

God, What is Your Story?

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Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

As soon as the meal was finished, he insisted that the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he dismissed the people. With the crowd dispersed, he climbed the mountain so he could be by himself and pray. He stayed there alone, late into the night.

Meanwhile, the boat was far out to sea when the wind came up against them and they were battered by the waves. At about four o'clock in the morning, Jesus came toward them walking on the water. They were scared out of their wits. "A ghost!" they said, crying out in terror. But Jesus was quick to comfort them. "courage, it's me. don't be afraid."

Peter, suddenly bold, said, "Master, if it's really you, call me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come ahead." But when Peter looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, "Master, save me!"

Jesus didn't hesitate. He reached down and grabbed Peter's hand. Then he said, "Faint-heart, what got into you?" The two of them climbed into the boat, and the wind died down. the disciples in the boat, having watched the whole thing, worshipped Jesus, saying, "This is it! You are God's Son for sure!"

We all like a good story. Today's scripture about Jesus walking on the water is such a story. After feeding 5000 with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus sends his disciples off in a boat while he cleans up after them, dismissing the crowd, and goes up a mountain alone to pray. Just before dawn, Jesus decides to join the disciples and walks across the Sea of Galilee to where disciples' boat is being battered by the wind and rough seas. The disciples freak out at the sight of Jesus, thinking him to be a ghost. Jesus calmly reassures them saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter, yet unsure, says to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come." So, Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water towards Jesus. (Why is this passage not labeled "Peter walks on the water?")

Peter suddenly realizes the absurdity of what he is doing, becomes afraid, begins to sink, and cries out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus does, but reprimands Peter saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" They climb back in the boat, the winds cease, and those in the boat worship Jesus.

We all hear the story but we all can have different experiences of it. Some of us will take it literally; some will take it metaphorically; some will dismiss it as totally absurd; some will question why Matthew included it, as it is not in any of the other Gospels. You get the idea.

The reality is that when we encounter a faith-based story we look at it through the faith-based filters of our own eyes, mind and experiences. The invitation then is to become aware of our own filtered beliefs of "truth" based on *our* experiences and beliefs, which may or may not be similar to those of others.

Beliefs are not facts; therefore, beliefs must be held firmly enough to act on them, but yet lightly enough to believe, and we must be open to the fact that, according to John Robinson who sent the Pilgrims off from Holland to the New World, *“there yet may be more truth and light to break forth from God’s Holy Word.”* So, let me share with you some of my experiences and beliefs that are becoming part of my contexts for interpreting faith-based stories.

I grew up in a staunch New England Blue-Blood Episcopal family. My grandfather, Rev. Anson Phelps Stokes, was an Episcopal Minister who had been Canon of the Washington Cathedral; Secretary of Yale University and author of the still definitive 3-volume *Church and State in the United States* (each volume was about 2” thick!). Whenever we stayed with my grandparents (which was quite often) we were expected to attend vespers in my Grandfather’s study before dinner each night. My uncle, by the same name, was Bishop of Massachusetts. Needless to say, growing up I went to the Episcopal Church every Sunday. I was a choir boy, an acolyte, and attended high school at an Episcopal Boarding School where we had chapel every night. As a result, I knew the *Book of Common Prayer* by heart, as well as most of the hymns and Bible stories. I knew all the stories about Jesus, but I did not “know” Jesus.

I got to know God through nature at a very young age. I was an early morning person, and would slip out in the morning to watch the birds, marvel at the dew-webs on the grass, or the water skimmers on the creek. In inclement weather, I would watch from my window gentle snow fall, lightning storms, or buds opening in a gentle spring rain—seeing all as manifestations of what I knew as “God.” I knew that Jesus is quoted in John 14:6, saying. *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* Yet I got to know God through nature, not through Jesus. I didn’t know what to do with Jesus.

