

## Where God Has Been

*Exodus 33:17-23*

*17 And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."*

*18 Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."*

*19 And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."*

*21 Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock.*

*22 When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."*

The scripture Ellen just read was a quote by John Shelby Spong in his book *A New Christianity for a New World*. In that book he said that he didn't think preachers ever used this text because they didn't want to talk about God's derriere. So I decided to take him on. More on that text later. First about the Tuesday Group. Mike doesn't like the name because it isn't descriptive enough, but no one has come up with a better name that has stuck. The Tuesday Group has been meeting since 2002, 14 years, on the first and third Tuesdays of every month. We are a unique book group, I believe, because we take our time going through books. We study them,

we discuss them, we talk about our own lives as pertaining to them. And, thus we get to know each other better. Some books take us two years to go through. Some of what we read we disagree with. I let the discussions go on as long as we stay on topic. Right now there are usually from 8 to 10 of us at a meeting.

Our current project is John Shelby Spong's *A New Christianity for a New World*. Spong is a retired Episcopal bishop who has gotten himself in a lot of trouble talking about how outdated a lot of Christianity is. He has sold over a million copies of his books which number approximately 20. He is an engaging speaker who speaks all over the U.S. Barbara Foster heard him speak everyday for a week in New York this summer. And Carolyn West and Rebecca Morris heard him at PSR earlier this month. I have heard him speak a couple of times over the years at PSR and at the Jesus Seminar. His subject matter in this book is well suited for Northbrae as we struggle to make this church relevant for our community and for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So, I am going to take my time today to talk about his book. Spong starts out by affirming his faith. His whole life has been dedicated to his faith. He does not want to do away with God, Jesus or the Bible. He wants to update how we approach them so that they no longer disagree with the findings of science and the ethics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He discusses how the world of the Bible did not know how human reproduction worked. Women were only the carriers of a child in their womb put there by a man. Ancient people had no knowledge of germs, so sin was the accepted reason for illnesses. Weather likewise was not understood so God brought good or bad weather on deserving people. God lived just beyond the sky. We no longer believe in miracles the way ancient peoples did. Spong's big thing is sin. We, because of Adam and Eve's fall, are recipients of their sin. And thus in many churches people must confess their sin and babies must be baptized to take away their original sin. Jesus died for our sins. We must always be placating an angry and vengeful God. But Spong says that humans were never perfect, we have not fallen. We are creatures who are still

evolving. Our survival instincts of tribalism and violence are no longer serving us well. We must change our ways if we are to survive.

Spong is speaking to those people who are still in the churches. Church attendance is declining as more and more people find the message of Christianity to be irrelevant. Those in the fundamentalist churches who take the Bible literally and cling to the old theology he finds hysterical, clutching at straws. While those who have no connection with church he feels are out of his reach. He is speaking to those who still have a hunger for God, who still have a spiritual yearning and a need for community. He is speaking to people like us. Spong is on a journey for a new Christianity and he doesn't know if it will survive. Our church stopped talking about sin years ago. Our church no longer thinks of the exclusivity of Christianity. This is demonstrated by the leaders of other faiths in our torchbearer window. Our church is on the right path.

Theology gets in our way. So we must change theology. The experience of God is real but the words people put around these experiences get in the way. Words can never convey the essence of the experience of God.

Spong's definition of theism is "a being, supernatural in power, dwelling outside this world and invading the world periodically to accomplish the divine." This is where consciousness comes in. We have evolved to the extent that we are aware of our existence. We are aware that we will die, that those we love will suffer and die and this causes us severe anxiety. For millenniums the church with its power and the paternalistic God who swooped in from time to time to do our bidding if we prayed hard enough was enough to keep our anxiety under control. But the belief in this miracle worker has waned and we feel increasingly alone. This anxiety in being human and conscious is demonstrated by the fact that many of us require addictive caffeine to get us going in the morning. The use of alcohol has become part of our culture to relieve stress. Antidepressants have become so common that most

