

May 8, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Jeremiah 9:23-24 I Believe In God, But I Don't Know Her
By Andy McDonald

Today's subject for our sermon isn't just some quirky little gimmicky focus we can take or leave. This is about God, the one whom to know, to be acquainted with, to recognize is life eternal. And today this time together is to expand our understanding and deepen our knowledge of the God who is beyond our full understanding.

Every once in a while I'll find out something about someone that surprises me. Something that isn't necessarily bad or good just something I never put with that person.

Just this week I met Roger Hamilton the pastor of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in College Park. We were introduced and had a brief conversation. Later at the occasion he shared a bit about himself and my stereotype of who he was as an Episcopal priest got enlarged. He has a love for travel, is soon headed of with a group mission to Honduras, where he'll bravely preach in Spanish, and get to pursue his scuba diving passion.

We easily make assumptions. We project. We gather the tiny pieces of a person's life that we know and imagine we "know" them.—we sort of put them in a box.

When David and Amy moved into their home a mile from here, they met their neighbor Chuck. He's a handsome carpenter, just a neighbor who builds things. But then over time they find that he used to live in Hollywood and had his own show on FOX, and was in JAG, ER, 24, and several movies.

Often as I'm preparing a life sketch for a funeral, or hearing one for someone I've known, almost everytime, I have to alter my mental picture of the person. I remember discovering that Helen Steven whom I only knew as a senior citizen, was a killer basketball player in her day. Wow! A whole new side of a person comes to light.

What if we have God in a bit of a box? Especially at risk are those of us who have known him as part of our life for many years, could we be at risk of having labeled and boxed up God?

After all we've read the Bible and know the stories. We're familiar with what he's done and how he's behaved.

Maybe some of us who had a more severe Old Testament God, you know the earthquake, fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah kind of God, maybe we've unpacked a bit of that stereotype and have enlarged our thinking to recognize that whatever Jesus is like is exactly what God the Father is like.

But those major or minor alterations have now ceased, our flight of investigation has landed, and like a long married couple we live with the illusion that we understand the other, and we have God pretty codified. So when we bump into a sermon title like today's it causes us some discomfort: "I Believe In God, But I Don't Know Her."

Some of you may even feel that such a title borders on sacrilegious, but please stick with me until we are done. Because...I hope we don't want a "God in a box" religion, a "God in a box" faith. Oh, life might be easier in some aspect if we believe spirituality and knowing God is all neatly packaged on the back shelf of our life, handy for emergencies or crisis but not messing with our everyday lives. It is easier if we imagine all the hard God questions have been answered but there is no box big enough to contain the real God. Any boxed God is really a false "god" and some form of spiritual idolatry to our idea of God not the real McCoy.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he instructed them to open their prayer with, "Our Father." Some of you would be quick to point out that fathers are his not her's.

God is called Father in scripture, but that isn't all he is called.

1 John 4:8 says God is love.

John 4:24 Jesus said God is spirit

Psalm 84:11 says God is sun and shield

2 Samuel 22:3 David says God is his rock

1 John 1:5 God is light.

Could it be that each description of God I just mentioned is an interpretive analogy to enable us to grasp some aspect of God.

Let's be really clear that as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13, we see God through a cloudy mirror. In other words our understanding isn't all we understand it to be.

None of us would likely insist that God is actually a rock, or sun or shield, but we would readily agree that these are analogies.

God is like a rock. He is stable. He is solid. He gives sure footing. Like the overhang of a giant rock he can provide shelter and safety. But we are clear that we don't pray to a rock.

God is like the sun. He can warm us. He provides life and energy. He melts the frozen. He scatters the fear of darkness. He is that around which all else orbits. But we are acutely aware and sometimes even proud that we don't worship the sun.

God is like a shield. He protects. He defends. He makes the attacks of our enemies come to nothing. But he's not really an actual shield.

But when it comes to Father we make a leap from analogy to the concrete.

Maybe our minds go to the incarnation, or Jesus telling Mary and Joseph that he must be about his Father's business and he wasn't talking carpentry.

And of course there's the "our Father" prayer, and the many references Jesus made to his Father, and we baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Our lives are wrapped up in the intimate knowledge of Fathers, so we think we understand and we end up projecting on God both the positives and negatives of Father's we've known and that's one of the boxes we may use to box up God for easy handling and distribution.

But what if he is more than our concept of Father. What if he is every bit as much Mother as Father?? I don't know but scripture is clear that God is beyond my full understanding. I can know some about God but God is infinite and just that word is beyond my finite understanding. With God there must always be some mystery. One writer put it well: "If you want a God you always understand—one who will not so frustrate and mystify you that you often feel offended—then you do not want the true God at all. You want a fanciful god of human invention."ⁱ

Speaking through his prophet God makes it clear in Isaiah 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

And Paul was aware of how creative our imaginations can be and how we can think outside the box but regarding God and his plans for us he wrote: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—1 Corinthians 2:9 Here's a God that is beyond our wildest most fanciful or thoughtful imaginative contemplation.

So how hard would it be for us to think of God as Father and Mother? The reality is that he is no more Father in our human sense than he is Mother, or rock, sun or shield. In Hosea 11:9 we find these words: "For I am God, and not man-- the Holy One among you." God is not man nor woman in any sense we understand, but it seems legitimate from scripture that we could use both as analogies.

