

“Beyond Us”

Ecclesiastes 3:11-15; Isa 55:8-9;
Ephesians 1:1-10; John 8:14-27

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There was once a fellow in a famous city, and some of the people in the city came to him and said, “You have been designated the wisest person in town.” He looked at them and said, “You must be crazy. I’ll prove this to you.”

So he started going to the people who were considered most intelligent, most powerful, the people who should have had the answers. What he found was that as he began to ask them questions, he was always able to come up with contradictions in what they believed, in what they thought. They weren’t too happy about that toward the end. The guy I’m talking about has a fairly famous name. His name was Socrates. He ended up dying because they didn’t like all the questions he asked in the end. He did decide that maybe he was the wisest person in town, not because of how much he knew, but because he realized he didn’t know that much and was willing to ask the questions.

Maybe there was a guy way back that did something similar, wondered about life and what it was all about, why we have the past and the future in our minds. The author of Ecclesiastes.

Then fast-forward a couple thousand years from Socrates. There was another guy who was caught up in a way of understanding the world that was prevalent at the beginning of the 20th Century. It was all about being able to reason things out and being able to understand it all. So, during a war, when he had nothing else to do as the bombs were flying overhead (I never quite understood this), he wrote a book about logic and how you could carefully parse things out and show how all these different philosophical propositions weren’t quite logical. But he found in the end that it left him with very little to know. He’s a famous logician, but he can’t tell you how the world works. His name was Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Now, I’m not trying to suggest that we should all try to become philosophers. But what I am suggesting is that throughout the course of human history we have tried to understand the world we live in and oftentimes the questions have been more real than the answers. What it makes me think about is that if we still have trouble understanding the world we live in, how are we ever going to understand God? We have a struggle with the world around us.

I was reading a different translation of Ecclesiastes than Lee read for us this morning, but there’s a suggestion there that we will never understand it all. We will never be satisfied with our understanding. We’ll never know it all. That’s a hard thing to run up against. Maybe it is a position of wisdom, however, to begin to realize that we might have some limits on what we can know and understand, especially when it comes to God.

If we think about who God is, one word stands out to me. God is transcendent. That suggests the same thing that it probably conjures up: what in the world does that mean? It's a sense that there's something beyond which we can't see. I don't really understand what transcendence even is because it means something beyond all the categories, something beyond all my thoughts, something beyond all reality. If God is that much "other" I don't think we can understand God. That's a little disconcerting. I think God is so other. It's hard not to fall back into human logic, but if God created everything that is, God is not creation, not part of it. God is different.

Not everyone agrees with me that we can't figure out who God is from the world around us. There are some ways I think that might be true, but I don't think we can start there. An example of why I think this: If you came upon a cake that somebody had baked, what would you know about the baker? We know a few things by looking at the cake because we've seen other cakes. The trouble with creation is that we don't have other creations to compare our creation to. Otherwise, what do we know about the baker of the cake? It's pretty hard to know. Did the baker some way make the crumb of the cake? Well, sort of, by putting ingredients together, but we can't necessarily see that. All I'm suggesting is that it is difficult for us to see God, and it's a bit disconcerting.

It's so disconcerting that I think one of the things we do is try to shrink God, domesticate God. After all, what I really want these days is to be able to go and find the definition of who God is. These days, I probably wouldn't use a reference book; I would use a tablet computer. I want to be able Google "God" and know who God is. Isn't it hard to think that maybe there's a God that is so far beyond us that I can't really understand God? I want to have the ability to kind of shape that God. I want to be able to hold on to it in a way that makes sense to me. I'm going to try to make sense of it all, but I don't think we can go there directly. I don't know how much of it is really up to me.

What it feels like to me is we struggle with thinking that we have any limitations on our intellect and understanding and imagination. But we live with limits all the time. I can't start flapping my arms and take off across the sanctuary. I live with gravity all the time and it's a real limitation to how I live my life. But do I have any limitation to my imagination, to what I can know? I believe I do. I believe God is beyond my ability to know *by myself*. It leads to a certain amount of humility, which makes some sense.

Thinking about who God is leaves me wondering. Perhaps that's the place where I can start, when I can be humble enough to recognize that maybe I can't do it on my own. It's where the scripture comes in today. What is Jesus saying he's doing? He's coming between us and God and introducing God to us. The whole of scripture is, in some way, that introduction. The very thought that God is creator really comes out of revelation. My belief is, and not everybody sees this exactly the same way, that God is unknowable except when God reveals God's self to us. That's what God has done throughout scripture.

We don't know all about who God is. We don't even know all about what the nature of the universe is. It's hard for me sometimes to know what the best thing to do in the

middle of my day is, let alone try to understand the whole universe. I don't get the sense that God really cares that we don't understand fully who God is. It feels like what God is saying is it's on a "need to know" basis.

There may be some ways in which God is infused within creation. Some people would argue beauty is one of those things. But I believe it is a grace given to us that we're not on our own. Jesus, and all of scripture, and all of the prophets and the patriarchs, all of that together lets us enter into a sense of awe of who God is and the wonder that God continues to come to us. Paul talks about the mystery of God's will being made known to us. If I sit out under the stars and look up at the vast nature of the universe I can begin to feel pretty insignificant pretty quickly. And yet, I don't have to know all that is because I have a God that comes and shares with us things we do need to know. We'll spend some time on that as we go into Lent, thinking about the things we do need to know and how our lives work together.

But for today, isn't it just a little disconcerting to think about God as transcendent? How thankful I am that God doesn't simply leave us there, but gathers us. God shows us the gift of life and invites us into that life, and leads us in ways that make that life wonderful. Like gathering together as a family of faith around a table because we remember what he has done for us. God may be beyond my imagination, but God has come and encountered me, us together, through scripture, in Christ, freeing us to live anew. That's what the table is about. God may be beyond my understanding, but he comes in really tangible ways to invite us to be God's people. Thank God.

Let's pray:

Lord, it's very clear to me that there's a lot that is beyond my understanding. But it's also clear that you have given us such wonderful things: the lives we share, the joy of care for one another, the freedom you give us through forgiveness, your blessing, and that you guide us into life. Lord, help us not lose sight of the wonder of who you are, the glory of who you are. We can give thanks for the very tangible ways you have come into our lives through the love we share, the grace you have given us, the hope that enters through you. Thank you, Lord. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.