

One of the most surreal moments in my life was my going away party in Ohio. When I lived there, I was part of a preaching team at a large church. When we left to come to Texas, they threw us a goodbye party. As they tend to be, the party was bittersweet, a chance to say goodbye to good friends one last time. But a couple of different people came up to me to say goodbye, and I would have sworn I'd never seen them before in my life. But they came up to me, gave me a hug, and spent a couple of moments telling me how much my preaching had impacted them.

It was surreal, but it happens in jobs like teaching or preaching or writing. Any place where, as part of your craft, you put a lot of yourself out there, share personal stories as illustrations, get raw and vulnerable... but it's all a 1-way interaction. It's not bad necessarily - I don't expect to have a close personal friendship with every person I meet. But it was weird for me, to be on the receiving end of the illusion of a relationship, and as I was working on this new series I kept coming back to that experience.

What I really want to explore with you today is how we know God. Not just know *about* God, but really know God. It's a lot easier to know *about* God than it is to know God, and I wonder if we're clear about exactly what the difference is.

How do we know God? The answer is complex, but not complicated. As with any relationship, there are a lot of ways to know God. And as with any relationship, it takes time.

The best news is that God wants to have a relationship with us. God wants to know us, not just know about us. So today, we're going to explore some access points for knowing God better, and we'll see how God uses them to invite us into a true relationship, one where we don't just know about God, but truly know the God who created us and calls us.

Message

During the Summer, I want to ask one basic question with you: How do we know God? In one sense, that question lives in the realm of apologetics. We debate whether there even *is* a God, and if there is, which God? The God of Islam? The married father god of Mormonism? Krishna or Brahma?

I have some good friends who point to all these religions and suggest maybe the problem is God - if there is a God - would be way beyond human capacity to understand. It would be, they suggest, like ants trying to talk to people.

And here's the thing... they're not wrong, exactly. Even the Bible agrees with them. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God said,

My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. -- Isaiah 55:8-9

How about that? The Bible says, "Yeah, sorry. You don't have any hope of understanding God on your own. God is simply on a whole different level from us."

The good news of Scripture, though, is that we're *not* left on our own. From beginning to end, Scripture affirms that God takes the initiative to know us. In other words, while it's true that, on our own, we can't know God, we're not on our own. The very God who created us knows how to know us, and makes the first move.

God spoke to Abram in a way he could understand, transformed him from a fatherless nomad to the patriarch of a world-changing faith. God spoke to Moses in a burning bush, and transformed him from a coward into a liberator. God spoke to David through the prophet Samuel and transformed him from a shepherd into a king. And then God went even further. God became one of us in the person of Jesus. The creator became the creation, so that we could understand God wholly and fully.

John's gospel put it like this:

The Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. -- John 1:14

So we begin this summer with an affirmation: if it were up to us, God would be unknowable. But it's not up to us. God always makes the first move, and in Jesus, God makes Godself knowable to us and invites us into a relationship.

Through Jesus, we can do more than just know about God. Through Jesus, we can know God.

So how do we do that?

In our theological tradition - Wesleyanism, we identify four sources of knowing God. Those are Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience. If I had asked you to guess, I think most of y'all would have listed the Bible first.

And obviously, the Bible is a major source of knowing about God. The Bible is a record of the various ways God has spoken to us. We learn God's character - that God is quick to show mercy and slow to anger. That God's defining attribute is love. We learn God's values - God calls us again and again to attend to the widows and orphans, which is a Biblical way of saying that God's society is one in which even the people on the margins have what they need to flourish. We learn how God acts - that God is the one who lays down his life for his friends.

And of course the Bible can be really complicated, too. It's 66 different books, written by more than a dozen different authors, in three languages over more than 700 years. It's got history and poetry and legal codes and parables and letters and apocalypses and more. So learning to read it well can take some time.

Go to a book store and find the theology section - it's huge, packed with volumes on every topic you can imagine (and probably quite a few you'd never thought of), all growing from the Bible itself.

It's easy to spend a lifetime reading the Bible and always learning more.

And it's easy to fall into the trap of mistaking knowledge about God for knowing God.

When we say the Bible is our primary source for knowing God, we have to be careful to remember that relationship is the heart of the Good News. What God desires is not a bunch of brainiacs who can ace theology exams. You read the Bible and see all those heroes of faith - what do they all have in common? NOT brains, I promise. No, it's transformation. When we know God, we are transformed.

