

“God is Personal” // Joe Heikman
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Where is God? Think about it for a minute. Dave just led us in an extended time of prayer, and like good Mennonites most of you had your heads bowed and your eyes closed--I know because I peeked. :) When Dave led us in prayer, where did you imagine those prayers were going? We spoke as though God was listening, where was God listening from?

It's Super Bowl Sunday, and I'd bet that at some point during the tv coverage tonight some extremely excited athlete is going to express their faith by pointing to the God in the sky.

And in many, many churches this morning, people are raising their hands and lifting their voices to God in praise. (and ironically, many of the songs they're singing come from Australia, where Christians down under are raising their hands to worship God in the entirely opposite direction!)



Of course, God is not “up,” everybody knows that. But I was raised with the image of God on a throne *somewhere*, if no longer “up” than perhaps in another dimension or something.

We just sang “God moves in a mysterious way.” That hymn suggests that God is somehow beyond us, transcendent, present and active but in a way that we can't really understand.

And we also sang “God is here among us...God is here within us...come indwelling Spirit.” So maybe when we pray you look within, to the voice of God within you.

Or there's another song we sing often at Wildwood, “[Peace before us](#).” The last line of that song says that Christ is before us, behind us, Christ under our feet. Christ within us, Christ over us, let all around us be Christ.” Which I love, and which makes sense if we are to believe the ancient creeds that suggest that God is indeed everywhere.

So which is it? Where is God? All of the above?

There are many ways that Christians have attempted to answer that question over the years. I think any answer that we give, in Christian theology anyway, usually bumps up against two tensions.

The first is the idea of God as personal. Judeo/Christian theology has stubbornly clung to this idea that God is personal, that God has character, that God has a mind and a will, that God does things and feels things and engages in things.

The first line in our [Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective](#) says that “We believe that God exists and is pleased with all who draw near by faith.”



What a statement! That the God of the Universe can and does *draw pleasure* from God’s creation. That’s what our tradition teaches, that in some meaningful way, the God of Creation is knowable and relatable. In fact, the tradition says that God has so much personality that it is expressed in not one, but *three persons*. (Don’t ask me how that works, I’m just the messenger...)

I’m not always comfortable with that idea of a personal God. It makes more sense to me to think about God in the abstract, an energy or force or power, dynamic and flowing and accessible, but not exactly with a mind or will. Some Christian theologies move in that direction, understanding God as the “Ground of Being” or the “Prime Mover” or the “Divine Mystery.” Not exactly like “The Force” from Star Wars, because of copyright (?), but kind of, sort of, yeah... like that.

Those images make sense to me, largely because they’re predictable and constant like the laws of nature. And I want God to be like that!

Personality is NOT consistent; it comes and goes and moves and flows. So it makes a lot of sense to me to view the Personal God as mostly a metaphor. Maybe what’s happening is that we can’t get our heads around all that God is, so we anthropomorphize God, we project our human personalities onto this thing that is really entirely different from us in ways that we can’t begin to understand.

That’s where a lot of Christians end up, with a very abstract understanding of God.

And yet, there’s this:



The personality of God might not make sense to me, but *I'm* personal. I have a mind and a will and emotions that experience the world and interact with it from a particular, personal perspective. From everything I can tell, in every way that seems to matter, I am personal. And you are personal. There is personality in the universe, or at the very least the illusion of personality. So either personality has always been, or personality came into existence from nothing.

I experience what I call God in personal ways. I interact in meaningful ways with the Divine, in experiences that reflect genuine, dynamic relationship. I might not be able to explain how God speaks or moves or shows up, but that's how I know of God. I can't explain my life without talking about God in a personal way.

And yes that's at least partly me projecting my personal experience onto God. But that's not nothing, and that has to have come from somewhere.

So that's something our understanding of God has to account for. God can't be totally abstract, as we are not totally abstract. Christianity has refused to let that go, choosing to embrace the paradox instead of dismissing it.

The second tension is the problem of dualism vs. non-dualism. Yes, that does sound all philosophical and boring. I'll keep it brief.

Again, think about what happens when you pray. Where is God? I'm going to guess that for almost all of us, God is somewhere else, something beyond myself. For most of us, we think of God as totally outside of us, "our Father in Heaven," maybe, or in nature, or somewhere outside--when we pray we go-to-meet-God.

