

“Beyond Me”

Genesis 1:1; Exodus 3:11-15;
1 Kings 19:11-13; Job 38:1-11;
Revelation 22:11-13; John 1:1-4;
Matthew 19:23-26

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
April 7, 2013

Have you ever been present at the birth of something or someone? It's an incredible event. The coming of new life into this world—there's nothing else like it. There's that moment when that new life comes and all of a sudden you're holding that baby. It's incredible! That new beginning, that new life, is wondrous.

It used to be that when I was a boy—and I don't know why they did this—but in all the TV shows, whenever a baby was born they showed the doctor holding it up and slapping it on the bottom. I don't what that was about, except maybe they wanted to make sure life started off with a bang.

Some people say that's exactly how life and everything started. It started off with a bang. Was it God's way of slapping the baby? OK, it probably doesn't work. But isn't it incredible? Not only to think about a baby—that's incredible enough—but think about *everything*. I really do get a little overwhelmed thinking about it. I think about the height. Going out and looking at the stars, thinking about the vastness of the universe, it is incredible. And then the depth. I used to be an electron microscopist so we were looking at very small things. Some of the equipment showed us patters of atoms and things millions of times smaller than what I normally see every day. It's hard for me to even conceive, really, of what that means. The vastness, the heights, the depths, and the breadth of creation. All the different kinds of life. If you have done any travelling at all, you recognize there is so much variation. It's an incredible place. It's incredible to think of all this beginning. *In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. Through Him, all things were made.* That's just incredible to think about.

It's incredible to try to think about a beginning for the earth, a beginning for the universe. It's incredible enough to think about a beginning for my life let alone all the rest of it. And then to think about the One who began it—how do you do that? How do you begin to think about that One who created it all? I don't even understand my parents. How do I understand God?

Well, we do have some hints, some clues along the way. We have Moses encountering God and speaking with him, asking him what his name is. That should help. “I AM WHO I AM” or “I AM WHO I WILL BE.” “I AM.” That helps a little bit. Is God just the being of everything? I AM. Well, it's pretty incredible. The tendency is to say that there is this God, this wondrous God, and perhaps we begin to form God into a shape of who we think God must be. It's easy to begin to think of God as part of creation in some way. One who does particular things, makes things happen. I particularly like to think of God as the One who makes things happen for me. It's easy to go there, isn't it? God began it all, God's this wondrous being, God's the one who is making things happen, God's the one who is going to make things happen for me.

And then we run into Job and his encounter with God, when God says maybe he should step back a moment. It's easy to begin to make God kind of domesticated. We think

we're in control. We think we know what God is going to do. We've got God in a box. God comes along and says, "Were you there when everything began? Do you really understand who I am and what it's all about?" Job is pretty quick to say no. I understand that. I'm there with him. Who is this God? What's God like?

Then we have Elijah out in the wilderness. I always thought that earthquake and storm would be great places for God to be, but he's not there. When does Elijah recognize God's presence? I actually like the new translation: in the sheer silence. So let's do something, just for 10 or 20 seconds. Let's try to listen for sheer silence. Let's see how silent we can be...

You guys are pretty good. It was pretty quiet. But even in the quiet, it didn't quite get me to sheer silence. I could hear my own breathing; I could hear all kinds of things going on. Although you were amazingly quiet.

What it says to me is that the idea of sheer silence is a silence that goes beyond any silence I've ever heard before. Sheer silence. There is something incredibly different in the moment when Elijah encounters God that is different than simple silence. He knows in that moment, when something is so different, that God is present in a special way. God is different.

I think that's the main point today: God is so *other*, so different. God is really beyond me. The technical word is transcendent. It simply means that God is so different, other, beyond us. Think about any time somebody encounters God in the Bible. So often the first thing they do is to be afraid. Part of that fear is being in the presence of something so different, like a burning bush. Being on the mountain at the time of the transfiguration, those disciples fall down in fear. Even in encountering an angel, Mary is afraid. There are all these times encountering the divine as it makes itself known in our presence, as God is made known. It's incredible.

So how can we have anything to do with something so beyond us? It's a little like that question the disciples are asking Jesus, "Who can be saved?" There is a flip side of it. Because God is so great, all things are possible with God. Jesus is answering that question, "Who can be saved?" I think about the incredible nature of God and wonder how in the world can I ever have a relationship with that God? How could I ever be saved? How could I have anything to do with that God? Well, things that are not possible for mortals are possible with God. Jesus says, "All things are possible with God." And so that God comes among us. That God uses very simple things from our daily lives to help us recognize that we are a valued, important part of what that God cares about. In spite of the incredible wonder of who that God is, he invites us to a simple table. He raises Jesus to reenter our world to show us that love never dies, that his love is present with us, that he is with us.

I think is awfully easy at times to just come and think it's a nice thing we do, and to begin to let God be too small. It's an incredible thing that God has done to not stay distant. To think that God might serve us in any way; to serve us as somebody at a meal serving friends. We are invited to recognize and remember, to praise, and to come in thanksgiving for that wondrous God who invites us in to share a meal in a pretty simple way, but which reminds us of the love of that God for us and the power of that God at work in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.