

Is There One God?
Deuteronomy 6:4-15
Mark 12:28-34

Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone [or The Lord our God is one God or The Lord our God, the Lord is one or The Lord is our God, the Lord is one]. You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

On this World Communion Sunday, when Christians cannot even agree on who belongs together at the Lord's table, listen to the bigger questions you have asked about the Christian faith in relation to the claims of other religions: Why do we think we are right about God? Why is my religion true? Are Hindus, Jews, and Muslims wrong? Isn't religion fundamentally flawed? Is there a Muslim problem (a question that suggests the need for an adult education series on Islam)? And finally the question of the morning: Is there one God? The brief answer offered by Jim Jones last Wednesday at Bible Study seems to say it all: If there is a God, there is only one! Perhaps that is the bottom line, though it will take us at least the length of this sermon to get there.

Specifically you asked if the God of Jews, Muslims and Christians is the same God. Given that I need a course on Islam as much as you do, we will spend the morning wrestling with the coincidence between the God who spoke to Israel through the law and the prophets and the God who has spoken to us in these latter days by a Son. Is that God one and the same God?

I think the general answer to your question in the Jewish community is "No." "...the doctrine of God's having three identities appears incomprehensible," writes Peter Ochs, professor of Judaic Studies at University of Virginia and a most remarkable interfaith dialogue partner. I also would venture to say that the question of God is not generally a burning question for many Jews who, since the destruction of the Second Temple and certainly since the Shoah, are much more interested in ethics than theology. Nevertheless, when asked about the God

Christians confess to be one God in three persons, my new friends at Main Line Reform Temple logically think that Christians worship three Gods--Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A three-personed God, they might say, bears no resemblance to the Lord our God who is one. Christians, on the other hand, must find a way to say "Yes" because if the God of Israel turns out not to be the same God who raised Jesus from the dead, we are still "strangers to the covenants of promise and without God in the world." (Eph.2:12)

Though there is a prior question we each must ask this morning. Namely, to what reality in your life does the word "God" refer? Martin Luther said that God is "whatever you hang your heart on and trust in completely." For the most part, whether Christians or Jews, we tend to hang our hearts on gods that cannot bear the weight. We think that if we give heart and mind and soul and strength to our one true love or to the children or to the company or to the nation or to the arts (my particular idol) or to an idea, an ideology, even to religion itself, that these will seal our happiness, determine our destiny, offer meaning to human existence, accompany us through the valley of the shadow of death. Is there one God? Not by a long shot! We hang our hearts on so many other things along the way, only to discover in the midst of the fray that none can bear the weight. They are no gods at all.

Therefore the "only interesting question," says friend and theologian Robert Jenson, "is *which* of the innumerable candidates for the God-job will make good on [the] claim?" The two candidates we are considering this morning (two that may, in the end, be one candidate) are the God who brought Israel out of Egypt and the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

The first thing to notice about both is that we are dealing with a God who *makes promises*, who enters into covenants. The Noahide Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, up to and including, Christians believe, the covenant

made in these latter days through the life, death and resurrection of a first century Jew. The second thing to notice about the God who makes covenants is that God creates: specifically creates “an actual creature other than himself” with whom to make a covenant. The God who makes promises creates a people because in freedom God has chosen not to be God without them. The third thing to notice about this God is that God does both of these things by speaking. God spoke the world into being, saying, “Let there be...”; God said to Israel, “I will be your God and you will be my people”; and in these latter days, Christians confess, God has spoken through a Son. “The God who can make a covenant must, like the God who creates, be a verbally able God: [God] must have a word,” says Jenson. And in the fourth and final place for now, the God who can make a covenant, who creates, who has a word, also has a purpose in the world. Written in 2 Esdras and echoed by the early church, God has created the world for us to be together in: for holy community.