Or maybe for some of us, we're thinking of God within us, that prayer is learning to listen to the Spirit's presence amidst all the other noise within me. So I stop listening to my own thoughts to hear God's voice instead.

Either way, there's still a wall there, a division between God and me. God is Other, separate from me.

That's dualism, that there are at least two things in the universe, God and creation, God and humanity, God and me. And that's how most of us have learned to think about God.

But here's the thing. Jesus' main message was that *God is not separate from God's creation*:

They shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." ~ Matt 1:23

The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is near ~ Mark 1:15

Nor will they say 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' for, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among [or within] you. ~ Luke 17:21

And the Word became flesh and lived among us ~ John 1:14

***On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you.
~ John 14:20***

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us. ~ 1 John 4:12

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. ~ Gal 2:19-20

Do you see the trajectory there? The dualistic, separate God is not the God of the New Testament. (Or the Hebrew Bible as well, though that's a different sermon). There is no division, no separation between me and God. It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me. I am in my Father and you in me and I in you.

God is not separate from us! In fact, [*nothing can separate us from the love of God who is Love.*](#)

Now I find that, frankly, incredible. And my guess is that this idea was as incomprehensible to the people of Jesus' day as it is to us, and they're struggling to find the words to describe it. When the New Testament writers say that God lives in us, they're not describing a split-personality thing or a

spiritual cohabitation scenario. The Holy Spirit is not shacking up with my spirit. But rather, we are One. I am somehow merged with God, and the whole thing is One Spirit.

God is not Other. God is not *only* me, and I'll say more about that in a minute, but God is in me and I am part of God.

What do you think about that? I could be wrong, but I don't think I've said anything overtly heretical thus far. I'm not above heresy, for sure. And I'm not trained as a philosopher, but I think this is pretty solid Christian orthodoxy. This is probably more direct language than many theologians would use, and it's in tension with some other things that Christians also believe, but it's definitely a central part of the historic Christian tradition.

God is One. God is Incarnate, present and intimately connected with God's Creation. God lives in me, and thus I am part of God. That's what it means to be the Children of God. To be called the Son of someone was to be 100% true to that lineage. So when they called Jesus the "Son of God," that meant that he was "full of God," 100% "of God." And that's what the Bible calls us, the Children of God, God's Offspring, 100% "of God."

There is One body and One Spirit, just as you were called to the One hope of your calling, One Lord, One faith, One baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.
~ Ephesians 4:4-6

[One.](#)

So we've got these tensions. God is personal, even though that doesn't always make sense. And God is One with God's Creation, even though *that* raises more questions than it answers.

What do we do with that? The trouble is that we have a hard time connecting this with our reality. It just sounds too *vague* to be true.

What does it mean to pray to that kind of God, to connect with a God who is personal and relatable, and also unified and not Other? What does that look like, for me to be truly One with God?

That's a most excellent question.

• **Personal vs Impersonal**
God is knowable and relatable.

• **Dualism vs Non-Dualism**
God is not Other.

How do we pray to (connect with, relate to, communicate with) this kind of God?

One of the great privileges of my role as a pastor is that I get to preach funeral sermons. It's an incredible honor to speak, as well as I can, the truth of someone's life, in the company of their loved ones. It's also the hardest and scariest thing I have to do... but a great honor.

When I begin to write a funeral sermon, my approach is pretty simple: where did we meet God in this person's life? What is it about this particular life, how this individual lived and loved and moved in the world, what does that reveal about the God who made them?

That looks very different in different people. For some, it's been in the things they've done, the music they've made, the hospitality they've offered, the crops they've grown. For some, it's been about their character traits, their courage or gratitude or hope. For many, it's been in the things they loved, and the joys they brought to others. It has nothing to do with their holiness or perfection, because God shows up even in their struggles and weaknesses and darkness.

And God always shows up! I have yet to tell a lie in a funeral sermon. And I have not yet failed to meet God in the life of one of God's children.

And yes, that has everything to do with how I'm looking! I see God in their lives because I'm looking for God in their lives.

