

[Who is God? Video]

According to the most recent polls, 75% of Americans claim to believe in God. Ask "Who is God?" and get a bunch of competing ideas. Most will be generally good - God loves us, God is good, God rewards good people and punishes bad, God watches out for us, God wants us to be happy. God is a sort of cosmic grandparent, doting on us cute little humans. A Santa Clause or genie.

And you do get some who view God as a kid with an ant farm. Or God as a distant, nebulous force, a "thing" that's not particularly involved in our lives. God as a cold, merciless judge.

[Anonymous God pic] The word "god" is nebulous enough to be basically useless. When you tell me what you think about God, and I tell you what I think about God, we could be talking about the same God or about wildly different beings. And how do we know?

Can we do better than a generic god saddled with contradictions? Can we have a meaningful conversation about God, can we know who God is?

Yes, we can. In these 50 days between Easter and Pentecost, between Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, we want to find out who God is. And the best way to do that is to find out from the source: God. In the Scriptures, we find story after story of persons who encounter God, humans to whom God reveals Godself.

These encounters teach us more about God, about who God is. In other words, God teaches us who God is. God helps us understand the details of who God is. God isn't an abstract impersonal force. God is not a generic good vibe. And God is not one good choice among many.

[Scripture title slide] So if you have a bible, turn with me to Exodus 3:1-14. If you're using a BCN bible, you can find Exodus 3 on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, please keep that as a gift from us. We're about to meet Moses. He's a Hebrew, a descendant of Abraham, one of God's chosen people. At the time Moses was born, his people (God's people) were slaves in Egypt. Moses has fled Egypt and has been hiding out in a place called Midian. He's married and works for his father-in-law.

Moses was raised in Egypt, under the Egyptian gods. Everyone in his world was a polytheist - they believed that every nation had its own god or set of gods that ruled. So Egypt was ruled by Ra, Osiris, Isis, Anubis, Horace and all the others. Canaan was ruled by Ba'al and Asheroth and their gods. In polytheist cultures, if you travel to another land, you worship their gods (and you probably bring along a small statue of your own god as well).

That's the kind of world Moses was raised in. He'd heard of the god of his ancestors - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But he wasn't in Israel - he was in Egypt, and then Midian. He worshipped the gods of his father-in-law.

Until one day, when that god of his ancestors revealed himself to Moses. And God's revelation is a total game-changer - not just for Moses, but for everyone in the ancient world. Let's read what happens together:

One day Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led the flock far into the wilderness and came to Sinai, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the middle of a bush. Moses stared in amazement. Though the bush was

engulfed in flames, it didn't burn up. "This is amazing," Moses said to himself. "Why isn't that bush burning up? I must go see it."

When the Lord saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, "Moses! Moses!" "Here I am!" Moses replied.

"Do not come any closer," the Lord warned. "Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord told him, "I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey—the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live. Look! The cry of the people of Israel has reached me, and I have seen how harshly the Egyptians abuse them. Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt."

But Moses protested to God, "Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?" God answered, "I will be with you. And this is your sign that I am the one who has sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God at this very mountain."

But Moses protested, "If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they will ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what should I tell them?" God replied to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. Say this to the people of Israel: I Am has sent me to you." God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: Yahweh, the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you. This is my eternal name, my name to remember for all generations. -- Exodus 3:1-15

So Moses is out, taking care of the sheep and goats, and suddenly he sees a bush that's on fire, but not burning up - who wouldn't stop to take a look?

And if that's not crazy enough, the bush speaks to him. The bush identifies itself as the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - this is the god of Moses' ancestors. God reveals a plan: that God is going to free his people from slavery, and Moses is going to lead the charge.

After going back and forth a few times, Moses finally says, Who am I supposed to say sent me? Obviously Moses can't just say "God" sent him - remember, God is a pretty useless word. It can mean *any* of the gods, and in Moses' day there were tons of them.

So when he says, Who shall I say sent me? What is his name?, Moses is wanting to know who God is. He's wanting to know God's name, God's character, God's identity.

And God - for the first time in human history - gives Moses his name. He is "I Am Who I Am, I Am, Yahweh". These are three variations of the same name, a name that is loaded with implications and insinuations. And what Moses learned about God at that burning bush is as helpful for us today as it was for him in the wilderness of Midian.

[Universe Man] Many today think God is a sort of cosmic force - an impersonal energy that is woven throughout the universe, giving life but not interacting. The sort of "god is nature" or "god is in everything" pantheism we find not only in Hinduism but in some of our popular culture and protest movements as well.

But when Yahweh appears to Moses, Yahweh says, I AM. I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am Who I am. I Am.

