

Huggin' the Hot Stove
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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John 14:1-14
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The scriptures are scattered with stories of theophany – God’s appearance to human beings. Moses first encounters God in the form of a burning bush – and God is mysterious – “YHWH’s my name, and I am what I will be.” Later on, God appears to the Israelites in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, and on Mt. Sinai as an earthquake. Elijah hears God’s still small voice; Young Samuel hears God calling late in the evening, and thinks God sounds a lot like Eli; Abraham and Sarah meet three strange men, who are agents of YHWH; And Proverbs, a feminist voice before feminism ever existed, introduces us to Lady Wisdom, a precursor of the Holy Spirit.

But notice a trend: throughout the Hebrew Bible, God remains mysterious, other-worldly, divine, untouchable, out-of-reach, on a whole different plane – And sometimes, God’s even dangerous: those Israelites on Mt. Sinai were warned to cover their ears and eyes, because their bodies were incapable of processing the sight and sound of God. Moses and Elijah get close to God, but even so, they must turn their backs while in God’s presence. And remember the Tabernacle and Temple – God dwells in an ark, screened off from the public in the Holy of Holies, situated in the safest and smallest and most secure of concentric circles.

Now don’t get me wrong. In the Hebrew Bible, God is still love. And God is still loving. But God is like a hot stove – you must learn how to approach God, how to respect God, how to work in and through God, because God’s power is both loving AND untamed. The stove radiates heat and warmth, and it provides nourishment, and it has the power to transform raw ingredients into delicious finished products. And you can’t find a loving home anywhere in the world that doesn’t have a stove. But here’s the thing: you can’t hug a stove, you can’t wrap your arms around it, because a stove is too powerful to be hugged. It’ll burn you. And if you don’t pay attention, it’ll burn your dinner, too.

I think that’s where both the readers of John’s gospel, and the disciples who fill its pages sit: each one longs to hug a hot stove, or look an earthquake in the eye, or give God a less mysterious name.

And guess what? John’s Gospel tells us that such a desire can be so!!!

The same God, the one that formed the earth out of chaos; the same mother of wisdom calling out at the city gates; the same presence that met Elijah in silence – John tells us that somehow, someday, this God was manifested in the person of Jesus. The evangelist tells us that the Word – the wisdom quality of God – came and dwelled among us. In other words, for a brief moment in history, God was present and certain and huggable, and here among us as one of us.

In this morning’s lection, we meet Jesus and the disciples in a section called the farewell discourse. You are of course familiar with the Last Supper. In John’s version, there’s an after-dinner conversation – In a sense, Jesus is telling the disciples: “I’ve gathered you all here to tell you something important. Something you need to know before I leave you.”

So we've got to put on our pre-Easter hats. Remember, even though the disciples SHOULD recognize that they are in the presence of God, they're not quite there yet. To them, the presence of God is supernatural, and in such presence, seas are split wide open, and rulers are toppled from thrones, and you'd better cover your ears and your eyes if you value them. So while the disciples look for those mighty signs of Messiah, they are blinded from the impact of a Samaritan Woman who recognizes God's presence; they are blinded from the grief of a woman who pours out precious oil to anoint Jesus' feet – for she knows his presence is fleeting; and they are still unable to realize that the death and subsequent raising of Lazarus foreshadows the fate of their teacher.

In short, the disciples believe that by hanging around Jesus, they may one day have the chance to hug a hot stove and not get burned. By hanging around Jesus, they may finally have the chance to meet the “big guy (or gal!), the person in charge, the being that can REALLY make things happen.” And the disciples are ready for their coveted cabinet positions.

Imagine their delight when Jesus tells them about His Father's House – there are many mansions and dwelling places, and everyone's gonna have all the room they need. It's gonna be a party. “Don't worry,” Jesus says, “I've got to go, but where I'm going, there will be a place for you also.”

“And don't worry, you'll know just where to find me.”

“Hang on, Jesus,” Thomas says. “How do we know where you are going, and how do we know how to find you?”