But of course that's the point, that God shows up when we are looking for God, because God is already present. Maybe present in what is, or maybe present in the longing itself, maybe both; either way, God shows up when we look for God.

So let's not wait until we're dead to look for God in each other's lives.

We sang the words earlier in our service, "[God Is Here Among Us](#)." What if that was true, in a real, grounded, practical way? Look around, the personalities around you all reveal something of God's personality. Some part of God is sitting in the pew beside you.

Not in some abstract, deep inside there is a hidden pearl, kind of way, but in a real way. The way they live, the things they say, the things that make them laugh, the way they show love, those are expressions of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

And this is also true of you: who you are *is* a part of who God is.

And so if we want to understand God, what better than to try to understand the people around us.

At Wildwood last summer, we took nine Sundays in a series we called "Stained Glass: Nine Windows of Divine Light." Each Sunday we looked at one of the different personality types described by the Enneagram personality system.

Patty told me that some of you are familiar with the Enneagram, but for those who aren't, Enneagram simply means "nine-sided figure." There's nothing mystical or magical about the number nine. The Enneagram system says that there are nine basic personality types, that most people identify strongly with one particular type or number. But it's quite flexible, and I find that most people connect with many of the types in different ways.

"Stained Glass: Nine Windows of Divine Light"

The Enneagram: 9 Personality Types

The Perfectionist - God is Good

The Helper - God is Nurturing

The Achiever - God is Effective

The Romantic - God is Sublime

The Thinker - God is Knowable?

The Loyal Skeptic - God is Trustworthy

The Adventurer - God is Wonderful

The Challenger - God is Dynamic

The Harmonizer - God is Comfortable



Each of these has different ways of understanding themselves and the world, for better and for worse.

Each Sunday in the series, we explored one of the nine types, and we asked that question: where can we find God in people that share this type? How do these people look like God?

Through this lens, we learned about each other and also about the God who lives in us. We were reminded that God is good, God is nurturing, God is effective, etc.

Some of that is like, well, of course God is good or nurturing or trustworthy. That's just self-evident. But wait a second, what if it's not? What if it's only self-evident to you? What if others have a hard time seeing God this way? What if they can't see God in themselves, but you can see God in them?

I mentioned funeral sermons. It would be so fascinating to see people's reaction to how we talk about them at their funeral. My guess is that most people would shrug it off, I wasn't really as good as all of that, what about all my flaws, I don't think I look like God. I mean, what would you say if I looked you in the eye and said that I see God in you? *Nah, that's not believable. This guy just doesn't know the real me.*

As humans, we tend to project our fears onto the world and onto God and especially onto how we see ourselves. Our fears run so deep that we convince ourselves that that's how things really are, that our flaws define us. But really, there's so much more that we can't see unless we open ourselves to it.

We're all standing at some particular point on this Enneagram map, and we're looking through the lenses that have been handed to us and built into us, and we can't see more than we can see. From that place, I do think we tend to project our personality onto our understanding of God. And we let our fears and failures blur the image of God within us.

The invitation of the Enneagram is to see the world through other perspectives, and by that, hopefully, to see the world, to see ourselves, to see God, to see the Oneness as it really is.

So it's about recognizing that God is in me and I am part of God. And not just me.

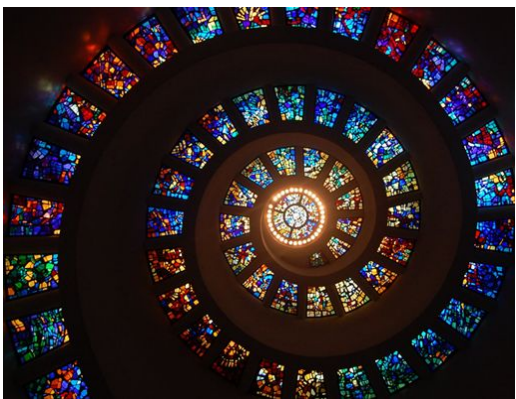
God is also in you and you are also in God. And not just you.

God is also in us, we are also in God. And not just us.

God is also in them, and they are with God. And not just them,

but also in all of the creatures and all of the created things.

And not just all of the created things, but also in all things as a whole, more than the sum of their parts, and perhaps beyond even that.