This god, Yahweh, is Person. [A "Yahweh" Facebook Profile] As in, God is a person. Not a force, not an energy, not just some good vibrations. God has a personhood. A Personality. Likes and dislikes. Yahweh is distinct from you and me and Moses and that bush that was on fire. Yahweh is not just a name we give to the life force we sense in the world around us. Yahweh is the creator of you and me and Moses and that bush and the life force we sense in the world around us.

But Yahweh is distinct. Yahweh is personal.

But the same could be said of Egypt's gods to an extent. The Egyptians prayed to different gods, drew images of them. You can imagine a wise ancient philosopher speculating that Yahweh and these Egyptian gods are really all versions of the same deity.

[All gods are the same] I don't know about you, but since I'm a pastor people love to talk to me about religion. And I hear all the time the theory that all these religions are really worshiping the same god. That each religion is just a different path up the same mountain. That every culture has its own way of talking about the divine, which is, after all, surely beyond the realm of human reason and language.

At face value, it makes a lot of sense. It would explain some of the similarities among the various religions and their customs. And frankly it feels nice. All the fighting and divisions are the result of misunderstanding - if we could all just chill out and discuss our differences, we'd figure out they're all superficial and insignificant.

Now, I'm all for chilling out and having conversations instead of screaming matches. But once you do that, once you sit down and have an honest, open, respectful conversation with people who worship other gods, you find out quickly that the differences between gods are anything but superficial and insignificant.

[Facebook side-by-side] Rather, you learn pretty quickly that Yahweh is *particular*. Yahweh's not just the Jewish version of the Egyptian gods. Yahweh has not only a personality, but a past and a future. How does Yahweh introduce himself to Moses? I AM the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Why begin like that? Because Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were real people who lived in history. And they'd had real interactions with a being, a deity, a god. And Moses *knew* those stories. So Moses knew something of this god.

And Moses had been raised in Egypt. He knew the Egyptian gods, their stories, what they were like. So Moses could tell this god who was speaking to him from the bush was not just another Egyptian god, or a different version of the Egyptian gods. Yahweh has a past, a present and a future. Yahweh has a people and a plan, and Moses could know this god through his story.

After Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt, God brings them back to this same mountain where the bush was on fire. Here at this mountain, God makes a covenant with his people and here's how God begins that covenant:

God gave the people all these instructions: "I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but me. -- Exodus 20:1-3

Here's a quick fun fact about your Bibles: see how the word "Lord" is written in all capital letters? Nearly all of our English translations render God's name - Yahweh like that. So when you see LORD in all caps, remind yourself that in Hebrew, that's actually Yahweh, God's name.

So here, God says, I am Yahweh, the god who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery.

Which god am I? I'm Yahweh.

Which god am I? I'm the god who frees slaves.

I'm not the gods of Egypt. I'm not the gods of Canaan. I'm not the gods of Babylon. I'm the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and you must not worship any of those other gods.

Moses learns that God is personal and particular.

But there's more. Because Moses actually didn't have any problem believing that Yahweh was different from the gods of Egypt. That's a bit harder for us to grasp today, but Moses readily accepted the existence of multiple gods.

What Moses didn't realize is that Yahweh is not just another tribal god. He thought the Egyptian gods ruled in Egypt and the Canaanite gods rule Canaan and the Babylonian gods ruled Babel. And Yahweh, this god who found Moses in the wilderness? Maybe he was just a wilderness god, a god of nomads and wanderers.

But then God says, My name is I AM. And God sends Moses to command the Pharaoh of Egypt - which is the same as commanding Egypt's gods. God wanted Moses to march into the capitol of the world and tell them their gods were shams, pretenders, false.

Moses was under no delusion what this meant - that's why he was so terrified to go, why he kept trying to convince God he had the wrong person.

What Yahweh did at the burning bush was to redefine religion for everyone, everywhere. Here at the burning bush, Yahweh claimed to be the eternal creator God, the God who created everything - including the gods of Egypt, Canaan and Babylon. Yahweh is the supreme ruler who will not be bound to one land, one people. Yahweh is the true god of all peoples in all places.

This world - Moses' world and our world - belongs to Yahweh. We live here on Yahweh's terms, as Yahweh's children and honored guests or we invite death on ourselves (as Pharaoh and the Egyptians learned the hard way).

But this Lordship, this vastness, this immanence over all creation does not make Yahweh distant and unapproachable. It does not mean that Yahweh is a cold, uncaring tyrant who punishes lavishly and rewards sparingly.

Because this God became human. This God, Yahweh, took on skin and bone and lived among us. This eternal creator became a finite, limited person named Jesus. In John 8, Jesus is arguing with some of the Jewish leaders who're scandalized by the things he's teaching about Yahweh.

