



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## How Did God Make Himself? Exodus 3:1-15; Acts 17:16-28

Late last winter, I had the privilege of meeting with some of our children here in the sanctuary. The purpose of our time together was to talk about their importance to our congregation and the ways in which their participation enhances our worship.

We discussed how their singing as a choir always tells us something about God or reminds us of important ways that we can express our faith. We talked about the importance of singing hymns and how each hymn tells a story about faith.

I reminded them that on special occasions they help us visualize some important experience of faith. When they decorate the chancel with poinsettias, they remind us that any gift given to God from the heart is blessed. On Palm Sunday as they wave palm branches in celebration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, they remind us that if our faith is not well grounded, our celebrations will be hollow and we will not be willing to follow Jesus to the cross and beyond to the open tomb and new life.

We talked about how as Acolytes they bring light into our worship, symbolizing Jesus, the Light of life. As they take the light out at the end of each service, they remind us that Jesus said we are the light of the world so that other people will give glory to God.

When they bring forward our offertory object each week, our children remind us of where our resources go within this congregation, throughout our community, and around the world to spread God's love to all people.

The children listened attentively and answered the questions I asked, but then they had some questions of their own. Let me give you a little advice: if a dozen or so first through fifth graders wants to ask you questions, be prepared—or run!! Here are a few of the questions they asked:

Why did God create me?  
How did God get his power?  
Why do we have music?  
How long did it take to build this church?  
How can people always have faith?

The children's questions were great and made me think. As I attempted to answer each of them, I realized that at some point I had asked those same questions—and still do. Perhaps you do as well. It occurred to me that it might be helpful to us all to explore some of the questions our children ask. Throughout our summer worship, that is what we will do.

As I said, all of the questions the children asked were good, thoughtful questions, but I remember taking a deep breath when Bo Browder asked "How did God make himself?" If you are going to ask a question about God, you might as well drill right down to the core of our faith, which is what Bo did. In essence, he asked, "Who is God?" Equally challenging were Eliza Craig Parker's three questions: "Is God an actual person or spirit? Is God a boy or a girl? Is God black or white?" Our young people don't mess around. They get right to the heart of the matter. They think seriously about God and want to understand the One in whom we place our faith.

They are not alone. I imagine that some quiet night thousands of years ago, someone—perhaps a young girl or boy—stood outside the family tent in the rugged wilderness of Paran, looked up at the millions of stars in the sky, and thought,

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

Psalm 19:1-4

On another occasion, possibly while fishing for supper on the bank of a river, helping a mother collect fruit from trees in the valley, or sitting around a fire while flames danced into the night, a child—much like our own children—asked, "How did the world begin? Who made everything? Who is God?" A pause usually follows those kind of questions . . . sometimes a long

pause. I imagine a parent began to answer, “In the beginning, God created . . . .”

The rest of what we know as sacred scripture tells the story of God and God’s people. In many ways it is a story of God’s attempts to let us know who God is and our attempts to understand who God is and who we are.

“How did God create himself?”

This question seeks to peer into the very essence of God. As humans, most of what we know is what we observe. Our science endeavors to discover how things came to be, how and why they behave as they do, and what might be possible in the future. The scientific method works with everything that exists . . . except with God. We cannot prove scientifically that God exists. Scientists, philosophers, and theologians have tried for centuries to come up with a proof for God, but they all fail. There is no experiment that will result in the answer “God.”

We know God by faith. Certainly there are a multitude of things and experiences that point us to God. For a person of faith a glorious sunset, the cheerful petals of a spring flower, and the cry of a baby’s first breath are all evidence of God’s existence. It is clear to us that something larger than ourselves must be responsible for the world and the universe beyond, but what or who?

We can figure out how plants and animals evolve, how mountains and valleys, lakes and rivers are formed. Scientists can calculate how far a distant star is from our planet. They have learned how stars form and how they die. They discovered that the universe is expanding. But science cannot tell us the reason behind it all. That is a matter of faith.