Expanding spirals of awareness, that's how we find God in all of God's fullness balanced with all of God's personality and individual relatability.

And now we're back to thinking about abstract concepts far beyond what I can reasonably explain.

But can you see how it's connected? The individual and the universal, the personal and the infinite.

I think that's what the Psalmist was getting at as well, drawing that connecting line between the breadth and grandiosity of God's love in the heavens, and bringing it down and into the intimacy of the soul:

*Your love, Creator God, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.*

*Your justice is like the mountains in their splendor,
your judgments like the great deep.*

*Whether human or animal, Creator God,
you keep us all in your care.*

How precious is your love!

*Whether creatures of heaven or children of earth,
we all find refuge in the shadow of your wings.
We feast on the bounty of your estate,
And drink from the stream of your delights.
In you is the wellspring of Life,
And in your light we become enlightened.*

~ Psalm 36

That was the hope of the series at Wildwood, to be enlightened by God's light in and among us, not separate from but emerging out of the living depths of our beings.

It was a fascinating series, in my humble opinion. You can check it out on our Wildwood website, if you follow the [sermons link](#) back to last summer. Even more than the sermons, we were blessed by the amazing courage and vulnerability of various individuals who let us examine their personality type publicly.

And we also tried to connect the various personality types with different kinds of prayer that might work better for different kinds of people.

If I can ask you to experiment with me, I'd like to close with one of those prayer exercises.

One of the most straightforward ways of connecting to this God who is both personal and universal to use prayer to intentionally engage that expanding spiral of connection.

Today we'll do this with a simple guided prayer exercise, talking to God about our hopes, dreams and fears.

I'll lead us through four stages, following that expanding spiral. First we'll focus inward on ourselves, then our local community, then our region, and then on the whole world. At each level, I'll ask you to pray about three things, your hopes, your dreams, and your fears.

Feel free to get your body into a relaxed and comfortable position, and perhaps close your eyes or soften your gaze, and let's talk with God.

Let's begin by introducing ourselves to God, however you understand God in this moment. Whatever words feel most comfortable to you, friendly or formal, even if that's just acknowledging that maybe this feels a bit strange, to introduce yourself to God.

Now let's talk to God about ourselves. First, our hopes: what do you wish would happen in your life? How do you want today to go for you, what are you hoping for in this week or this month? What is your hope for your relationship with God?

Now share with God your dreams for yourself. What do you long for, what do you desire for yourself? What is your vision for your life, perhaps big or perhaps small? What do you imagine could happen if things went just right?

And now share with God your fears for yourself. What are you afraid of? What terrifies you about your relationships, your vocation, your well-being? What worries are you carrying with you today?

Now let's expand the spiral. Think about your community, your loved ones, your various circles of relationship.

Again, talk with God about your hopes for your community. How would you like things to be for those people that your thinking of, for your relationship with them, for their well-being?

And now your dreams for your community. What best-case scenarios can you imagine for those people, what could happen if everything went just right? What would you long for them to know and experience?

Now your fears for your community. What kinds of things are you afraid of on their behalf? What fears might they be carrying?

Let's expand the spiral again, now talking to God about our region, maybe that's the city and towns that we live in, maybe that's our province or country, maybe all of North America.

What hopes do you have for this region? What projects are we working on, what would you like people to experience?

What dreams do you carry for this area? What direction would you like to see us move in? What's the best possible future you can imagine for the region?

And fears, what frightens you about this region? What dangers are we facing? What worries do we share?

And finally, let's expand the spiral again to the whole world, all of humanity, the entire planet.

What are your hopes for the world? In the immediate future, what gifts would you give to the world if you could?

And what are your dreams for the world? Big or small, what goodness can you imagine growing among us? What possibilities can you see?

And finally, share your fears for the world with God. What dangers are we facing? What worries you about the future of our planet?

Creator God, you are as close as our breath and as far as dimensions unknown. You are intimate and inaccessible, you are personal and mysterious. We are grateful for the pieces of your presence that are known and felt, and we are in awe of the wonders that we can only imagine. Open our eyes that we might see, open our minds that we might know, and open our hearts that we might live in your Love. Amen.

