

Last Feb when we were all busy trying to keep warm and dreaming of this time of year, I stood here and attempted to share with you the best I could about my newfound appreciation of the greatness and otherness of God. I had been thinking about this topic and had read Rob Bell's book titled: 'What we talk about when we talk about God'. It got me all excited and I wanted to try and pass that on to you.

Besides a cool video that shows the microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects of the world we live in, I tried to say something illuminating and helpful about God. So I talked about God as wind /spirit / energy; about God as the great 'I am'-free of time, about how God is beyond the names we use, beyond gender , and yet God is with us and for us (an idea borrowed from Bell). I tried to point out that like my cat sitting on a puzzle, we don't really get the picture. I suggested that maybe the best way to understand our relationship with God is to view God through Jesus.(apparently I said a lot of other stuff too, I just went back and listened to some of it and realized I spoke way too long-sorry . But if you need a review it's still up on the churches website-it might be faster to read it rather than listen)

I don't know about you, but I experienced a strange reaction. I kind of scared myself! God became so great to me, so other, I started to wonder: how do I deal with a God like that? Does a God that great and beyond even care about my issues? Is that God even a being with whom I can communicate? What does this do to prayer? In between other life stuff , on some back burner, I muddled away at this stuff. Then a couple of weeks ago (weeks, not months) Wendy asked me to take Dwight's spot for today's service, and after trying to wiggle out of it- Wendy can be very persuasive and persistent- I agreed to speak today. So here I am and here you are and I want to try some more to work at this issue. So let's spend a few minutes thinking about God and what God might like from us and perhaps other related topics.

I found some cartoons that kind of relate to the topic.

One of the issues that always arises is how do I know God exists? (sign) Sometimes I wish it was that easy. We have our problems as people (power of prayer) But maybe God has problems too (4 or 5) We think were pretty hot stuff (God Particle) but maybe we have something to learn from Snoopy (peanuts). A good place to start: we might be wrong!

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Yes we might be wrong, but we do have to start somewhere. In fact there is a very good chance we might be wrong somewhere in how we see God, in our understanding of Jesus, christian life or even raising our kids or our relationships with the significant others in our life.

So I realized I had a problem. How to deal with this new issue around my understanding about God! I did some reading, no time for books etc, so blog reading, podcast listening, YouTube watching etc to try to see what my new go-to people were saying about God (Rob Bell, Peter Enns, Mike McHargue, Richard Rohr, Peter Rollins) -not enough in my opinion, or at least not enough that made sense to me. I'll get into that in a moment but first I want to make this point: I realized, God hadn't changed, I had- or rather my thinking had. These questions are old ones . People have been trying to make sense of God stuff for thousands of years. So if you are confused, rest assured, you are in good company!

So here mainly from, an interview of philosopher/theologian Peter Rollins by Rob Bell, with help interpreting from Ben Schnell and Nancy Myers Rust, is my attempt to look at God in 4 different ways. I guess this will be something of a primer, a teaser. To get more out of the ideas I will give you today, you might have to go out there and do your own digging. There just isn't time here to get into everything I could. Are you ready?

1)The first idea is ***God as Super-Being***. Here God is seen as like a super version of ourselves. God is all powerful, all knowing, (usually male) anthropomorphic being residing in a literal location called heaven while overseeing daily life on earth. Most cartoons and images representing God see God in this way. I believe many Christians do too.(by the way- cartoon -God with computer)

The risk of this view of God is it's limited-ness. Because of our brains being finite, our imaginations small, we tend to limit God, God is no bigger than that which we can imagine. We create God in our own image instead of the other way around. As Rollins says: “We create our god's and then our god's create us. They bless our tanks, they bless our freedom fighters, and they condemn those terrorists. God becomes a way of legitimizing our world and our thinking.”

It's like Homer Simpson in this cartoon: (homer) (superbeing-superman)

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2)The next idea is ***God as Hyperbeing***. In an attempt to get beyond the criticism above, maybe?, people came up with the idea 'that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.'(This is practically a direct quote from Anselm of Canterbury who proposed this in 1078.) So God is bigger, better, different than anything we can say about God. This could be seen as the most orthodox view of God. Rollins uses the analogy of a ship on the bottom of the ocean. The ship contains the ocean and the ocean contains the ship. But while the ship contains a small fragment of the ocean, the ocean contains the entire ship. We contain but a fraction of God, but God contains us in our entirety. We are totally saturated by God. So Rollins says we thus have to constantly de-name God. For example, if we say God is like a father, we right away have to say but not just like my father, more. He says much of the narrative of the scripture is the biblical writers saying 'this is how God is, then realizing actually no, God is bigger, wider , beyond my tribe.' So the poets and writers in the Bible try to get at the un-namable God by naming God in many different ways (.Meister Eikhart:the unnameable is omni-nameable

It's like when you try to speak of love- you use so many metaphors, and sometimes those metaphors clash, similarly in the Bible God is seen as warrior or as peacemaker, or God is portrayed as one who never changes, or you have God who changes- the poets are trying to articulate something they cannot articulate. So theology is a discourse in a reality we cannot nail down. The mystics said you cannot study this from afar. You have to be immersed in it. Like that ship, we are in the middle of it, we may know something by experience, by what it does to you. Like a painting, the question becomes not what does it mean, but what does it do to you.(***not how you get at it, but how it gets at you***). So I guess we get to know God by an immersion experience'

