

Good News

One of my seminary theology professors was very fond of telling first year students that, while all theology is in some way contextual, it is the job of the theologian to minimize the effect of *context* on theology. What he meant was that we all have things we bring to bear when we think of who God is and what God is like. Further, we who are finite, transient creatures, cannot ultimately fathom the depths of God who is infinite and wholly other.

Perhaps he was right, at least regarding Systematic Theology. But it is also true that we cannot ultimately outrun all of our perceptions of God, no matter how diligent and objective we might try to be. Part of our Conversations Worth Having topic deals with understanding how our cultures shape how we read the Bible, which of course is the basis of Christian theology.

The real truth is that we are *all* theologians, with all of our context, from the moment we first begin to conceive of a notion of God.

I am fond of a story shared with me by a woman who was the mother of a small child. Upon returning home after Sunday School, her daughter declared that God had been in her class that day. Her mother, not wanting to crush her daughter's nascent faith asked her for a few particulars, "What does God look like," she asked?

"You know what he looks like," her daughter replied exasperated, "You listen to him every Sunday in church."

Before her mother had even a moment to glory in the wonderful mysteries of God shown by her daughter's profound statement of faith, her daughter went on, "Sometimes we only get Jesus, the red-headed one, but today, God visited." It quickly became crystal clear: God was the pastor, and Jesus was the red-headed associate pastor.

No pressure.

Come to think of it, my favorite description of me that has been offered by a child from a church I was serving was simply, "The Godfather." I'm not quite sure how I earned it, but I'll take it.

We all become theologians at an early age.

The minute we face an existential question we cannot answer, we become theologians, either drawing conclusions about God or conclusions about God's absence.

We also become Biblical interpreters at an early age. We hear the story of Adam and Eve, or Noah, or Moses and have to decide *how* to hear it. We have to decide what we believe about it. Generally, if we are very young, educational theorists tell us, we interpret the stories literally,

because that is the way our brains process information at an early age: A thing is true or untrue, reliable or unreliable. We are generally literalists at a young age.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur put into words what we all go through: We experience a pre-critical and post-critical naiveté that stand on either side of a desert.

Think of it: We hear things about God from reliable sources, we believe them to be true. Here's an example: Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho.

We learn the song. We believe it. We're not critical. You could say we're naïve.

Then, perhaps we learn that the archaeological evidence is clear that Jericho never was a walled city.

We heard a story as true. We believed it. But it is not historically accurate.

Losing the child-like trust of faith leads us into a critical desert of development.

Then, in the fullness of our growth and in God's grace, we realize something profound: It doesn't have to be *historical* to be *true*. The presence of God with the people of God against all odds is still a true story, whether Jericho had actual walls or not.

We know the story is not factual; we also know it is true.

We enter an intentional post-critical naiveté.

The life of faith is full of critical deserts.

Sometimes it is an event, a happening, a life transition that forces us into the desert of critical reflection about God and ourselves.

Truly, John Calvin was right when he said that there is no knowledge of self that is not prefaced by the knowledge of God.

And yet, theologians still try to give descriptions of God that will transcend the inevitable contextualization of God that we all experience. Classically, they are called *the perfections of God*.

Here is a short synopsis: "God is not limited in power; therefore God is omnipotent. God is not limited in knowledge; therefore God is omniscient. God is not limited by spatiality; therefore God is immense (filling all spaces) and omnipresent (being present to every point in the universe that God has created with the fullness, the entirety of God's being."¹

The problem we all face, however, is that the very finiteness with which we approach these perfections leads to a failure of understanding.

¹ While these are classical definitions, this synopsis is taken from Prof. Bruce McCormack's lecture, *God Revealed and Hidden*, Princeton Theological Seminary, Mar. 2, 1998.

Which is not to say we have no knowledge of God, but it is to say that any knowledge of God that we *do* have will be incomplete, contextual, and unique to each of us.

Which is to say that we *all* have conceptions of God.

And why would we be concerned with this?

Because our conception of God invariably shapes our conception of the whole world. Calvin truly was right when he said that there is no knowledge of self that is not prefaced by the knowledge of God.

If we have an impoverished understanding of God, we will have an impoverished understanding of creation, of both our humanity and others' humanity.

And why are we concerned about this?

Here is one answer: A poll published by the Wall Street Journal last year revealed that just four years before, 80% of Americans rated tolerance for others as very important. In 2023, that figured had dropped to 58%.²

Similarly, in the last two months of 2023, Antisemitic incidents in the United States reached their highest rate in a two-month period since the Anti-Defamation League began tracking.³

Further the FBI's crime report for 2022 showed that hate crimes based on sexual orientation increased 13.8% over the prior year, and hate crimes based on gender identity jumped a staggering 38.9%.⁴ I could go on, the same is true of Islamophobia and AAPI hate.