Jesus replies, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my father also. From now on, you do know him, and you have seen him.”

Translation: Jesus is of the same substance of God. It's a substance that is cyclical. Jesus uses the transitive property. Because you know me, the presence and persona of God, you also know God.

I am gonna tag in, and use an assist from Tillie. Earlier this year, Tillie, and Linda and I had the opportunity to go the funeral service for Howell's mother, Mrs. Peterson who lived to be 104. It was a lovely service for a lovely woman, and this is one of the passages that was read. On the ride home, Tillie said a thought had been circulating in her head. She said, “I never met Mrs. Peterson. But I know Howell. I know his character, I know his story, and I know the kind of man he is. And because I know Howell, it's safe to say I also know Mrs. Peterson. And that helps me understand this passage – It is God who made and created and embodied and empowered the life of Jesus – And because I know that story, and the goodness that flows from it, I can safely say that I also know God.”

But the disciples are still not convinced. God's not a person. God's a hot stove.

Thomas tells Jesus that as much as he appreciates the fact that Jesus speaks on behalf of God, and that Jesus is a representative of God, he'd really be more satisfied if he could just see God for himself. Just once.

Jesus responds by saying that he is in God, and God is in him. The work that Jesus does, is the work of God. And works done in Jesus' name, are also works of God.

I think what Jesus is saying to Thomas and Philip and the disciples, and to you and me as well, is that God is no longer a hot stove, or an earthquake, or an un-named mystery. God is revealed in Jesus – something like us, something tangible, something lasting, something accessible.

And Jesus tells the disciples that because they have access to him, they have access to God, and to be God's presence in the world.

And then, our lection abruptly ends. We're left to wonder how the disciples will respond. Will they embrace God in their midst, or will they keep seeking the hot stove?

Friends, because we know the story of Jesus, we know the nature and character of God. And when we emulate the actions of the Christ, we too become part of God's substance, part of God's story, part of God's creative purpose. God lived and dwelled among us, and God still lives and dwells among us.

And today's lection tells us that God is accessible – a presence to be touched and embraced; a presence that is not dangerous, but is instead life-giving and renewing and best-revealed in community.

Finally, I want to offer a thought that's out of sequence, but one that's too important to omit. Often times, this passage has been used in a really dangerous and exclusive way. Christians have carried it as a banner of primacy – God is only revealed through the Christ.

Let me say that as a Christian, the story of Jesus provides for ME, the most complete and whole understanding of the divine. In Jesus, I find my access to God, and in Jesus I am introduced to a sense of love and grace that extend beyond the furthest reaches of my imagination. Because of the God I know through the story of the Christ, I am made whole, and I find my center, and I know my value as a child of God.

But the God that I know, is SO full and SO big and SO loving and SO beyond my comprehension, that I cannot, and I will not, and I shall not claim my truth as exclusive. We live in a world full of billions of people, the majority of whom, do not view the story of the Christ as their primary access to the divine. And yet they seek, and seek earnestly, the same spirit of the divine. And they seek peace and justice and love and a world where neighbors do what is right and good. And it is my sincere hope, that if the story of Jesus is not their divine avenue, that they might find another avenue, a different no less miraculous truth in which to be made whole, and to feel full, and to know the love and value deeded to them by God. I wish for them, to be undergirded in the same cosmic spirit that undergirds each of us.

And friends, I believe in a God big enough and strong enough and wise enough and loving enough to make that happen.

And I do not believe that by saying this, we in anyway diminish our authenticity or credibility as Christians. In fact, I think it's the opposite. I think we enhance it. I think the more power we give to God's generous possibilities, the more life-giving and expansive our truth becomes.

Friends, all those years ago, Christ told us where God could be found. And it's no longer in the inaccessible, hidden from site, reserved for the privileged few. It's in the accessible. Dorothy Day called it companionship and banquet, with a crust even. A crust made golden made golden-brown on a hot stove we can finally touch. May it always be so. Amen.