishes a relationship that is real, with give-and-take between the partners in that relationship. There is no predetermined outcome in which we have no say. There is no simple “given” about the way this relationship will develop. Real relationships don’t work that way. Real relationships change both partners involved in it.

Brueggemann uses the story of the Exodus as an example. Israel cries out to God. God hears. God remembers. God feels. God comes down. The story begins with the people, who call out to the God who has promised to be with them.

This story gives a certain dignity to human participation. Humanity is honoured with a real relationship to God.

At the same time, there is danger in this story, for this God who is faithful to us demands that the people also respond in faithful ways. Again, it is like any relationship in that way. It’s a partnership which requires the active and faithful participation of both partners.

The Bible tells that story repeatedly. Jesus lived as someone who was completely loyal to God and paid the price. When the world could not bear Jesus’ faithfulness, the authorities executed him. On the cross, he experienced the worst form of abandonment and cries out, “My

God, why have you abandoned me?" It is a cry ripped from the guts of someone who feels himself to be set adrift. God has not been loyal. God has not played God's part. God has left him.

That is the drama of the central festival of the Christian church, the festival of Easter. It is, in many ways, a dramatic battle between God's promises of fidelity and the appearance of apparent infidelity. Jesus is a faithful human. Where is the faithful God? It is a "strange fidelity" indeed. But at the end of the story, human faithfulness is met with divine faithfulness. God hears once again. God bursts into the tomb of death and gives birth to life. The tomb becomes a womb.

It is a grand and overarching story. It is not "news and video at 11." This story is not a documentary. It is a story, with all the rich nuances, imagery, symbolism, and ambiguity of all exceptional and remarkable stories.

And when we tell such stories about how God and human beings interact, we can't help but use personal language. We simply cannot know God in abstractions. This God can only be known in particulars.

These stories also expose the limits of human language to talk about what is beyond us. But they give us a way of entering into such mythic realities. Is God a personal being? Maybe. Maybe not. But the language of personal relationship is the only language we have.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism got it wrong. Asking "What is God?" is absolutely the wrong question. It is not faithful to the way the Bible tells the story. The right question is "Who is God?"

And the answer is that God comes into relationship with us. God's story becomes part of our stories. Our stories become part of God's story.