This, of course, turns out to be part of the rub, prompting various candidates for the holy community to ask not “Is there one God?” but “Is there one people?” Exactly which community is the holy community? And the not so curious thing about religion is this: if we confess belief in the one and only God who has chosen to be in relationship with a one and only people, chances are pretty good that we think we alone belong, for reasons of blood or right belief, to God alone. Moreover within any one holy community it eventually comes to pass that the particularly faithful start to wonder whether the more liberal in our number (or the more conservative or the more observant or the more permissive) are *really* God’s people because the others apparently do not know God as we know God or follow God as we follow God or believe as we believe. So we spend this one precious life we are given together quarrelling among one another, either within the one community or between various communities, leaving God to look down from heaven on

humankind, as today's psalter says, to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after the God who is God. And so it is that religion becomes the thing we believe in, the thing we hang our hearts on, the truth we bet our lives on, instead of God. I promise you, religion cannot bear the weight!

The better question, then, for those of us who are late to the story, is whether the one God who makes covenant, creates, speaks and gathers a holy community can have dealings with more than one people? Does the one God who said to Abram, "in you [or through you or by you—it's complicated!] all the families of the earth shall be blessed," does this God have dealings with us too? In order to wrestle with this question, I am going to skate on thinner ice than I have thus far and make one more claim about the God who makes covenants, creates a people, has a word and gathers a holy community: the one God who is able to bear the weight of human hearts is the one God who alone dwells, who pitches a tent, who is nigh unto those who call upon him.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, I think of many instances, but time permits me only to speak of the Tent that was said to be "the place where the Lord *dwells* {shakhan) among his people. For this Presence," writes Jenson, "the rabbis took a word from the same root. In both the Tent and later in the Temple, the central holy place became the place of the *Shekhinah*, in Temple the Lord's usually but not always invisible presence above the cherubim-throne. Was God beyond his creation or was he in the created Tent and then in the created Temple? To be faithful to the texts we must say he was both: he is the one God as God ruling over his people's history from beyond it, and he is the same God as one who in that history is himself among its...*dramatis personae*."

Likewise Jonathan Rosen, in *The Talmud and the Internet*, writes that "God revealed Himself in words and lives in stories and, no, you cannot touch or even see Him. The Word, in

Judaism, was never made flesh. The closest God came to embodiment was in the Temple in Jerusalem, where God's presence was considered more intensely palpable....But the Temple was destroyed. In Judaism, the flesh became word...and Jews became the people of the book....In Judaism, where God never borrowed a body and walked among men, words [are] the Divine medium of revelation."

Yet barely ten years after the destruction of the Temple, a disciple of a disciple of a rabbi whom some said God raised from the dead began to write of the Word that was in the beginning and was God. That same Word dwelt with us, he wrote, pitched a tent among us, in the person of a first century rabbi. In him "the content...--the plot—the Logos—of the Lord's history with Israel came, at the beginning of the End of Days, to dwell in Israel as the teaching and suffering and action of one Israelite. What the Lord and Israel are together as a joint reality," says Jenson, "appeared as one concrete person, and so as one personal and simultaneous participant in God's life and in the life of God's people." Why would such a claim be made? Because the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, we confess, is the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Is there one God? "To confess...that the Lord is 'one'" says Old Testament professor and friend Pat Miller in his commentary on our text, "is to claim that the One who receives ultimate allegiance and is the ground of being and value is faithful, consistent, not divided within mind, heart, or self in any way. The reality of God in one time or place is wholly conformable with all other moments and experience. The presence and involvement of God in the world and in shaping history and human destiny is not in one guise now and in another guise elsewhere. In purpose and being, God is one and the same, though open and hidden to the future, becoming as well as being."

Is there one God? All any of us have are the words, the promises, the witnesses, the

story, the Spirit we cannot hold, the mystery we cannot dispel, the community. Mediated in these is the God who has pitched a tent in the wilderness of our life and who accompanies us at the hour of our death when, says priest turned novelist John Carroll, “human aloneness becomes a kind of [vulnerability to] the aloneness of God. God *is* one. One only”: One alone to whom we may cling with our whole heart in life and in death.

On a trip to Israel that changed my life, forty-four Jews and Christians discovered in our difference a sort of holy community none of us could ever know without each other. Is there one God? The question simply compels us to continue the conversation because if there is a God, there is only one whose command in the visible world is to love him with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might and to love one another! Amen.