So when we talk about Scripture, we're going to explore how to read the Bible such that we know God, not just learn about God. We're going to spend some time in this series talking about the Bible. What is it? What *isn't* it? And how do we read Scripture for transformation, not just information?

This is where some faith traditions stop short. They say *sole scriptura*, which is a Latin phrase that means "Scripture alone". The phrase goes back to the Father of the Reformation, Martin Luther. They mean Scripture is the only source of faith.

We're part of a faith tradition that says instead *prima scriptura*, or Scripture is primary (as opposed to alone). We recognize that, while the Bible is the main source of our faith, Jesus speaks to us and invites us to know him through other channels as well.

The next source is Reason - and this one is often pitted against Scripture as the enemy. Reason is our ability to make sense of the world around us. To see things like Cause and Effect. The scientific method, which has given us everything from modern health care to cell phones to the printing press, is a tool we developed with reason.

For about the past 300 years or so, many Christians have seen a tension between faith and reason. Whether they're the debates over the age of the Earth or pastors telling people you don't need counseling you just need the Bible, a lot of Christians view reason with suspicion.

Which is too bad, because the Great Commandment, the one thing that, according to Jesus, sums up the whole way of God, includes the phrase "Love the Lord your God with *all your mind*."

That's why in our tradition, we value Reason as a way we can know God. Another way to say it is that God gave us brains, and expects us to use them. And yes, that includes the sciences. Though the concept of natural sciences hadn't been invented yet, the Apostle Paul made a big claim when he wrote to the Church in Rome:

Ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. -- Romans 1:20

Paul claimed we can know God by getting to know the world God created. If you know anything about science, you know that's exactly what science is - a tool to understand the natural world better.

We're going to explore Reason this summer. We'll talk more in depth about Faith and Science, the limits of Reason and most importantly, how we can use our minds to know God better.

The next source of knowing God is Tradition. I know for some people, Tradition is a dirty word. A lot of times that's because you asked questions and were told, "That's just the way we do things." And certainly, that's a problem. I'm a punk rocker at heart, and I bristle when someone tells me 'that's just the way things are.'

But when we talk about Tradition as a path to knowing God, that's pretty far from what we mean. Most simply, Tradition means we're not on this journey of faith alone. We have thousands of years of brothers and sisters across the world and throughout time who are on this journey with us.

The Book of Hebrews refers to these as a 'cloud of witnesses':

Since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. -- Hebrews 12:1

According to Hebrews, these others are essential helpers on our faith journey. So we learn to know God by walking with others who know God. That means we have the whole history of the Church to draw from - Jesus lovers from every language, race and culture imaginable.

And it means we can appreciate and value our own denomination, the Church of the Nazarene, for the unique contributions they offer to the overall picture of faith.

And of course it means we lean on our friends who are part of our spiritual family here at Catalyst.

So we'll spend time this summer looking at how each of those pieces of our tradition - the historic, global Church, our denomination and our local church - all help us know God.

The last source we have is Experience. This is where we claim our faith journey as our own, where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. We're going to explore the spiritual practices that help us know God. We'll also see how serving others is a way of imitating God, one that connects us more deeply with God. And we'll see the limits of experience in knowing God, and why that makes our faith community all the more valuable.

We might compare these four sources - Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience - to a three-legged stool. Scripture is our primary seat, but it doesn't stand on its own. A stool isn't sturdy and reliable unless it has all three legs and the seat.

So too, we often rely on only one or two of these channels to know God, and our faith is wobbly, less certain than it could be.

This summer, we're going to spend a lot of time exploring how we can know God better.

And through it all, let's remember that we can do all this because God made the first move. God has removed every obstacle between us and God. And God is not content with one path to a relationship with us. What we'll see this summer is that God is always speaking to us everywhere, always drawing us deeper into a relationship with our creator.

We don't have to settle for knowing about God. We can know the creator and lover of our souls.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus doesn't give us a lecture. He calls us his friends and invites us to know him.

1. What is the main way my relationship with God grows?
2. Where am I lacking in my relationship with God?
3. How is God inviting me to grow this summer?

Assignment + Blessing

What are the main sources for your faith? What's lacking?