people recognize the name of drugs like Prozac. Suicide is more and more common. Mass shootings in schools and public places are increasingly common. John and I were in Germany last month. Every place we went the tour guides talked about WWII and how much of their particular city or village had been bombed out. Sometimes 90% had been reduced to rubble. In Nuremburg we saw the huge coliseum that Hitler was building. It was never finished because Hitler ran out of money and after the war the Germans did not have the money to tear it down. It stands in front of a vast parade ground with its bleachers and a high platform. Hitler would address the people from this platform, high above the crowd as if he was a god. These stand today as symbols of a horrible war. The war generation in Germany, to this day, never talk about what happened. The post war generation was never told but today school kids are brought to the parade ground and the coliseum and to Dachau and Auschwitz, so they will know what terrible things happened as the result of racism, hatred and tribalism. Things may look bleak for us now but they are nothing

to what they were during WWII. Spong contends that all this is the result of the pain of human existence and the death of theism.

Religious institutions no longer have the power to control people and people's anxiety that they once did. A noted theologian Paul Tillich called it "the shock of nonbeing." Sigmund Freud called it, "the trauma of self-consciousness."

If God is real, and the theistic God who cured illness, controlled the weather and even parted the Red Sea is not real, what is God? God is a presence that can never be defined. And we must now grow up and stop being frightened children dependent on a theistic parent God. We must approach the God who is experienced in radically different ways. The God Spong speaks of and experiences, is not a being but the source and ground of all being. For centuries, mystics have experienced and described God this way. In today's text from Exodus, Moses on the mountain has only seen God in clouds or in thunder. Moses wants a face-to-face meeting with God. God declines his request. There was a conviction among the Hebrews that the holiness of God was so

intense that no human being could see God and continue to live. Moses, undaunted, continues to press for a face-to-face meeting. Once again he is denied. Even the great Moses cannot look upon the divine countenance. God offers Moses a compromise. If Moses would cover his eyes, God would pass before him and then as God went around the bend in the mountain, Moses could open his eyes and stare momentarily on God's "back parts" or "hindquarters." Later it was translated "backside" or "back." The ancient writer is saying something very profound beyond the humorous picture he paints. He is asserting the human experience that mortal men and women can never see who God is but only where God has been. We can visualize and experience God's effect, not God's being. No words, no formulas no religious system will ever capture the reality of the God experience. We can gaze upon only where God has been, on God's "hindparts."

Spong offers three definition of God. First: God is the ultimate source of life. One worships this God by living fully, by sharing deeply. The second: God is the source of love. We love in ever-

widening circles moving from our immediate family to our extended family, friends, neighbors, our tribe, our nation and finally to humanity itself. The further we venture, the more difficult we discover it is to love. We love for love's sake not for our sake. We need to escape the narcissism and be lovers of God in all others even though it frightens us. We walk in the footprints of God so that we can go places we fear to go. We cannot see God ahead of us because God is in us, in you. God is part of who I am. God is love and so love is God. The third definition is: God is the symbol of being itself. We need to recognize the being is not a gift that can be embraced or preserved or held in perpetuity. The only thing one can do with being is to give it away. In Exodus is the story of the burning bush. Moses is challenged to be a liberator, to set the slave people free. They need to be free to live, free to love and free to be. In the story Moses asks God what his name is. The divine voice replies, "I am who I am is my name." What this enigmatic answer implies is that God is not a being, but being itself. God is the source of life. We worship God by living fully.

God is love. We worship God by loving wastefully. God is being. We worship God by having the courage to be all that we can be.

In the New Testament, the challenge is to tell the Christ story apart from him as a divinity. Is there anything left after the stories of his miraculous birth and his resurrection have been lifted from his shoulders? In liberal circles, Jesus is reduced to a great teacher or a noble master. What was it about Jesus' life that caused him to be raised to the level of God? Spong contends that you can watch theism being introduced into the Jesus story. If you look at the earliest gospels, the sayings source Q, Paul or Mark a lot of the theistic material is absent. Paul does not understand the resurrection of Jesus to be a physical resurrection. Paul sees Jesus as the life in which the divine One has emptied the divine nature. In the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four gospels, Jesus is a human being infused with God's spirit, not a deity masquerading as a human being. Miracle stories do appear in Mark. Jesus can heal the sick, cast out demons and feed the multitudes with five loaves and two fish. Yet there is no miraculous birth story. The