Moses ran into this puzzlement while he was tending his father-in-law’s sheep. Although he was a Hebrew, Moses had been raised as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He had a privileged upbringing and had access to the education provided a prominent Egyptian in those days. He was a thinking man and often tried to figure out what was happening around him. One day as he followed his sheep, he saw a bush on fire. As he got closer, he noticed that the bush continued to burn with the same intensity. The flames never got larger nor did they begin to die down as the bush burned. He wondered why, so he went closer.

The writer of Exodus tells us that Moses heard a voice telling him he was on holy ground. The voice said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses had heard about this God. He knew the stories about these men and what they had done. He knew that this God had led them to Egypt for safety even though they ended up in slavery. This God told Moses he was chosen to go back to Egypt and lead his people to freedom. When Moses asked for some more specific identification, a name, God said, "I AM WHO I AM."

That is an odd name, isn't it—I Am Who I Am? It suggests self-determination. The Hebrew words can also be translated as "I will be who I will be." In other words, God said to Moses, "I exist. I am. And only I can fully define who I am. You will have to accept me on faith." Moses did. And so do we.

How did God make himself? He did not. God is. It is difficult for us to understand because we want to explain everything that exists; however, the DNA of our faith is that four word phrase that begins the story: "In the beginning . . . God!" As our faith proclaims, "God is and was and ever will be. Thanks be to God!"

If by faith we can accept that God exists and always has, we still want to know more about God. That is why Eliza Craig asked, "Is God a person or spirit, a boy or girl, black or white?" These are categories of personhood that we have experienced and understand. What is God like?

You remember that story of Jesus and his disciples stopping near a Samaritan village in order to rest and get food. While the disciples went into the village, Jesus remained at the community well to rest. Soon a woman came to get water and she and Jesus had a life-changing conversation. At one point, they were discussing their views of religion and worship. The woman pointed out that Jews insist God must be worshiped in the temple in Jerusalem but Samaritans had their own place of worship. Jesus answered her by saying, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Jesus was assuring the woman that God is not limited to time and space like we are. God can be worshiped in Jerusalem or in Samaria or in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, but God is spirit, not human.

Of course, the irony of this conversation is that it is God in the person of Jesus Christ who is talking to the woman. God is spirit, but God chose to

put on human form, to experience what it is like to be a human, in order to connect with us and to let us better experience who God is.

When the Apostle Paul was in Athens, he discovered that many people spent their days talking over the latest ideas that were circulating. All over the city were monuments and temples and statues to the pantheon of Greek gods. There was a god for everything. In fact, Paul even stumbled across an altar that was dedicated to “an unknown god.” The Greeks wanted to be certain they did not miss anyone, so they created a place of worship for whatever other god or gods might be out there.

Paul took the opportunity to identify this God whom they did not know. It was “I AM,” the God who revealed himself to Moses and the Hebrew people centuries before. It was the God revealed in Jesus Christ who came and lived among us, died, and rose to life so that we might have life. The one true God, he said, is the One who teaches us to truly live.

Does the story of Jesus and the woman at the well mean that God is more like a male Jew than any other person on earth? No. God has no gender, no race, no cultural identity, no ethnic background, no political persuasion, no doctrinal creed. God is beyond all of the things that often separate us from one another and yet, God chose to enter into our world so that he could be united with us, with all of us. In this way, by sharing our humanity, God is boy and girl, black and white and yellow and tan and red and brown. God is Middle Eastern and European, Asian and Western, even North Carolinian.

God is not bound by our human distinctions but God identifies with our humanity. By crawling into our skin, God made it easier for us to allow him into our hearts. Certainly by becoming a part of our lives God made plenty of room for us in God’s heart.

I suspect that God’s heart was broken this past week as the events in Charleston, South Carolina unfolded. God surely cried as his children were gunned down while in prayer. As mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, children, teachers, mentors, and friends were shot for no apparent reason other than the color of their skin, God wept.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>On June 17, 2015, 21 year old Dylann Roof attended Bible study at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. After an hour, he open fire on the congregation, killing nine people, including the congregation’s pastor.

