



Meeting God

Isaiah 6:1-8

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It turns out that another of my college classmates is famous. If you've been following the literary news lately, you'll have heard of Amy Dickinson, author of a very popular young people's advice column called "Ask Amy," and now the best-selling author of an autobiography, "The Mighty Queens of Freeville." Now, there aren't that many Freevilles in the world, and one of my best college friends and fellow choir members was from Freeville, NY – and her last name is Dickinson. So I emailed her, and yes, not only is Amy her sister, but she's got a new book out herself, about falconry. Small world.

I tell you about Rachel because I vividly recall one time when the college choir was singing in a local church service – something we did from time to time as a warm-up for our Spring concert tour – and I noticed she wasn't joining the responses in the service along with everyone else. I asked, and she told me: "I'm not worshipping; I don't believe. So here because I'm supposed to be here."

Valley Presbyterian Church is a pretty large congregation, and it's made up of individuals who represent a surprisingly wide range of thought and belief. We're large enough, I know, that many of you have never had a chance to get a sense of what others in the same room think or hold dear.

Because of our size, and also because of the wide range of activities that are a part of our congregation's life, there are more reasons to be a part of Valley than what happens on Sunday morning. Not all of you are here right now to worship God in Presbyterian manner, at least not primarily. Some are here to listen to the music, or to sing themselves. Others are here because someone else would like them to be: spouse, friend, parent – maybe even deceased. Some people just like the feel of a group in a space like this, or because you respect the work we do for others and want to support it.

There are quite a few of you who aren't particularly interested in hearing me or a pastor or a sermon, outside of a nice phrase or a bad joke. The Christian or religious part of church is something you don't understand, or disagree with, or just don't relate to.

All too often, the people who stand up here like me refer back to things you were supposed to have learned in Sunday School, or refer to complex theological doctrines in ways that assume you know what we're talking about. And certainly, we talk as if all of us shared a common experience, or at least a common vocabulary. But you might not have grown up in Sunday School, or even in church. Even if you did, nothing that happened there may have meant anything to you – and you may have no clue whatsoever when we go on about the Reformed tradition, or atonement, or take for granted that the resurrection is a foundational part of your world view. So why listen to a sermon?

Well, I think that's a shame, and so today if I've managed to describe you, I'm talking to you. I want you to consider something a bit more.

And it's ok if the rest of you listen in!

Some people's eyes glaze over when they hear the phrase, "religious experience" – it's even worse with the word "spiritual." One of my best friends in seminary was like that – yes, he's a minister still – and his pet peeve was people giving credit to God for things they'd done themselves, their own achievements.

The truth of the matter is that just as God knows each of us individually – bear with me here – each of us has a unique experience of God. You might not even know that you've had it.

William James, the pioneering psychologist and philosopher, who held chairs in both fields at Harvard about a hundred years ago, was one of the first to say in a way that people could understand that different people have different experiences of religion. His landmark book was "The Varieties of Religious Experience." That we might have different perceptions of God may seem obvious, but it's not at all, at least not in the way religious people behave. Generally, people assume that everyone else has to encounter the divine the same way that they do or did – and that's just not so.

One of my favorite professors, who had a wonderful gift for language when she spoke, but tended to write in a way that made phone books seem compelling narrative, liked to pose this question: "How do you know that it's God that you know when you think that you know God?" Let's turn that around a bit, and ask, "How do you know that you don't know God, when you think you've never done it?"

What I'm trying to say is, relax, suspend your resistance for a few moments, and take another look at what Christianity is up to: try and get around our "code words" and arcane concepts, and see if somehow, something, some part of you hasn't already seen a glimmer of the divine. Think of the Psalm we used as a call to worship, "The heavens are telling the glory of God...", something beyond yourself

and humanity and sterile science in the universe, something that might give confirmation to some internal sense of God's existence.

We humans do a great job of ignoring God. And I think there's good reason for that. Think how after a while a scent – if not too strong – will fade into the background, so we don't even notice it anymore. If we sensed God all the time, it would be overwhelming! Can you imagine being aware not just of every human life, but every piece of everything? Like William Blake's stanza, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, /Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/ And Eternity in an hour." That would be unbearable! So our ordinary state of being is programmed to make the incredible and complex simple and ordinary. We have to stop and think to see the beauty in even the smallest things – and us.

The passage I read at the start of these remarks is at the opposite end of the scale of experience. It's often called the "Call of Isaiah," since it describes the moment that he got his compulsion to speak what he felt God wanted to have heard. It's an incredibly powerful vision of God, apparently in the Temple in Jerusalem, and before Hollywood special effects and "Raiders of the Lost Ark" was clearly mind-boggling for those whose imaginations could bring the scene to life in their minds. But it's by no means the usual at all. The problem is, that it can easily be mistaken for some sort of normative experience – and there are very few people in history who've had an experience powerful as Isaiah.

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are rooted in both Christian belief and William James' work. The point of this grandparent of self-help is acknowledging that you and I are not God, and that an awareness of being at least second in the pecking order is very important to living as a healthy human being. The steps themselves identify their purpose: to create a spiritual awakening, for two reasons: one, to overcome addiction and its attendant behavior; and two, to create a connection of service to others, both of which the founders of AA agreed required acknowledgement of a higher power – or, originally, God. The 12th and final step reads, "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, sought to carry this message to other alcoholics and practice these principles in all our affairs."

The key here is "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps..." If you've ever wondered what on earth it is that gets people who believe so excited, that in the best cases gives them a sense of calm and peace and presence, you can have it. Chances are, it won't be anything like what you think it might be, but I can't tell you everything, because you're you, and obviously, I'm not.

What we offer here at Valley is a framework for making sense of God, people, and how the two relate. We who do believe – some in more detail than others – find that our faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ makes more sense – is *right*, both intellectually and intuitively. And so I invite you to give it a try. You're already a part of us by being here among us!

Another part of AA takes apart the second step: “We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity,” and looks at it this way: first, we came. Then we came to – either woke up, or found something that brought us back. Then, came to believe.

With an open heart, you may find something you never thought you were looking for – or had sought and not found. Here is the perfect place to start, today is a great day to begin, and this holy act we’re about to share is one place that God’s grace is abundantly available.