3) ***God as Ground of Being***. Attributed to Paul Tillich. Tillich was critical of a view of God that had God as any kind of being or presence. How could a being create beings? God has to be outside creation If God does creation, what/who does God? So he saw God as the ground of Being-Itself. The ground upon which all things exist. God comes before being itself. It seems to me very abstract. So Tillich sees symbols as the only way to envision something as abstract as God. Rollins puts it something like this; Speech about God is symbolic because as soon as I say something about God, there is a subject -me saying something about an object-God. But God comes before subject and object. So as soon as we make God into an object we miss God because God is not an object. It's always not

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enough. God is that from which subject and object arise. (I think I get it...God comes before subject and object because God is before creation)

Since God is not an object, you cannot love God directly. You love someone and in that love you love God. ***So God is not the object(person) you love, God is that which you discover in the act of love.*** So if you love your neighbour, you love God, if you don't love your neighbour you don't love God. Meaning in life is found when you can find something that you think is worth living and dying for, something beyond yourself. That's how you find God, that is the Ground of Being

4) ***God as Event-*** The world has what appears to be a natural way of being where violence is met with violence, and hatred with hatred. Predators eat their prey and affliction is paid back with affliction. (Maybe most action novels and movies?) Simone Weil called this 'gravity'. But there is also 'grace', her other term, which is peppered within gravity, within the world. Grace stops us from meeting hatred with hatred, but rather meets hatred with love. Through grace, violence can be met with peace. Grace calls us to be better selves. That is God as event. So faith would be attempting to orient yourself differently in the world, not having a certain view about the world. You could say, ***it's not what you believe, but how you believe what you believe. OR the truth is not in what I think but the truth is in what I do.***

There you go...the 4 ways to look at God, as discussed by Peter Rollins. And all these idea, even though they may sound new age-ish, are old , at least a fair bit older than I am. But before you go, I have a couple more Rollins thoughts I have to share with you.

1-the difference between scientific language and theological language. I have to briefly mention it because it is helpful. In scientific language you objectively examine something- and make a statement about it. For example: There is a flag. It is made of cloth and is red, white and blue. But theological language is made up of 3 parts-objective, subjective and eventual. The objective is: something happens-I see a flag, the subjective is: it hits me, it is meaningful to me, the eventual is: something has changed, I am transformed, I might do something different as a result of this. (I picked the US flag because I think it would be more stark there. Would be like that here too some places)

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So in life something hits me(objective)-I see a clear blue sky through the trees in my back yard. (subjective) I am struck by the beauty of creation (evental) my day is brighter, I feel more thankful. So that sky is more to me than what I see.

Out of this comes a great idea from Rollins: to summarize- birth and life allows us to experience, so rebirth in a christian sense allows us to experience everything differently, everything is transformed. ***So religious experience is not an experience of anything, it's what transforms your experience of everything .***

2- you might have guessed by now if you wanted to, that Rollins doesn't see God as a magician, someone who fixes all your problems. (and it is tempting to want God to solve our problems for us) He says, rather, that to see God as offering salvation from hardships and anxieties is bad religion. He says that rather than offering salvation from hardship, anxieties and difficulties, the Bible offers salvation ***within*** those things. Not a way out of the grit and grim of the world, but a way to bear the burden of those things. ***So God helps us not escape our suffering but helps us carry our suffering.***

OK All shared. But so what? (I'm almost done, but..) I just want to share some reactions I have and maybe they'll be of help to you, or maybe for your further thought.

---this doesn't sound like God in the old song: 'My God and I go in the fields together, we walk and talk as good friends should and do...' does it? I come away feeling like it's hard to relate to such a great God. But should I be thinking in terms of worship rather?. I also don't want everything we say about God to be metaphor. But maybe that's just the point? If God is God, God must be beyond me, beyond human. Yet even Rob Bell and many others speak of feeling God close at a certain time of crisis. And in the New Testament Jesus promises God's love and concern for us. I'm still trying to put it all together. Here's a quote from James Finley, I probably heard here in church that might pertain: 'The love of God protects me from nothing and sustains me in everything'.

---how then do I pray? some wise people say prayer is contemplation. Another wise one told me prayer is aligning oneself with the divine. What does that look like? I don't know if Rollins even talks about prayer. How do we pray for other people? Why then do we pray if not for a change? Or do we pray for that strength to make it through? Maybe Joe will give us some new insights next week!

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---There is nothing here about Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit. Maybe some illumination would be helpful?

---the third and fourth ideas of God focus on finding God when you forget about yourself and love others. I don't see why the God you find in that experience cannot be what they call Hyper God, God more than we can possibly imagine. Maybe I just don't get it yet...

---For your info, near the end of my writing this, too late to incorporate in this sermon, I ran across an article called 'What God do you or don't you believe in' by Jack Preston King. He makes some of the points above from a different angle. Ask me if you are interested.

---I want to let Peter Rollins have the last word. I love his Irish accent, but you may have to listen extra carefully to understand. Listen closely- do you recognize the good authority he quotes from? (Hint- it's in our 1John passage).