

For the next several months, Laura and Jeff and I will be leading worship and bringing you the sermon. And sermons inevitably lead to practical application, how we live in the world and with one another, and that inevitably leads us into prayerful engagement with issues and problems we encounter in life. But today, my first sermon of the Fall with you, I want to take a step backward, before all that happens, and examine the very way we encounter the world. Because popular and accepted religion and theology is often just plain wrong. So it seems fair, as we journey through this Fall together, to let you know where my starting point is, from where my theology rises.

This story is attributed to Teresa of Avila, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic. *An angel was walking down the road with a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. Someone asked the angel what he was doing with those things. "With the torch, I'm going to burn down the mansions of heaven," said the angel, "and with the water I am going to put out the fires of hell. Then we shall see who really loves God."*

Do you see what she did? With great imagery she took heaven and hell out of the equation. Gone. Then she asks: "Now who loves God?" This is important: The Christian faith is **not** about getting into heaven or staying out of hell. In fact heaven and hell make rare appearances in the Bible at all, and when one does it is a metaphor. (The "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew is about God breaking into this life.) American revivalism has subverted Jesus' message. Jesus was telling us how to live in *this* life, loving each other and loving God, not how to escape from it.

What I want to tell you is that everything is holy. To do that, we need a couple of definitions, so as not to misunderstand. First, *pantheism* is a view that God is the sum total of the universe and everything in it, that is, that "all is God." *Panentheism* is to say that all is in God, that the holy saturates everything that is, and extends beyond time and space. The latter of those two is closest to what I am trying to say when I say everything is holy.

German poet Rilke wrote it this way:

*I find you, Lord, in all things and in all  
my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life;  
as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small  
and in the vast you vastly yield yourself.  
The wondrous game that power plays with Things  
is to move in such submission through the world  
groping in roots and growing in thick trunks  
and in treetops like a rising from the dead.1*

At the Iona Community in Scotland, they talk about "thin places" where the wall between heaven and earth is so thin holiness seeps through regularly. Or you may have seen the painting of Jacob having a vision at Beth-El, of a ladder to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on a long ladder that gets foreshortened as it rises far into the sky. And a friend told the Finches and I about an ancient church in Jerusalem going back to the 300's AD, with bas-relief carvings of scriptural stories, including Jacob's Ladder, and that ladder only has 5 rungs. God is *very* near to us!

BUT... the world doesn't look all that glorious most of the time. What do we say, and where is God, in the presence of death and loss, suffering and pain, heartache, hunger, oppression, violence, war? Hemmingway wrote, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break, it kills... the very good, the very gentle and the very brave impartially."2

And yet that is exactly where faith comes in. How many people have you known who will say that their faith was made strongest when they were in the greatest crisis? It is what the Cross – an instrument of execution and torture – is about. The cross represents, says Quaker author Parker Palmer, "the way in which the world contradicts God... but then the cross represents the way in which God contradicts the world: bringing hope out of despair, life out of death."3

The character Father Zossima says, in the Brothers Karamazov, "Love people in their sin, for that is the semblance of divine love and the highest love there is. Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in all things."4

Even the Bible turns to prophets, writers and poets to go where theology fails. American poet Mary Oliver writes of watching white owl kill its prey in a field of snow, "like an angel or a Buddha with wings", and leaving a 5 ft. span of its wings imprinted in snow:

*so I thought maybe death isn't darkness after all,  
but maybe light wrapping itself around us – as soft as feathers –  
that we are instantly weary of looking, and looking,  
and shut our eyes, not without amazement,  
and let ourselves be carried... to the river that is  
without the least dapple or shadow, that is nothing  
but light – scalding aortal light – in which we are  
washed and washed out of our bones.*5

God is found everywhere, especially in the painful and tragic. How can that be? The answer for that may be in our text from Exodus. Moses had encountered God in the burning bush that was not consumed, and gotten his marching orders to free Israel from Pharaoh. But today, direct your attention to this exchange in vss. 13 to 15. Moses asked God: *If I say 'God sent me,' and they ask, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?* Our text reads, "I am who I am." Say to them "I am has sent me to you."

All right...Hebrew lesson! There are 3 Hebrew letters in God's name, all consonants, and the vowels change with the tense and the context. We would write it - HVH -- the root word for iseverything that follows. God actually said, *HYH ser HYH* at first – *Ehyeh ser Ehyeh - I will be who I will be*. And then: *Tell them YHWH (I Am) has sent you*. Columbia University prof. Emanuel Derman writes that "God is riffing on his true name."6 Yahweh means *being*. Existence. Yahweh is also the name of the *present tense* in Hebrew grammar. Derman writes, "YHWH is the irreducible substance, the ultimate non-metaphor, too, the bottom-level primitive out of which everything else is constructed. Hence, no graven images, no models are possible. You can't ask 'Why?' about YHWH, you can only ask 'How?'"

See what happened? Moses asked for God's name, and the answer is: Existence itself. Being. IS-ness. An encounter with Being itself should probably not result in requirements of doctrine or theological propositions, or even (like Peter) building 3 shrines on a mountain. Richard Rohr (Franciscan priest at the Center for Action and Contemplation, just down the road on Albuquerque's West Mesa) reminds us, "God is always bigger than the boxes we build for God, so we should not waste much time protecting the boxes."<sup>7</sup> Everything comes from God, points to God, and returns to God. Or to turn to the poets again, my favorite theologian (Kristofferson) wrote, "Life is the question and life is the answer, and God is the reason and love is the way."<sup>8</sup> An encounter with being itself, existence, does *not* require of you a statement of belief. It demands instead, attention. Awe. Wonder.

Jesus described it this way: *Don't worry about your life, food and clothing, things. Consider the ravens. They don't plant seed or harvest crops, yet God feeds them. How much more worth are you than the birds! Pay attention to the lilies of the field. Solomon in all his glory didn't match up. God knows what you need, and it is God's pleasure to give you the kingdom, to give away the store, to shower you with life, with being itself. Where your treasure is, will your heart be also.*

No one was ever saved by what they believed. Only by God. Saving Grace is not a reward for your right belief. It is a gift from God. It simply *IS* – *all in all*, everything to everyone, as Paul wrote to the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 15:28), like Ezekiel's vision of holy water rushing from the temple to spread life, life, life, abundance, everywhere in the city whose name is *The Lord is There*. Life the question and the answer and love is the way. God *IS* existence itself, present tense, and the only response to that is wonder, love and praise.

How would we live, how would our worship, our politics, our village, our relationships with our neighbors, our lives and our world be different, if we could get this – Everything is holy. Everything and everyone belongs. God is hidden under every rock and in the feathers of every bird, and is hidden in you – you, made in the image of God.

The whole earth is drenched in sacrament.

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1 Rilke, Rainer Maria. *I Find You Lord, in All Things, Ahead of All Parting*, Random House, NY, 1995, p.9.

2 Hemmingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*, Scribner, New York, 1929, p. 249.

3 Palmer, Parker. *Promise of Paradox*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2008, p. 40.

4 Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book VI, Chapter 3.

5 Oliver, Mary. *White Owl Flies Into and Out of a Field, Owls & Other Fantasies*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2003, p. 54.

6 Derman, Emanuel. *Metaphors, Models and Theories*, www.edge.com.

7 Rohr, Richard. *Everything Belongs*, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1999, p. 24.

8 Kristofferson, Kris. *Love is the Way, Repossessed*, Monument Records, 1986.