mother of Jesus and other members of Jesus family think he is mentally disturbed. The raised Jesus of the resurrection never appears in this earliest gospel. Mark seems to be trying to interpret Jesus in terms of the symbols of the Jewish faith story. Much of what Jesus says is found in the earlier Jewish sources. The stories of Jesus life line up with the liturgical year of the Jews. The Gospel of Mark may not be a biography at all, but a liturgical text that later got misinterpreted as a story of history and biography. Mark portrays a Jesus whose life was not yet been squeezed into a theistic mold, as a God presence, a life through which the kingdom of God is breaking into human history. It is the later gospels that distort the picture of Jesus. There was something about Jesus that made it essential that theistic language was later added to explain him. What that “something” was is what Spong is looking for. Only if we can find that “something” can Christianity survive. What was the Christian experience of the disciples and others who knew Jesus? How can you and I get in touch with it and enter it today? After several chapters of removing the layers of theism

from Jesus, his virgin birth, the Christmas star, his death to take our sins away, his physical resurrection, Spong thinks he has come in touch with the real Jesus. Jesus was one who was more deeply and fully alive than anyone else. He is constantly dismantling the barriers that separate people from one another. He invites people today to walk past their fears of white vs. black, of gay vs. straight, Christian vs. Muslim, and of our nation vs. other nations. The story of the Good Samaritan is a good example of this thinking. The officials of the Jewish faith walked by the injured man in a ditch and did nothing. It was the disdained half-breed heretic Samaritan, who was ignorant of the Law and the Torah who saw that the injured man was nursed back to health. Jesus reached out again and again to those who his own religious system rejected: lepers, unclean women, and a Roman tax collector among many others in the New Testament stories. The Gospel of John declared Jesus the Word of God who dwelt among us. But Jesus was the word of God, not God. Jesus is a God-presence, a doorway, and an open channel. The fullness of his life reveals God. That is why Spong

can still call him “my Lord” and still call himself a Christian. But he is a Christian who does not live inside an exclusive Christianity. Others like the Buddha, Moses, Isaiah, Mohammed, Julian of Norwich, Rosa Parks, Florence Nightingale, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dag Hammarskjold are also holy people who are doorways to the divine. Every person has the potential to live, love and be, that which is found in the Christ-figure.

The chapter that I feel is the most important is the one on the future of the church. He does not even call it church but calls it Ecclesia from the Greek meaning “those called out.” Spong has a long list of reasons that church or ecclesia should continue to exist. One is the spiritual experience of worship that goes beyond the words that are spoken. In Vienna, Austria this summer, we found ourselves at one of those massive cathedrals on a Sunday morning. Tour guides as not allowed in on Sundays, but visitors are allowed in the back to peer through a wrought iron fence. There in a gloomy light we could see the soaring spaces, we could hear the magnificent orchestra and the voices of a wonderful choir. Racks

of flaming votive candles surrounded us. I put coins into a box so I could light one of the candles and participate more fully in what I found to be a truly awe inspiring experience. This is what worship should be like.

Worship of the future will also celebrate the long human journey from the first form of life in a single cell. This will help us recognize the connectedness with all living beings both plant and animal. We must become a new humanity that depends on moving beyond our self-centeredness to develop a capacity to love others beyond our own needs. The ecclesia must be a center for caring. We must continue to observe traditional passages of life: puberty, marriage, childbirth, parenthood, sickness, aging and death. It will help people walk through difficult times of life without being alone—times of trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or other adversities that afflict us. We will relate to the Christ figure and God to help us learn to live, to love and have the courage to be. Only out of communal living, loving and being can we make sense out of our experience of the divine.

There is much more in this seemingly simple but ultimately complex subject that Spong has raised. He feels that it may take centuries for the issues to work themselves out. He does not expect that he will have the last word on how or whether Christianity and the Church can survive. In the meantime the members of the Tuesday group have a lot to discuss and to dispute. We have been at it for months now and we have made it to page 28. But we are part of our community here at Northbrae. It is one of many places here where we can look for where God has been, and where we can experience the living, loving and being of God.

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