I was over forty before I got up my nerve to confess my apostasy to my Congregational minister, Rev. David Serfass in Hilo, Hawaii. His response was, “Not to worry. We all have the spark of divinity in us, Jesus just developed it to a higher degree than most of us!” So, I went off to seminary to study Christology, *not* to become a minister! Through that process I came to realize that Jesus’ humanity was much more important to me than his divinity, especially when Jesus states in John 14:12, *“The one who believes in me will do the work that I do and, in fact, will do greater work than these...”* I asked myself *If I was not immaculately conceived, as it is believed that Jesus was, how could I be like Jesus and do the things Jesus did?* My answer was that Jesus had to be just as human as I am. With that as context, let me proceed.

It is my belief and experience that organized Christian religion has fed us a diet of an anthropocentric, male God who sits on a cloud and intervenes on our behalf, based on the efficacy of our prayers. It is a God whom we are to obey and seek to please, through our words and actions, in order that we might be “saved.” (From what and for what has never been clear, but my sense is that the best answer is, “from ourselves.”)

I find that this anthropocentric image of God is far too confining in an age when we know the universe is expanding, and that there are hundreds more galaxies beyond our own. It is an image of God that is finite rather than infinite, and excludes all other aspects of the infinite, diverse manifestations of ALL facets of creation, including all of nature and vast energy fields such as gravity, darkness, light, and love. It is my belief that it is way past time to re-language divinity for the Church and the new generations of the 21st Century. We need a quantum shift in our consciousness. It is an enormous task.

When trying to comprehend that which is infinite, definitions do not work. That is why our early church Fathers took a Trinitarian approach: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit). Following that formula, I have come up with the following three questions as my first step in what I call “re-languaging” divinity. Those questions are: 1) What beats our hearts? 2) How do we make sense of the world in which we live, and evolve in our understanding as we gain new wisdom and insights? 3) How do we remain open to new insights and discard that which no longer serves us? Let me explore the three questions.

1. What Beats Your Heart?

As far as I am aware, almost every living creature has a heart. The heartbeat is one of the first signs of life that can be heard/detected by others. That heart continues to beat as long as we are alive, yet we have very little control over it. We do not have to tell our heart to beat faster because we are climbing a steep hill, or beat slower when we are asleep. In Luke 17:21, Jesus said about the kingdom of God “*it is within you.*” It is my belief that our heartbeat is living proof that we are of God and within God. More importantly, our heartbeat is living proof of God’s unconditional love for all God’s creatures, no matter the color of our skin, our ethnicity, our abilities or disabilities, or even the nature of our manifestation as human, animal, bird or fish. God’s unconditional love for us is made manifest in each beat of our heart.

2. How Do We Make Sense of the World in Which We Live?

In Philippians 2:5 the Apostle Paul states, “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....*” While we may not have much control over our heartbeat, we have a lot of control over our minds. It is our minds that allow us to learn language from our parents, and understand the culture and expectations into which we are born. It is also our minds that, like Jesus, let us think for ourselves, make choices for ourselves, and develop our own faith and belief systems that inform how we chose to act out our lives.

3. How Do We Remain Open to New Insights While Discarding that Which No Longer Serves Us?

Both in Greek and Hebrew the same word is used for breath and spirit. Our breathing is the process by which we take in the new and let go of that which we have already used and no longer need. Inspiration and expiration. Insight allows us to replace that which no longer serves us. Therefore, in Heart, Mind and Spirit, it is my belief, that I am just as human as Jesus, and like Jesus, I have the potential to become ever more divinely human. That being said, have patience with me. God is not finished with me yet; I still have a long way to go. I find in Psalm 85: 8-13, a guide as to how to proceed.

Psalm 85: 8-13

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for God will speak peace to God’s people, to God’s faithful, to those who turn to God in their hearts. Surely God’s salvation is at hand for those who fear God, that God’s glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness *will* meet; righteousness and peace *will* kiss each other. Faithfulness *will* spring up from the ground, and righteousness *will* look down from the sky. God *will* give what is good, and our land *will* yield its increase. Righteousness *will* go before God, and *will* make a path for God’s steps.

So be it for each of us!