

Cornel Barnett  
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Selections on God from Scripture  
Genesis 1:1-5; Exodus 3:13-15; Psalm 47;  
John 1:1-5, 14; 1 John 4:7-12  
“God”

I’m continuing to preach sermons I preached before to emphasize the message in my last months with you. In my last sermon, I said I would speak about God in one of them. The sermon I shall now preach was spoken on the sixth Sunday after I began at Redwoods, September 14, 2008. It is slightly revised.

Most of you know that I have just completed a sermon series on loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. I mentioned that the biblical way of loving our neighbor is to love as God loves us. For this we needed to figure out how God loves, so we study God: Thus, the sermon today. Interestingly, the best biblical definition for God is love.

This is a complex subject but absolutely central to our faith. What do we mean when we say “God”? A member hit the nail on the head when she said: “everything!” It sounds strange even to say we can study God. How do we study “awesome?” How do we begin to talk about the “numinous” as described by theologian Rudolf Otto, or the wholly other, or as Otto states, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the fearful and fascinating mystery)?

There’s a fullness that makes talking about God daunting. It is reaching for the infinite. It occurred to me that when we talk about God it’s not so much about God as an objective being but of our experience of God. Hopefully, this sermon will provide something of both.

Richard Dawkins, author of the populist book, *The God Delusion*, writes that, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, and a capriciously malevolent bully.” The first critique of Dawkins is that the genre of the Bible is not fiction although there are some fictional elements in it. Taken literally and in a proof-text manner (which is the worst way of interpreting the Bible), God is portrayed in Dawkins’ ways by a nomadic, primitive, fearful and warring people but the real God is also portrayed in glorious, truer ways in both the Old and New Testaments. There is also an evolution of

thought supremely expressed in Jesus of Nazareth through whom our understanding of God in scripture is best expressed. Statements of God in the Bible and beyond are often good or bad at the same time depending on who names God or who uses the name God for their own ends.

The best expressions are God as creator and eternal in Genesis, "I am who I am" in Exodus, and holy, healer, redeemer, merciful, and gracious, etc., in the Psalms. God is an affirmer of peace with justice in the Prophets. God is spirit, light and love in the New Testament. There are many glimpses of God's holiness, sovereignty and grandeur in scripture, in fact, too many to mention here.

Rob is a member of Riverside Presbyterian Church, Jacksonville, Florida, where I served as associate pastor for five years in the late 1980s. I asked Rob how, as an architect, he saw God. He looked at me like I'd asked a dumb question. "The answer's obvious," he said, "God is the great architect. God is the great designer and creator of the universe and architects imitate God." A friend working on a Ph.D. in Physics Education told me that whenever she looked into a microscope she saw God's amazing universe.

Many of us can envisage God as the best expressions of our occupations. For those in the medical profession, God is the primary healer. For the hospital administrator, God is the one who manages with fairness. Who would God be for the ditch digger, accountant, lawyer, factory worker, agricultural worker, pilot, teacher, realtor, homemaker, computer expert, therapist, engineer, scientist, pastor, etc.?

A seminal book about God for the third millennium was published in 2002. It's entitled *God at 2000*. The book emerged from a nationally televised symposium on God that took place at Oregon State University in February 2000. It featured authors from Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

A sellout audience of 1,200 people attended the event. Thousands watched it live at satellite sites around the country. It was webcast live on the Internet. Participants at off-site locations took part in the Q&A sessions by telephone, fax and e-mail.

Speakers at the symposium were asked: "From your lifetime of study, reflection and experience, what have you learned about God that seems most important to you?" The introduction to the book, *God at 2000*, states that for some God does not change and for others God does. "Whether or not God changes, how we as humans think about God does change."

A friend told me that her family back East, had stayed the same for as long as she had known them. "Their God is in a box," she said. For her, God had vacated the box. She said her God of 20 years ago was remote and private. In a Jamba Juice Bar, she said that God was with us in our encounter and our relationship there and then.

I empathized somewhat by pointing to my carrot juice as a symbol for me of the holistic nature of God who is concerned about me in the totality of my life: body, mind, emotions, relationships, work, and play. God for me is holistic and relational. By extension, God is concerned about peace and justice in our world. God is the sum of my experiences: my struggle with the apartheid system in South Africa, my past 27 years in the U.S., and my past 17 years in Northern California.

One definition of God states that God is a symbol or metaphor for the totality of everything we consider to be of absolute value and meaning for us. (James Byrne, *God*).

God has been formed for me by the community of faith and by my own personal and cultural experiences. My understanding of God, especially as expressed in the Brief Statement of Faith (in the Trinity of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit), in the insert, is my bedrock understanding of God but I have other perspectives which complement and further energize this understanding.

The book *God at 2000* states that how we think and talk about God at the beginning of the 21st century is different in important ways from how people did 100 years ago because of developments in the last century. These developments include our growing awareness of religious pluralism, the feminist critique of the patriarchal character of much of traditional religion, the emergence of liberation theologies, a greater awareness of the relationship between God and the natural world, and changes in the religion and science debate generated by post-modern science.

German theologian, Dorothee Solle, in her marvelous book *Thinking about God* speaks of mutuality in our relationship with God which provides a model of mutuality in all our relationships. We change, then our view of God changes, which creates a further change in us, then a change in our perspective of God, and so on.

One might ask why it is important to ask ourselves who God is for us in 2008 (or 2016). It might sound like remote theologizing. Our lives and our world depend on who God is for us. If our God is small, our Christian response will be small. If our God is expansive, inclusive, compassionate, concerned, mutual, loving, and just, we too will be like that as we respond to a world in need.

Finally, I resonate with Benedictine sister, Joan Chittister, a speaker at the abovementioned symposium who says: "If the question is, 'Who is God for you in the year 2000' then for me at least - in the face of new glimpses into the universe, the findings of science, the continuing insights of an ancient tradition, the piercing experience of light, the many faces of God around the globe and the revelations of ecofeminism - the answer is certainly 'God is not now who God was for me in 1950.' The God at the other swing of my trapeze is fierce but formless presence, undying light in darkness, eternal limitlessness, common consciousness in all creation, and

inclusiveness, greater than doctrines or denominations, who calls me beyond and out of my limits. The only proper response to that, as far as I am concerned, she says, is 'Thank God. Thank God. Thank God.' And we must realize that, for the sake of the people, for the sake of the planet, for the sake of the empowering presence of God in an increasingly godless world, we must search for God with all the lights we have."

As a confessional community, Presbyterians like to name God because it makes a difference in the way we live. May our naming of God and our encounter with this God and with each other, fill us with joy in believing and doing that our world may truly become the dwelling place of a great and glorious God.

James Byrne ends his brilliant book on God, entitled *God*, with this quote by Raimon Panikkar: "All talk of God ends in a renewed silence." Byrne adds: "Were we wise enough to take this sage advice, we might just hear something in the silence."

A postscript: Byrne states that, "Each encounter with the most profound depth of our co-dependent selves, with each other, and with the natural world which produced us and on which we depend, is an encounter with 'God'. On a recent Tamalpais Mountain hike with the Rademachers and their nature conservancy friends, one of the friends asked what my profession was. I told him I was the pastor at Redwoods Presbyterian Church where the Rademachers were members. He immediately pointed to a nearby crystal clear stream rolling sparkly over rocks and said, "There is my God." I affirmed his statement and *thought*, "Yes, his profound encounter with nature was indeed an encounter with God.....but there was more, much, much more. Amen.