They appealed to Abraham - that first man with whom Yahweh made his covenant. And Jesus counters that Abraham would be excited to meet him:

Your father Abraham rejoiced as he looked forward to my coming. He saw it and was glad." The people said, "You aren't even fifty years old. How can you say you have seen Abraham?"

His adversaries are understandably confused - how can this barely-middle-aged man be talking as though Abraham knew him?

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I Am!" -- John 8:56-58

Jesus isn't just using bad grammar there. He's very intentionally calling himself Yahweh. He's claiming to be this personal, particular, eternal God who has now become a human.

We don't have to wonder who God is. God is not distant, unapproachable and unknowable. Is God beyond us? Unquestionably. Is God too vast for our minds to comprehend? Of course - if Yahweh weren't beyond us, he wouldn't be much of a god.

But in that burning bush and in Jesus himself, God speaks to us in ways that we can understand. Yahweh comes to *us* so that we can know him. God speaks a language we can understand.

This is why we value the Scriptures so deeply. In the Bible we have the written record of Yahweh's interactions with humanity. We have God's Word, preserved and passed down for us. When we read the Scriptures, we not only experience how Yahweh has revealed himself to people in the past, we find fresh revelations of who Yahweh is today, in our own lives.

So for the next seven weeks, we're going to explore the Scriptures. We're going to hear stories of how Yahweh acted in human history, what they learned about God and how they told those stories. But their stories will ultimately reveal the god Yahweh who is living and active in our lives today, right now.

Lectio Set Up

So I'd like to invite you into an experiment with me. Some of us who are gathered here today know Yahweh very well. We have a deep, intimate relationship with him. Others of us know a lot about Yahweh - we've been around the Church and heard the stories, but we don't have a powerful personal connection - at least not as powerful as we'd like.

Some of us have brand new relationships with Yahweh. We don't know much, but we're all in and can't wait to know more.

And still others of us aren't even sure there is a god - at least not like this Yahweh: a god who is Personal, Particular and Eternal.

No matter where you are in your relationship with this god, this Yahweh, I want to invite you into an experiment with me this week.

In the bulletins, in place of the Discussion Guide we normally have, we've put a reading guide. There's a way of reading the Scriptures that many in the Church have used for a few hundred years (basically since we got that Printing Press up and going and people learned how to read). In Latin it's called *Lectio Divina*, which means Divine Reading. It's a way of reading the Bible that's reading and praying together.

You take a passage (like our burning bush passage - pretty short, only 14 verses) and read it three times. The first time, you simply read the passage. Take it in.

The second time, before you begin, ask God to show you something in the passage. You then read more slowly, paying attention for any words or phrases or plot points (if you're reading a story) that jump out at you. Circle or underline them, or write them down in a journal.

Finally, read the passage through once more and pay special attention to what's stuck out to you. Finish the Divine Reading in prayer, focusing on those words or phrases that stuck out to you. Ask God to show himself to you through this passage.

In the Discussion Guide, we've put five passages about God to use as Divine Readings this week. So in the next seven days, set aside 15-20 minutes in five of those days to do a Divine Reading. Ask Yahweh to teach you more about who he is.

It's okay if you're not even sure there is a god. Take a risk.

God is more than just a generic phrase. More than just a force or cosmic energy. It's similar to a marriage - we've all met people who want to be married, who just want to be a husband or a wife, and they don't care to whom. That's like generic religion - it's actually super unhealthy.

I don't want a wife. I want *my* wife, Amanda. I don't love being married. I love *being married to her*. If I woke up one day with a different wife, my life would be totally different.

So too with gods. Yahweh is not a generic, place-holder god. Yahweh who loves you and has gone to the ends of the Earth to have a relationship with you. Yahweh is the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses. The God who frees the slaves. The God who became human. The God who died for you and me. The God who abandoned Heaven and shattered the gates of Hell itself to be with us.

Don't you want to worship *that* god? You can. You have today. Join us this week in the Divine Readings. Discover the God whose name is Yahweh, who loves you and has sought you out!

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide] We conclude today by receiving Communion together. This meal represents Jesus' death - the ultimate demonstration of who God is, who Yahweh is.

When we were separated from Yahweh, he became one of us, showed us how to live and then died to make that life possible. He gave his disciples bread to represent his body, broken for us. When we take the wafers, we remember who God is - Yahweh is the God who died for us.

Jesus gave his disciples wine to represent his blood poured out for us, to reconnect us with him. When we dip the wafer in grape juice, we remember who God is - Yahweh is the God who embraced Death to give us life with him.

You don't have to be a member here to receive Jesus' meal. If you hear God calling to you, inviting you to know him better, then you are invited to Yahweh's table.

[prayer]