

## "To a God Unknown"

Sandy Reimer

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### Readings and Scripture:

And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground of our own feet and learn to be at home.

~ Wendell Berry

The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most simple person if that person has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent person if that person is firmly persuaded that she knows already, without a shadow of a doubt, what is laid before her. ~ Leo Tolstoy, 1897

Let mystery have its place in you; do not be always turning up your whole soil with the plowshare of self-examination, but leave a little fallow corner in your heart for any seed the winds may bring; reserve a small nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your soul for the unexpected guest, an altar for the unknown God.

~ Amiel Ward, 1851

When that which is god – or that which we want to call God – is being understood, we have to translate it into the format we understand. But this Energy, this Source, that we give the label "God" cannot be quantified into anything that we understand. And as we attempt to do it, the distortions are enormous. ~ Esther & Jerry Hicks

Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

~ The Gospel of Thomas

### **SPECIAL MUSIC – "All the World is One" (Peter Meyer) – David Evans, Mack Tyner and Paula Tyner**

... Go and ask the Buddha when he's sitting under the tree.

Go ask Walt Whitman when he's looking at the sea.

(2<sup>nd</sup> chorus: Ask Annie Dillard when she's up on Tinker Creek.)

Ask Alan Shepherd when he's standing up on the moon,

Staring at the pearl of blue .... All the world is One.

### **Sermon**

I remember clearly my earliest sense of God. I was about four years old, and every night I said the same prayer beside my bed. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." I don't think I knew much about what those words meant, other than a sense that God would watch over me while I slept. In fact, the words kind of ran together so that they were more a sing-song cadence, rather than a set of coherent sentences. It reminds me of those jokes about little children when they first learn the Lord's Prayer. Little boy says to his mom: "Why is God's name Howard?" His Mom replies: "Who says God's

name is Howard?" Little boy responds: "It's in that prayer. Our Father, who art in heaven, Howard be thy name."

I carried that simple sense of a God who watched over me throughout my childhood. In adolescence, my family attended a Lutheran church, and I was immersed in standardized ritual, creeds and catechisms. I was told that God not only watched over me, but also that God was very interested in what I believed about Him and in very interested in how I was behaving, each and every day. I didn't really examine those beliefs and creeds closely; I was more involved in demonstrating that I could say and do and be what was expected of me. The great thing about being Lutheran is that you can feel such a sense of accomplishment – and I dare say sometimes righteousness – simply by knowing when to stand up and sit down in worship services, or in how to sing the Gloria Patri along with the Gospel lesson, or in memorizing the Apostles Creed, so that you can say it boldly and clearly without looking down to your worship book.

A few years later, two things happened that foreshadowed my impending spiritual earthquake. One Sunday in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, when our Sunday school teacher said that no one could go to heaven unless they believed in Jesus, I was startled and I asked *"What about Moses? Is Moses in hell?"* It was hard for me to believe in a God who would close the doors of heaven to Moses. In 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I was elected Chaplain of the Student Council in a high school where 85% of the students were Jewish. My faculty advisor, Mr. McCall, opened my eyes to the world beyond my own church teachings. He mentored me in how to use inclusive language and readings.

In college, I was required to take a year-long Bible course which was built around the kind of modern critical Biblical scholarship that is usually found in seminaries. That was truly an earthquake that shook my foundations as we discussed both the through lines about the sense of God in the Bible as well as the evolution of the sense of God in the Bible. I especially remember being stirred by the voices of the prophets in the Old Testament, Isaiah and Micah and Amos, and their sense of a God who said *"I am not interested in your religious rituals; what I want is justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* These were experiences of a God I had not known before.

Because I had learned to type and take shorthand in high school (*a girl always needs something to fall back on*, my father told me), I was able that summer after my freshman year in college to get a job as a secretarial aid in the legal offices of the Securities and Exchange Commission in Washington, D.C. John F. Kennedy was President at that time, and he communicated a vision of public service as a noble calling, which attracted bright young people of all races and political persuasions across party lines to come to Washington and to be part of this new frontier in America. It was the same summer that Martin Luther King, Jr. led his civil rights march on Washington. And those five young liberal lawyers I was working with, and my African American boss, made sure I heard King's words: *"I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. This is our hope and with this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope. With this faith,*

*we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."* That was a moment of true epiphany for me: in King's words, I heard this God of the prophets speaking in the present moment, alive in this courageous man who called me to let go of the past and to be part of the future. A new, previously unknown, sense of God illuminated my life and became my North Star throughout all the change and consciousness of my 30s and 40s.

