

Who is God, or we might even say: Who *or What* is God? Christian worship includes readings from both Christian and Jewish sections of the Bible; after all, we need to remember that Jesus was a Jew who knew the Hebrew scriptures. Like Jews, we often read the Psalms. Most of them are Psalms of King David, and to be honest, I do not easily resonate with some of the ways God is described... One thing is that God is often described as a warrior that is on the side of David and the Israelites. We know all too well that war is a gruesome and sickening waste of life; every soldier has a precious life, has parents and siblings and loved ones. Thou shalt not kill is one of the 10 Commandments, so we shudder to think about a God who is on one side, therefore needing to help kill more people on the other side. Another thing I have a hard time resonating with is the consistent patriarchal bias of the Bible, in both testaments... using usually male pronouns for God, “He” did this, “He” did that. It is simply the limits of language in many cultures that uses the male pronouns as a default (“We hold these truths to be self evident, that all *men* are created equal.”) The Bible has been interpreted rigidly and literally so that God can be seen as a “male warrior,” and the main characteristic of God is seen to be power.

We must admit that descriptions of God are full of paradox, full of mystery! On the one hand, God must be “beyond” all that we can see and know. Such a transcendent God is more impersonal. On the other hand, we talk about a relevant, dynamic, personal God, with whom we converse, who can even have a change of mind. On the one hand God is invisible, but on the other hand we can see and hear evidences of God working in the world, being present in the world. On the one hand, we can have rational arguments that there must be a God, but on the other hand, the Christian faith has spread more by personal experience and conviction of personal encounters with God or the Risen Christ.

Some people take all the paradox of God and conclude that it is easier to be atheist....Like the comedian George Carlin. In a humorous way, he points out the paradoxes (the contradictory aspects), but then

decides that therefore God does not exist. He sarcastically calls God the “invisible man in the sky.” Well, we do prefer things that are visible and would like God’s presence in life to be more noticeable. As Christians we like to give credit to God when good things happen, but we can’t really *prove* that it was God that interceded in our earthly lives. George Carlin talks about the wrath of God, threats of punishment and hell if we break commandments, and then says sarcastically, “But He Loves You!” Yet this is not really a contradiction; in the analogy of God as a loving Father or Parent, it is natural for a parent to have moments of anger and threat of punishment, but also so natural for Love and Forgiveness to have the final sway. Carlin points out the paradoxical nature of prayer... like why bother praying if God already has a plan? (The Bible does say that God knows what is on your tongue even before you speak!) Yet people of faith know that prayer is not always to get precise results from God, but to change ourselves as we meditate on God’s way and God’s will; so prayer can be seen as being in communion with God, a spiritual connection, even a resting, a surrendering to the spirit of God.

I wrote a song a couple years back that acknowledges the mystery of a God beyond our understanding, the lyrics go like this: *Where is God, we want to know, why do answers comes so slow? God is here, although not seen, in our hearts and in our dreams... When the sun cannot be seen, we still know that it is there. When the wind cannot be seen, we still feel it everywhere.* Yes, I’m convinced of the presence of an unseen spirit, as sure as we know the reality of love, of hope, of courage, of peace; Remember the short definition of God, God IS LOVE.

Another difficult part of the Psalms is the sheer magnitude of God-miracles that are hard to imagine... Moses striking a rock and water comes out, or holding up his staff to part the Red Sea, as waters heap up on both sides, or people being fed by God for 40 years in the desert with flaky, dew-like manna every morning, and birds falling from the sky every night. With recordings of great miracles in the Bible, you would think God would cure cancer, put a stop to wars, etc. Who is this great

God? And if God is so great and powerful while loving the world, why allow such bad things to happen? The atheist comedian points out (oh so sarcastically) that all the evil and disasters in the world make a “bad resume for a supreme being!” Theologians call this the “theodicy” question: “How can there exist a God who is all-powerful and all-loving and all-knowing, if so much evil and suffering persist in the world?”

One spiritual teacher who has an interesting take on this matter is Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose own son was born with a disease that made him age quickly and die at a very young age. Rabbi Kushner has the view that God’s power IS “limited” in various ways, first by the laws of nature (if someone jumps out the window of a tall building, God will not stop gravity to make a soft landing) and secondly by human’s free will (we can choose to do evil as easily as we can choose to do good). He would agree with Paul that “Good” can come out of any situation, and remarks that although his son’s illness and death was very sad and tragic, it spurred him on to write a book that would help millions of people (“When bad things happen to good people”).

One of the devotional writers in *These Days* dealt with this topic well and very concisely (retired pastor in Kansas named Jeff Light)... He writes: *Some things in life just happen; tree limbs break, rivers flood. People contract diseases whose causes are neither an evil force, nor an act of God. My belief in a loving powerful God is not threatened by a parallel belief in random mishaps or tragedies. What we call incarnational theology is the abiding trust that the God who comes to us in Jesus is present with us in our suffering, allowing us to be transformed by the healing and reconciling love of God. (All things work together for good for those who love God, Rom.8:28)*

Notice the shift that Rev. Jeff Light makes to Jesus Christ; God being incarnate, coming in the flesh. That is how we Christians make a bit more sense out of the mystery of God. Jesus did not go around forcing himself on everyone and changing the course of history by coercive power. He did not and could not heal everyone. It is clear that

we humans, and mutating cancer cells or viruses for that matter, always have free will, freedom to act, even freedom to destroy.

Yet the God we look to in sickness or in war, or in any kind of suffering, is the spirit that we see in Jesus, a spirit of peacemaking and healing and transforming, in all things. The cross of Jesus Christ is the symbol that reminds us that, as the Buddhists also say, all of life has suffering. But the cross also reminds us of God and Jesus' steadfast love and presence to heal and to transform.

Who is God for you? God for me is indeed a mystery and a paradox, beyond a clear description, beyond even a name, as we recall God saying to Moses I AM WHO I AM. But my study of and relationship with Jesus gives me a clearer picture of God, God in the face of Christ. As Jesus said, You have seen me, you have seen the Father. Jesus clarifies for us who God is; Jesus becomes for us the window to God. If that is so, then Rabbi Harold Kushner is right about the self-limiting power of God, since Jesus *“did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, took human form and came in the form of a servant.”* (Philippians 2). God, as supreme being, does not need a resume that shows complete power, complete control over a perfect world. God can be viewed as supreme in “sharing power,” even giving up power as Jesus did, to walk alongside us, helping and serving, showing the transformative power of Love, God becoming flesh to dwell among us. This is the kind of God we can trust and lean on in faith. Amen.