

UNKNOWN GOD
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Sixth Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Acts 17:22-31

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus in Athens. "Listen up, Athenians. I see how extremely religious you are. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What you worship as unknown, I will proclaim to you."

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Ten or so years ago a ninth grade girl showed up for my confirmation class and with hands on hips announced: *I shouldn't be here. I don't believe in God.*

That's great, I said. Tell me about this god you don't believe in.

And she did.

I don't believe God is some old man with a beard sitting above the clouds on a throne showing mercy to some people and sending the rest to hell.

Good for you, I said. I don't believe in that god either. And if that's God, I'm proud to be an atheist with you. She sat down and finished the 10-week course.

Last Sunday I invited you to put on your "thinking caps" for a graduate level sermon. You'll need it again for this one.

Ready? Here goes.

Everybody talks about God but nobody knows what they're talking about. God by whatever name is the great unknown. A god you can define is no god by definition.

Theology is the study of God. Good luck with that.

Geology studies the earth. The earth can be touched. Zoology studies animals. Animals can be caged. Meteorology studies weather. Weather can be measured.

Theology studies God. God cannot be touched, caged or measured. And yet theology was once called the "queen of the sciences"—when "science" only meant knowledge.

Theology is not science, as we know it today. Whatever God is or isn't, God can't be known through the scientific method. Science depends on measureable evidence. There is no hard, conclusive evidence for God. Only clues.

But clues count. It's how we know we are loved.

Science is one way of knowing. It's not the only way.

For example, we know another person not by scientific investigation but by revelation. The other is not an object to be studied; but a subject to be discovered.

Love is found in vulnerability. We know our friends and lovers—not by detached observation—but only as they reveal themselves to us.

And that rescues theology.

Theologians see clues of something greater than the sum of all the parts in the material world. Something we can't put our fingers on. Something that seems more like a person than a thing. Something revealed in dreams, art, music, literature, and mystical moments that defy rational explanation.

It sure seems that the universe and this material world are more than the sum of the parts just as a person is more than the sum of biological parts. We can't quite say what that is. We just know.

We call it soul or spirit or mind. We have names for it just as we have names for gods. But what are we naming with such names?

Psychology is the study of the mind. That puts it in the same boat with theology—clues but no evidence.

Neurology studies the brain and touches nerve tissues. But nerve tissues are not the mind or the soul.

Psychology and theology are in the same boat. And so we talk about the mind and God even though we're beating around the bush half the time.

And speaking of beating around the bush, our tradition's most definitive clue about God came from a bush.

Once upon a time, long, long ago—as the story goes in Exodus chapter three—Moses was living in exile, tending sheep in a high desert country. For 40 years the “god question” haunted Moses. At that time every tribe and peoples had names for countless gods along with rituals to please and appease them. Inventing names was an attempt to manage these mysterious powers.

Moses was raised as the adopted son of Pharaoh. During the day he learned about the gods of Egypt, the gods that sustained the royal class and kept the poor in bondage. The “divine right of kings” went unchallenged.

At night, Moses learned the sacred stories of his ancestors from his mother, a slave. His mother told him about a different sort of god, a pesky god, a god without form, walking on the wild side, not subject to definitions.

Moses was torn between the daytime and nighttime stories. Did he belong to the oppressors or the oppressed? What power ruled this world? Were the gods on the side of the rulers or the side of the ruled? And, by the way, whose side was he, Moses, on?

And then something happened. Moses saw a bush burst into flame but it didn't burn up. It just kept burning and burning like the fire in his heart, a raging passion to liberate his people from bondage. He crept near the flame and it spoke.

Take off your shoes, Moses. This is holy ground.

Was that voice outside of him or was it inside?

I hear the cries of my people in Egypt. Go down, Moses. Go down and tell ole Pharaoh to let my people go.

I can't do that? I'm nobody. Was Moses arguing with himself? What if Pharaoh asks for the name of the god I represent? What will I say?

The voice replied, *I am who I am. I will be what I will be. Stand before Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go. And when he asks by what authority, you tell him: I AM WHO I AM. If you must have a name, that's my name. I AM.*

And that name just happens to be the simple verb "to be."

So there you have it from our deep tradition, from our Great Ancestors—god as a verb, not a noun. God or whatever we may call the unknown mystery in this world and in our hearts, is nothing. Absolutely nothing. No Thing. God is being and becoming.

Make no graven images or fixed verbal definitions. Leave it alone. Let it be. I AM.

Jesus was born of that tradition. Before Abraham was, I am, he said. I am the light of the world. I am the bread of life. I am the vine. I am the door. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the way, the truth and the life. I am in you as you are in me. We are one. Those who abide in love abide in God.

Which means, the only Lord and Savior of our lives is love.

And that brings us to the lesson for today. The apostle Paul was peripatetic. He got around. Like Moses he once seethed with anger. And then something happened.

Paul was knocked over by the voice of Jesus whom he had never met. In that mystical moment he discovered the Beloved—not Jesus of Nazareth so much but rather "the cosmic Christ" in whom all things, all creatures, all peoples and nations are loved as one family. After that moment Paul went about spreading the good news of amazing grace and endless love.

One day he happened into Athens and saw multiple statues depicting multiple gods. One statue was labeled: "To the unknown god." Just in case one had been overlooked.

Listen up, Paul cried out. I can tell you something about your unknown god.

Paul didn't recite his sacred scriptures. He cited their own poet who had written: "There is one in whom we live and move and have our being." That's it, cried Paul, whether you know it or not. The "unknown god" is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. And that makes all of us one family whether we know it or not.

Gentile and Jew. Man and woman. Slave and free. All are one. For the God of all being is love. Those who abide in love abide in God no matter the name or no name at all.

So say it once and say it often: *I am. I am love and loving is how I come to be.*

The unknown God is only known through love.

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Hymn 11

“Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud”