

The Walk: Study
2 Timothy 3:14-17

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One of the great challenges of being a person of faith is believing in a God we cannot see. So, we seem to be perpetually trying to imagine and portray what God looks like. We know that we are made in God's image, so it's reasonable to think of God in human terms. And for centuries the Church was ruled by white men and most of the artists who painted images with God were also white men. The most common image we have seen over the years is of God as an old, white man with a long, flowing beard.

However, in recent times, we've begun to see God portrayed in all sorts of different ways - especially in movies. My first memory of seeing a portrayal of God other than the old white man with the flowing beard was George Burns in the 1977 movie, "Oh God", in which the old white man trades in the flowing beard for a captain's hat and a thick pair of glasses. Burns' version of God is approachable and even fallible, readily acknowledging that he makes mistakes - including creating avocados and ostriches.

Of course, there have been many other portrayals of God in the media since the "Oh God" movie. One of the most widely known is Morgan Freeman's portrayal in the movies "Bruce Almighty" and "Evan Almighty". Freeman's God is an aging African American man in a snazzy white suit who hangs out in a warehouse in Buffalo. Then there is God as portrayed in the hit movie, "The Shack", based on the book by William P. Young. Young is brave enough to take on the Trinity and gives us God the Father, a warm, loving African American woman, Jesus - a middle eastern man, and the Holy Spirit - a mystical Asian woman.

The point is, of course, that we don't know what God looks like, so how are we supposed to know who God is? And that leads us to the second of the essential practices for a Christian life outlined by Adam Hamilton in his book, *The Walk* - study.

During these weeks leading up to the start of Advent, our whole church is learning about the five essential practices which Hamilton discusses in his book. In worship and small groups, in kids' ministry and with youth, we're focusing on Hamilton's book as a way of deepening our faith during this time of disruption and uncertainty in our country. Last week, we talked about worship and prayer. Today we're going to continue on our journey by talking about ways we come to know who God is and who we are in relationship to God.

Hamilton calls this practice study, but he means that in a broad sense. Historically, theologians have understood that God reveals God's self in a variety of ways, and Hamilton is suggesting that we study all of them, starting with what we learn about God from the natural world.

If God is the Creator of everything that is, what can we learn about God by studying the Creation? I suspect the list of answers to that question is endless. Whenever you stop and pay attention to the natural world, you are likely to make some new observation about God.

For example, given that God has created so many different living species, we can assume that God values diversity and celebrates that all of life exists on a spectrum rather than a binary. Since so much of Creation is unnecessarily beautiful, it seems fair to say that God appreciates beauty in all its forms. God created some sort of natural defense mechanism for many living creatures, which suggests that God cares about our safety. We are blessed with an abundance of food and water on earth, which tells us God is concerned for our health and wellness. The natural world exists in a cycle of life, death, and new birth, which reflects God's love for life and God's promise of a life after death.

That is just a handful of what we know about God from studying God's creation. Another way in which God reveals God's self is through our consciences, intuition, and reason. In my mind, this is how the Holy Spirit does her work. We know what God values through our innate sense of right and wrong, of what is just and unjust. We "hear" God speak to us through the gut feelings we have when we're discerning what action to take or what decision to make. Hamilton writes, "The Holy Spirit typically speaks in a whisper, not a shout; through a nudge, not a shove. I've learned I have to pay attention if I will hear the Spirit speak. I hear the whisper of the Spirit as I study, pray, read scripture, or sit in worship listening to the choir sing or the band play, and as the pastor is preaching".

God also reveals God's self in the Bible. Reading scripture is how we come to know the nature of God and God's story in relationship with humanity. As we heard in 2nd Timothy, all scripture is inspired by God and, therefore, useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and learning what is righteous in God's eyes. The Bible was written over the course of 1400 years by many different people who were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write down the truths about God, humanity, redemption, and salvation revealed to them. As United Methodists, we don't read the Bible literally but understand that its authors wrote in particular contexts and for particular purposes. Nonetheless, as it says in our Confession of Faith, it is "to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice". Hamilton summarizes how we view the Bible saying, "It is a beautiful, powerful, complex library of documents that bear witness to the faith of its writers, their experiences of God, their insights and intuitions as they were led by the Holy Spirit."

The Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, was the sacred text that Jesus knew and taught from. As a Jew, he grew up reading the stories of God's relationship with Israel, and he learned about God's values and priorities through them. Those stories shaped him and became the foundation for his ministry. It was here that he learned that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor. He saw in Israel's history that while humans often wander away from God, God remains with them offering love and grace. He heard in the words of the prophets that God defends the weak and prioritizes justice.

All of this matters because as Christ-followers, we believe that the ultimate way we come to know God and what God's purpose is through the example of Jesus. This is what incarnation means. That God took the form and lived the life of a human being so we could learn from him what it means to be faithful, how to love our neighbor, and what our priorities should be. The four gospels are the written record of how God revealed God's self through Jesus and his teachings. So, if we seek to grow in faith, it is imperative that we read them - not just once but over and over again. Hamilton recommends to his congregation that they read at least one gospel every year.

There are many different approaches to reading the Bible. If you're seeking to understand the Bible in its historical context, I suggest getting a study Bible. This is a Bible that gives you all kinds of information to help you understand nuances of meaning and the values and social context that shaped how people at the time would have understood the events you're reading about. They usually have maps that help you envision the places where different events take place and even family trees so you know who begot whom.

However, you may prefer to focus on how what you read in the Bible speaks to you and the circumstances of your own life or what you can learn about God and yourself from it. Another approach is what is called *lectio divina* in which you read a passage and listen for a word that jumps out at you and then meditate on that word.

Here at FUMC, we have had a number of people take the Disciple 1 Bible Study and discover how valuable it is to talk about what you read in the Bible with a group. Sharing ideas, insights, and stories helps us apply biblical teachings to our lives today. Wendy Everett, our director of adult faith formation, offers other opportunities for group Bible Study, as well.

Hamilton recommends choosing a number of verses per day or chapters per week that you will read. That kind of commitment helps you to follow through with your resolve to read the Bible regularly. Choose a number that is realistic for you and your life right now. Of course, Hamilton uses the number five - five verses a day or five chapters a week - but you need to do what is workable for you.

There are many ways to think about who God is. Some people focus on God's transcendence. The idea of God as a great power, distant from us but concerned about the unfolding of God's kin-dom here on earth is comforting and reassuring for them. Others find comfort in recognizing the immanence of God - God who cares for each of us and loves us deeply, heals our hurts, and soothes our fears.

Of course, God is much more complex than any one word can capture, and elements of God will remain mysterious to us. Yet, through the world around us, the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the example of Christ, and 1400 years' worth of testimony in scripture, God reveals God's self to us. We have the choice, the opportunity, to know God more deeply, embrace our history as God's beloved ones, and grow in our relationship to God.

May it be so. Amen.