
Living, Moving, and Having Our Being

Acts 17:22-31

“The God who made the world and everything in it . . . is not far from each one of us.” So, if you are looking for God, don’t use a telescope, use a microscope.

When I was a young boy growing up near an American Army base in Germany, one of the things we liked to do as a family was take an evening drive around the German countryside. Now, it was quite a different experience for my parents than it was for my two brothers and I. Our attention was fixed not on what was outside our side windows but on what was above us. Thinking back, it was a rather genius move by Mom and Dad. As a parent, there are some days when you just need the sibling bickering to stop and for the whole family to be together in peace. I've imagined that at some point, the conversation between my parents led them to realize that if you want young children to calm down and get along, lay them down in a moving vehicle and let them stare at the sky. Genius! Parents take note.

So, my dad would lay flat the seats in the back of his little 2-door hatchback coupe, to make just enough room for our little legs and he’d cover us with a blanket. As the adults had a peaceful conversation, we would star gaze out the rear, slanted window, for who knows how long those car rides actually were. Us boys would imagine a game of baseball being played among the stars. We’d use them to come up with shapes, and stories, and create worlds of all sorts, while unknowingly appreciating the vastness of the cosmos.

I became quite fixated on the sky in those days. In fact, early on, that fixation earned me the nickname “Turtle.” And now you are in a privileged *circle of trust* with that kind of personal information. Use it with caution. My mom would tell me that anytime we went on walks, particularly at night, I would just stare at the sky, which inevitably would slow my pace and cause me to bump into things. I imagine I was a sauntering, fumbling caricature of what awe and wonder look

like personified. If you know anything about German culture, you know they walk fast and with a purpose. I was not shaping up to be a proper German transplant.

But there was something alluring, for me, to look up. So that, when as a church-going family, us kids were taught to imagine God watching over us and protecting us, I instantly would picture the shape of a bearded man etched among the stars. That imaginative exercise I kept with me through some hard times as I got a little older. That sort of awe and wonder was instrumental to my growing faith.

When I was a bit older, God would increasingly move closer. That coming near, I've found, is not the experience of everyone. Many never experience a close, intimate, loving God. Many need God to remain at a distance. In fact, much of our Christian doctrine is centered around the theological concept of Divine Transcendence. God must necessarily be transcendent—a separate entity from humans and Creation—because what is infinite and holy cannot share the same space as the unholy, finite, created world. If God was to save us from our condition, God must necessarily be separate *from* fallen creation. That's the doctrine of Divine Transcendence, and it has informed much of what we say in creeds, believe in statements of faith, and sing in our songs and hymns of worship.

But keeping God at arms' length from the very handiwork of the Creator, takes advanced mental gymnastics. In one breath we claim to be created as the *Imago Dei*—the image, or representation, of God. We even use the language that God lives in our hearts, the most intimate and central place of our lives. Yet, in another breath, the Christian Church we've been handed, formed the basis of its theology around the idea of total depravity—that we are born spiritually dead and corrupt from the start. As John Calvin said, "we are worms". And because of our unholiness, Father God is angry at us; So, Jesus would need to come and rescue us from God's wrath. The God of this story must necessarily remain at a distance. The great paradox or irony of this brand of Christian faith is that we are saved both by God and from God.

When we anthropomorphize God as a male Father at all—and you don't have such a loving, caring Dad as some of us do, you see God as cold, distant, and controlling. You cannot separate the image you have of your earthly parent from

the deserving of our highest praise and worship. That's when our metaphors—which are meant to help us envision the Divine force of love—break down.

Early believers, even Jesus himself, would call God "Father" because in that culture, and still in some segments of society today, the male figure is the dominant head of the household. To use male pronouns for the Divine was a shorthand for saying that God was supreme, the highest. We wouldn't think to address God otherwise. So, Jesus asked us to pray to Abba Father, not as a claim on God's gender, but a conviction about God's place in our lives. Counter to what most religions teach about God, the early mystics, like Julian of Norwich, envisioned God more definitely and beautifully as "Mother." This spoke to their understanding for God's maternal care and nurturing love. Julian said: "The kind, loving mother, aware of the needs of her child, protects the child with great tenderness. This is the nature of motherhood... Whenever a human mother nurtures her child with all that is beautiful and good, it is God-the-Mother who is acting through her."

Though God is the original non-binary, in Hosea 11 (:3-4), we read of Mother God. It says: Yet it was I who taught Ephraim* to walk (**Ephraim being a part of the people of Israel*); I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."

We sometimes need this image of the nurturing Mother-God, who takes us up and brings us close. This pictures a God who initiates the relationship with patience and care, understanding our need to come along in stages. This image helps to address the separation anxiety we have developed as humans. Because if we view God to be a separated Being, then we have to: Construct ways of either getting to God OR convincing God to come to us. So we put in place morality systems, so that "If I'm good enough, God will pay more attention to me." We construct binaries like: Saint and Sinner, lost and found, and saved and heathen. Being on the right side of this line helps us feel that we are right with God. Yet, all of this puts us at the center.

What we claim in the powerful image of infant baptism this morning is a reminder that God initiates the relationship and blesses us from the beginning, long before we form the right words to say or have the capacity to believe at all. God initiates the relationship and births us into blessing, acceptance, and

wholeness. The life of faith isn't an act to try and claim those things but the practice of remembering this and living into its power to set us free.

Paul, in a rare sermon, where he is preaching to an exclusively Gentile audience, gave perhaps the most profound statement about God. In Acts 17, Paul says it is "in God that we live, move, and have our being." Not when we are living right... not when we are at church... For Paul, not even when you are practicing the right faith... The unknown God for these Athenian intellectuals, is a distant God that is not interested in relationship. And Paul's word to them is that you are like a fish who claims to not know anything about water. Wake up and realize that the whole thing is water!

My friends, the implication, for me, is pretty simple: When we realize that we live, move, and have our very being in God, we eliminate the separation anxiety that has caused religion to become something it was never intended to be. This realization frees us from systems that make their claims on our lives.

It rids us from the anxiety of trying to stay within the boundaries of where God is and where God is absent. Everything is pregnant with the possibility of the sacred. And that's good news that should inspire awe and wonder in us. God is not far from each one of us. Amen.