If I were to ask most of you to tell me about the creation of humans you would likely tell me the story in Genesis 2. How God created Adam in his image, and then when Adam named all the animals there was no match for him so God put him to sleep took a rib from Adam and formed Eve.

But there is a creation story of us human beings in Genesis 1, that we often rush past in our hurry to the more romantic expanded story in Genesis 2. This first creation story of our primal ancestors is recorded in an interesting way. Some of the newer translations use the more generic “people” rather than the gender specific “man” when referring to humanity, but for the sake of our traditionally trained ears here’s what it says in the old King James Version Genesis 1:26-27 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; **male and female created he them.**

Here in the first telling, male and female are created in the image of God. For us to lock down our understanding of God as being male and masculine is to blind ourselves to a whole side of God’s image, the feminine aspects that are every bit as much the image of God.

In 1974, Sandra Bem, a Stanford University psychologist, developed the concept of androgyny. This new word puts together the concept of man and woman, andro meaning man and gyn referring to woman. Bem’s work was new. She didn’t view femininity and masculinity at opposite poles of a mutually exclusive continuum. Before her work most people assumed that if a person is high in masculine traits there would be an automatic and correspondingly low presence of feminine traits. She put forth that what she defined as the androgynous person is high in what we identify as both masculine and feminine traits.

This androgynous person is able to call on their feminine or masculine side as a particular situation requires. They behave in ways

appropriate to the given situation, regardless of whether the behavior is stereotypically masculine or feminine.

The androgynous man is more able to be nurturing and empathetic and emotionally connected than the macho man. And the androgynous woman is able to be assertive and independent beyond the stereotypical feminine woman.

Bem argues that androgynous people are freer, more adaptable and more emotionally healthy than those who restrict their behavior to traditional gender roles.

All the best traits we associate with either gender can be seen as traits of God. There are many people in our culture today whose experience with their Father's colors their ability to connect with a God overly and sometimes exclusively associated with the masculine. Their human father has so dropped the ball or wounded them so severely that to imagine God as Father causes nearly immediate rejection. So let's expand our understanding God is Father and Mother. He is our perfect parent.

Listen to what God says about himself to expand our understanding: Isaiah 66:13 As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

Paul writes, 2 Corinthians 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.

We may more easily imagine God as the Judge seated on his throne, or one who disciplines, or the powerful shaker of the earth, and the "call to accountability" tough guy. But God is clear that he is also the God of all comfort.

God hold the hurting, weeps with sorrowful, hugs the discourage, and enters in to all of our thoughts and feelings. He wants to hold conversation, communion. Whatever community is experienced

within the relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our God wishes to have that connection with us.

Jesus said

Matthew 23:37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

God longs for that closeness to be for us like a mother hen who protects her chicks.

Psalms 36:7 How precious is your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings.

I would hate for someone to have met me, come to know me 10, 20, 40 years ago, and assume that what they came to know that day is all of who I am—and I say that as a temporal short lived human. And if that is true for me what about God.

Why would we want to limit our understanding of God?
To know him only as him and not gather in the analogy of her as well shrinks God, lets us know less of him whom to know is life eternal.

But I'm not done. For us to box God in any fashion is to live as a practical atheist. Because to say I believe in God and then limit him in anyway is to deny that very belief. God is infinite. Scripture says he fills the whole earth. He is omnipresent with us everywhere and anywhere we are. His ways are beyond finding out.

If all we do because of today's sermon is to make room and allow for the him and her sides of God, then all we've done is make a bigger box but we still end up with a boxed God. Why would we do that?

Because a boxed in, codified, quantified, identified, describable, understandable God is easier to manage, we call them idols! But that is not what God wants and in our most lucid moment not what we want.

If you've missed a part of this series go to our website, www.hospitalchurch.org and listen to the ones you missed. Because I want us to not be practical atheists. I want to believe in God and fear him like I do electricity, and I want to believe in God and go overboard toward him not away from him like Samson did. I want to believe in God and find my trust in him not in money and I want to believe in God and know God's masculine and feminine side and be open to all the other sides beyond my current understanding.

The point of this series is that believing isn't enough. Believing can leave us practical atheists. It is in knowing God that life changes. For me to say I believe in God is really close to saying I know about God. Maybe you can say you believe in God because you know about him. Maybe you've learned some facts, some statistics, some stories about God. Maybe you're even a fan of God, you like the concept. And like a box of trinkets and keep sakes from some band or artist or movie star you have a box of God stuff from moments of insight or even moments of meaning. But the belief in God that the Bible invites us to is a belief that comes from knowing. From knowing the eternal, all powerful, omnipresent, gracious, comforting and empathetic God. How does that happen? How can that happen for you?

If you want to unbox your God, if you want to move him from boxed idol to limitless wonder here's what I want you to do—spend time with God, give God access to your life, create some space for focus on God. Sure you can still get to know about him, nothing wrong with that, but whatever you do don't limit God by believing but not knowing. We don't know nearly as much as we believe and we don't believe nearly as much as there is to know.

Every once in a while I'll spend time with someone I know and I discover something about them that surprises me. Something that isn't necessarily bad or good just something I never put with that person, and then I know them just a little bit better.

As you leave today I have a sheet with 13 ways to get to know God better and help us to not be practical atheists.

Following Prayer talk about James Taylor being a fan but not knowing him.

ⁱ <http://net-burst.net/god/mother.htm> copyright, Grantley Morris, 2007.