First Church is deeply committed to inclusion, I know the old line about lies and statistics, but when we get God wrong, it is hard to see the world right. Perhaps these trends show us where our work is still needed?

If one has an impoverished understanding of God, then one's understanding of *everything* else will be impoverished.

How does one come to an impoverished understanding of God?

There are many ways, but chief among them is this: *We do not learn the lessons the desert has to teach us.*

The world is full of folks who have experienced hard knocks.

² <https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/arts-culture/3920015-fewer-americans-prioritizing-hard-work-patriotism-religious-faith-poll/>

³ <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/adl-reports-unprecedented-rise-antisemitic-incidents-post-oct-7>

⁴ <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/fbis-annual-crime-report-amid-state-of-emergency-anti-lgbtq-hate-crimes-hit-staggering-record-highs>

There is nothing unusual about experiencing something difficult. It happens to everyone. The Bible has a way of understanding hard knocks – it is the analogy of the desert.

Experiences that shape us are frequently experiences in which we find ourselves open to God's help, God's love, and God's power to redeem and heal.

But, absent that knowledge, the experiences that shape us can *close* us to God's help, God's love, and God's power to redeem and heal.

The difference, frequently, is whether we learned the lessons the desert would teach us.

The community that Isaiah addressed was no stranger to desert experiences.

Theirs was an existence that was cut-off from the experiences that grounded them and provided that feeling of security that all of us crave.

It was a generational loss of security. In different eras, various prophets spoke under the name *Isaiah*, as calamity threatened, as the community collapsed, and finally was restored by God.

Their words are some of the great words of *hope* of our faith.

Including the fortieth chapter, where the prophet reiterates the creative force and power of God: From the very foundations of the earth, God is creator and sustainer. Then the prophet pivots to a resounding proclamation that those who wait, those who remain, those who look for the lesson this desert will teach them – *they* always will be sustained by God: Their strength shall be renewed and they shall mount up with wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

The understanding of God operative in Isaiah's theology is a God *who always comes through*.

Those who wait for the Lord will find that God waits with them, still meeting weariness and fainting with renewal and strength.

In Christian faith, that strength of God is shown, not in destructive power or might, but by the incarnation of love, which is why Christians know God through Jesus Christ, and his teachings.

A while back, I heard an interview with the poet and essayist Mary Karr by Krista Tippett. I was captivated by something she said about the carnal physicality of Catholic Faith.

She said, "I remember looking at the body on the cross and saying to my son that – I don't even remember whether I ever wrote about this or not – but I remember looking at it before we were baptized and saying, "I don't get this whole crucifixion thing. It's so awful. I mean, the suffering, beaten critter nailed up there is just so gross. Why don't they just have you say the jump rope rhymes, and then you're redeemed?" And my kid, who was young, like, maybe, I don't know, 8 or 9 said, "Who would pay attention to that?"

And he said, “This is like *Pulp Fiction*.” My mother, the one time I left him with her, had let him watch *Pulp Fiction* when he was, like, 7 years old. And he said, “This is like *Pulp Fiction*. It’s just like — everybody is going to gawk at this. And then I suddenly thought, what else would we pay attention to as human beings but this grizzly, awful, morbid thing? You’re not going to look at that and say, “Oh, you don’t know about suffering. You’re God. What do you know about suffering?” You’re going to look and say, “Oh, you were a hunk of meat like me. Wow.” ...that idea of descending theology of the spirit being in these hunks of flesh, it’s — wow. It’s a big deal.”⁵

The Christian conception of God is that of the incarnation. And the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the story of a God who enters the desert places, the God who call us to empathize with all people, seeing ourselves in them, and then in ourselves, the God who calls us to bring healing, even if the whole city comes to our doors.

So, let us return to our conceptions of God, and the world.

Perhaps you’ll relate to this: The older I get, the shorter I find the list of beliefs that are *core* for me, but I believe those things more and more deeply:

That God is love.

That in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s love wins, even over death.

And that this *Good News* of God in Jesus Christ is only good news if it is good news for *everyone*.

The Gospel is the way of welcome.

The Gospel is the way of solidarity.

The Gospel is the way of the desert, in which we journey with each other in the knowledge that we are journeying with God.

That is how God has always journeyed alongside us.

And now, as always, how we see God will be how we see the world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁵ <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-karr-astonished-by-the-human-comedy/>