As much as we puzzle over the existence of God, God must surely puzzle over the existence we sometimes choose. It was out of love that God initiated creation and with God's own breath that humanity filled its lungs. God created us in his own image. That means that we are supposed to look like God and act like God. It means that since God is our heavenly Parent, every human on earth is our brother or sister. Yet we allow the varying hues of our skin, the location of our birth, the cultures that shape our view of the world, and the inner understanding of who we are as a child of God to separate us from one another rather than unite us.

God did not make himself. But God did make us. That ought to mean that we are grateful to God for the gift of life itself. God does not wear all of the human distinctions that are ours, but God did choose to become one of us in order to identify with all of us. God is spirit but God chose to put on our bodies in order to reveal God's vast love for us. Our bodies ought to be considered sacred for that reason. Every breath ought to be experienced as holy. Every person should be recognized as a daughter or son of God.

On this Father's Day, when we give thanks for our fathers, we ought to remember that God is our Heavenly Parent which means that the people in this room, the folks driving by on the street, the neighbors in our subdivision and the people who live on the other side of town are all our kin. It means that the people who died in Emanuel AME Church were our brothers and sisters. Even Dylann Roof, as reluctant as we may be to admit it, is our brother and also a child of God.

If we ever hope to prevent tragedies such as happened in Charleston and have become epidemic in recent years, we have to work to change the thinking that our differences somehow make us inferior to one another. If we want to diminish hatred, we have to stop hating. If we want to stop killing, we have to dismantle the attitudes and behaviors that promote the taking of human life. If we want to understand how and why God exists, we have to pay attention to how Jesus lived and follow him.

God did not create himself, but out of love God created us so that we might love one another. That is simple enough for every child of God to understand. Amen.

June 21, 2015

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We know that you are so generous as to lavish us with all of the good things of life, O God. We do not mean to be selfish, but because of our need, because of our dependence upon you, because of our recognition that you hold all of life in your hands, we continue to ask and seek and knock. Thank you for your generous response and your unwavering love.

As we honor our fathers today, we remember that they are dependent upon you in their care of us. We thank you for our fathers, for the playful ways in which they have helped us to enjoy life, for the concern and guidance they have carefully offered to us, and for the difficult decisions and circumstances they have helped us endure. For all that our fathers have meant to us, and for all that they continue to mean to home and community, we offer our thanks. We also pray for those of us who have poor memories of our fathers, who were not privileged to share their lives, or who received anger and pain instead of love. Forgive those fathers of the wrongs they committed and help us to find a place where we can lay down our hurtful memories and move forward in life.

For those of us who have not been the father we ought to have been, who traded the rewards and satisfaction of work or recreation for the intimacy of family, forgive us. When we have given more attention to self indulgence than to our families, have mercy upon us. Enable us to seek forgiveness and to become the good parent you have modeled for us.

For everyone who has not had the chance to be a father but wished for it, we ask for opportunities to share the generosity and companionship that come with fatherhood. For all whose heart has been broken as a parent, by the death or rejection of a child, we ask for comfort and help. For all who need a parent, we pray that you will lead someone to them who will be a trusted mentor and who will direct them ultimately to you.

As our own heavenly Father, care for us in all our needs, O Lord. Demonstrate your healing and protective care throughout the world as brothers fight against brothers and sisters seek revenge against sisters. Bring peace throughout the world as well as to our own community. Bring healing of heart and mind so that we can learn to live together in peace. Heal all who are ill and bless all who are brokenhearted. Guide the perplexed and undergird the fainthearted. Grant us what we need, O Lord, so that we might live courageously for you.

In particular, we pray for our brothers and sisters in the Emanuel AME Church. Comfort them in their sorrow. Heal their broken hearts. Guide us all to find hope in the tragedy that took so many good lives last week.

We seek your grace, O God. Open that door to us that we might enter in and dwell with you forever, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.