I tell you these stories, and I could continue on for each of the next chapters in my life, because I believe that God changes as I change. The God I believed in when I arrived at the United Church of Gainesville in January of 1974 is not known to me in exactly the same ways that I know God now. God, however known, is not just about our religious backgrounds, but also about where we are on our own journey and how we see God or don't see God at this particular time in our lives. Remember, it was the medieval mystic, Teresa of Avila, who said *"The feeling remains that God is on the journey too."*

So what do I mean by the word God? Is God just a construct that I create to meet my needs? I use the word God to represent the essence of the way I understand the meaning of life itself, a meaning that is always more than I can capture alone. I use the word God to represent the essence of the power of creation, a power greater than anything I can name or explain. I use the word God to represent my paradigm of what I am called to be and do in this world, in my relationships, in my hopes and dreams and faith, in my time here on this earth. The word God is not God's name. The word God is my name for the mystery that looms within and arches beyond the limits of my being, the mystery that sustains me through joy and sorrow, through fear and hope, through life and death.

Saying that, I resonate, with Esther and Jerry Hicks who note, that *"When that which is god – or that which we want to call God – is being understood, we have to translate it into the format we understand. But this Energy, this Source, that we give the label "God" cannot be quantified into anything that we understand. And as we attempt to do it, the distortions are enormous."*

The writer, Forrester Church puts it this way: *"Perhaps that which I call the mystery of God is no more than the mystery of life itself. I cannot know that, nor do I care, because the power that emanates from deep within the heart of this mystery is redemptive and by opening myself to it, I find peace."*

I am willing to leave that space open within me for mystery, willing – as it were – to always put a comma, not a period, next to my sense of God. "For me, God is always emerging, which is also saying that something of God is always unknown or unknowable to me. All I can do on my journey is continue to seek new truth, to open myself to new experiences, of the Mystery that I believe is at the heart of my life and at the heart of all life. Can I prove it? No. Can I live it? Yes, that's exactly what I do.

I understand and honor that some folks need more certainty in their faith and that their sense of God is different from mine. I understand and honor that some folks do not believe in God and find life to be filled with meaning, precious and wonderful just as it is. And I believe there is a richness in sharing our differences, because at a

fundamental level, we are all alike in the commonness of our humanity as well as in the uniqueness of what we believe. In those ways, all the world is truly one. It's why I dislike labels, particularly when we use them on one another.

My hope for this worship theme is that we bring forth that which is within us, that which we believe or don't believe, the God we know and the God who is unknown to us. I hope that the comma here on this banner reminds us all to leave some space, some openings, for new understandings, some room for the sacred to grow and to change as we change. I hope that we find times and ways to share our journeys with one another, and that we, in the process *"arrive at the ground of our own feet and learn to be at home."*

The most important thing to me is that I not let my sense of wonder and faith calcify into a rock of absolute knowing or unknowing. I am no more at the completion of my sense of God today than I was when I began my faith journey with those early childhood prayers. If I had ended my journey of faith with the Apostles' Creed, I would never have been open to Dr. King's dream of a God I had not yet even imagined.

My journey has been marked by what I began calling spiritual earthquakes. I was rocketed out of my beliefs about original sin by Flora Wuellner's stunning insight that what we need more than the confession of sins is the healing of our wounds. I found affirmation of that insight when I discovered the underground river of ancient Celtic Christianity's clear foundation on the blessings of all creation. I have been led by contemplative prayer to find spiritual renewal and grace, that walks hand in hand with outreach and justice, that sees the inward and outward journeys not as either/or but as essential companions. And it is here at UCG that I discovered the God whose essence lives in mindfulness, in eastern and Buddhist teachings.

I have had more earthquakes of the spirit than I can count, earthquakes from which a new sense of God appeared when my outgrown sense of God disappeared. And I won't be embarrassed or astonished if several decades from now, when I am in my 90s, I find myself saying as I lie in bed, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray to God my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray dear God my soul to take."

If that should happen, I will trust yet again in a new sense of God, unknown, yet known again as if for the first time. Amen.

**Let us join in prayer:** Breathe in for a brief moment, and breathe out.

Think of your breath as a comma that opens up space within you

Space to bless what you cherish and hold dear,

Space to cradle what you believe about life and about what is sacred,

Space for the longing that brought you here,

Space to sit with what is unknown, without knowing

Space to breathe in what you most need

Space to breathe out what you must release

Space to breathe. May this breath of our souls

Be filled with the rhythm of the eternal breath of creation

That we may experience this day and each day

As a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder. Blessed be. May it be so.