

Questions for God

Exodus 3:1-15

It is good to be back among you beautiful people! I am excited about this new sermon series “Movies with a Message” because I love movies, and even more I like the extra practice of looking for the sacred in the secular. This week I watched *Bridget Jones Baby* with my sister, and even in movies that have no intention at addressing theological quandaries, there are always connections. Perhaps I am particularly attuned because I’m a preacher and always on the lookout for a good sermon illustration, but I think when we train our ears and our hearts to be looking for God, we are surprised by how frequently humanity engages with the biggest questions of life, love, and the nature of God.

This week’s movie, *An Interview with God*, is our least subtle film pick, in which Paul Asher, a journalist returns from covering the war in Afghanistan and finds his life falling apart. Paul is at his own personal breaking point when he arranges a series of interviews with a person claiming to be God.

In this vein, other movies too, have sought to paint the picture of what we might say, what God might look like, how an all-knowing being might interact with flawed humanity and our ignorance. *Bruce Almighty*, *The Shack*, *Conversations with God*, *Oh God!* (All) from 1977...the list goes on and on. The human soul is tormented by our lack of understanding, and movie producers have occasionally tried to scratch the itch.

If you or I were contacted to have a sit down interview with God, how we might react? We too would likely get hung up on who the person sitting across the table REALLY is and our skepticism would likely mean we spent more time trying to outsmart the individual rather than actually getting down to business. But, once we got past our doubts and surprise at the appearance looking back at us, I wonder what we would ask.

Would we like Moses, want to know God’s name? Would we want to have inconsistencies sorted through? Would we focus on the world at large or our own personal struggles? Our scriptural witness abounds with encounters between humanity and God, and people like Moses and Job give me peace in my own insecurities. Their stories got passed down through oral traditions and then written into what became the canon. Moses was fascinated by the bush that was on fire but not consumed, but he didn’t miss the opportunity to ask a few questions.

Job never sees a physical being, so his conversations and prayers might feel more familiar to us and give us permission to press God for the answers to our hardest questions and our deepest hurts. The prophets had conversations with God, and then were sent to help provide corrective instruction to the people of God, but their stories seldom give that interview-like feel.

Theophanies, or encounters with God, in scripture typically have a formula, which might help us when we strive to recognize when we might begin our own interview with God. In scripture the form takes this shape:

First – there’s a disruptive event of natural forces, like a storm, that indicates the awesome, unnatural coming of God.

Then – there is an utterance of God, who is present in the context of the disturbing circumstance.

Next – there is a fearful or submissive response to God from the one being addressed.

Last – there is an indication that the encounter has changed everything.

Moses' encounter with the burning bush launched his vocation in leading the exodus of God's people. The prophet Elijah encounters God not in the earthquake but in the quiet.

Walter Bruggemann writes, *"In the modern world, the raw directness of theophany is not easy, given the power of rationality to explain everything without reference to God's holiness, and given the temptation to a religious innocence and intimacy that tends to coziness with God and that eschews such dramatic encounters of the transcendent."*

Theophany as a statement about the quality and decisiveness of meeting with God that accents divine intrusion, divine sovereignty, and divine transcendence is thus to be understood as an important resource against perennial attempts to reduce the raw reality of God to convenient companionship. The God of theophany is characteristically no easy friend, but a demanding life-changing authority."¹

I have sometimes described my litmus test of determining if something is God's direction as it usually is something I hadn't thought of or considered, and it dances between being exciting and a little terrifying. Usually, the idea or message is reoccurring, sometimes in dreams or from completely different sources.

Before I applied to PRCC to become your Senior Minister, my husband and I out of the blue had wondered how the search was coming. Upon finding that there was an interim, Adrian suggested I reach out and get an update–Which I promptly forgot and moved onto ministry at my church in Dundee. One week and a day later, I got a phone call from Ginny Feurer, asking if there was a chance I might be ready to apply. I'm not saying that Ginny's voice is God's...but you should definitely answer the phone if Ginny calls!

I got to spend a week in New Hampshire this past week, and while I am there, breathing in the mountains and the grandeur of a God who has created such beauty, I often feel like God is nudging me, soothing me, comforting my hurts. I hope that you have a place you go to feel closeness to God. So, finding God seems to be the first step in our interview with God. But, then, what do we say, what do we ask – do we go through the list that we made earlier?

Probably one of our main questions would have to do with theodicy – “the question of God's goodness and power in a world that is manifestly marked by disorder and evil.” Here's our lesson in Greek for the day! The words *Theo-dike* combines the Greek words for “God's justice” and asks about the justice of God in such an unjust world.

This is Job's struggle – how can God be good and powerful, when such awful things happen to people.

Bruggemann writes, *"The Old Testament takes us these human issues, which refuse a rational, logical resolution, opting instead for a relational understanding of God, world, and the*

¹ Bruggemann, Walter. *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. p 217

community of Faith. This biblical perspective never permits that lively relationship to be reduced to such cold rationalities as Western theology has preferred.”²

Ancient Israel seems content with a foundation of faith that rests on Deuteronomy 30, verses 15-20:

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

A promise of abiding presence and blessing, rooted in covenant was the answer to the question of theodicy. God is a good and loving and powerful God, who is constantly seeking relationship with God’s people, even when the world is unjust and leaves us wounded. “The Old Testament is not interested in explanations but only in the deep and dangerous intimacy of communion that makes available God’s own engagement in the midst of inexplicable suffering.”

² Bruggemann, p 213.