

The Deep

House cleaning here at the church is something we do on a regular basis.

Whether its our daily group of First to Work folks with buckets and mops or Charlie Steffey with his power washer or Mosese Langi with his paint roller or the Kokubuns shining the brass or the Esakis pulling gum off the floor and pew bottoms, house cleaning seems like a never ending task.

I mention this because with today, the season of Advent comes to a close and Christmas, with all that it means, is nearly upon us, making this a perfect time for some personal and community house cleaning when it comes to our own ideas about who and what Jesus is, and about who and what God is, and what God is not.

Over the course of our lives, all of us, when it comes to these questions, end up with gum stuck to our beliefs, or scuff marks, with dust and mold and grease and grime that can use a good scrubbing.

We live in a society that every day worships a small "g" god that has no relationship at all to the God of the Older and Newer Testaments, and so we are all contaminated, to one degree or another, by the small "g" god that our society seems so much in love with.

The word itself: "God" has so many meanings to so many people, often meanings that cause more harm than good.

Our friends in Alcoholics Anonymous are really quite ingenious because they don't talk about God at all.

They talk about a higher power.

And they use the words "higher power" rather than the word "God" because they know that once a drunk has been beaten up enough to seek the help of recovery, his or her ideas about God are often completely clogged with hurtful baggage.

You know what I'm talking about.

The folks raised in homes where God is the terrifying monster pulled out by parents to make the kids behave; or the guilt monitor who is just waiting for you to mess up so he can knock you down, these ideas about God have sent more than a few folks running, not walking, from our pews.

But it's not only the terrifying god that gums up the works of real faith.

For the more socially progressive, for we modern folks, God is often reduced to a combination of magic, therapy and deism.

Magic, as in: "God, if you just get me out of this one, I'll never do it again!"

Therapy, as in: "God just wants us to be nice, to play by the rules, to get along with others."

Deism, as in: "God exists, but she is very, very, far away, and frankly couldn't care less about any of us."

These ideas are just some of the gum and ink stains and dust and grease that attaches themselves to our notions of faith and so today, just a few short days until we celebrate the most remarkable mystery in the history of the world, as the God who makes all of creation out of nothing comes to inhabit a virgin's womb, we come to scrape off the gunk, to seek a truer glimpse, a more honest peek, at the Mystery that we call God, with a capital "G".

And as we seek, if it helps you, it's okay to just let go of the word "God."

It's okay to put that word, with all of its baggage, on the shelf, and maybe start thinking in terms of something like, shall we say, the infinitely, inexhaustibly, deep.

Because, our word "God" is simply the name we attach to infinite and inexhaustible depth.

"That depth is what the word 'God' means." Tillich, quoted by Haught in *What is God?* at 14-15. paraphrased.

It's why in Exodus, as Moses stands confused and amazed, the voice that speaks to him introduces himself with a name that sounds like the sound of your breath, a name that means "I Am Who I Am" or "I Will Be Who I Will Be."

It doesn't get deeper than that, does it?

The Mystery that we call God is that which quietly, humbly, yet lovingly, calls us out of ourselves and beyond ourselves so that one day we might become ourselves.

You might hear this call whenever you are dissatisfied with your life, whenever you move into new and unexplored territories, whether those territories be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual.

God is both the source and answer to the infinite longing we each of us feel for wholeness and peace and joy.

God is the far horizon toward which we are all moving; and yet, God is also completely near, closer than our own heart beat, nearer than the breath you just took in.

So what response does this God ask from us?

At the end of the day, it's not an expectation for magic or miraculous cures or supernatural interventions that rescue us from life's catastrophes.

It's not even morality that's expected, behaving well so we can punch our own ticket to whatever after-life there may be.

The response God beckons from us is faith: it is the giving over of ourselves to the deep, to the endless horizon that is also the ground and substance of all things: as in Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, as the daily way in which we offer up our lives.

A disciple asks the great mystic Meister Eckhart how one knows when one is being true to the will of God.

Meister Eckhart replies,

"It's often the case that what seems trivial to us is very important to God.

So, treat everything God puts on you in the same way, not comparing and wondering which is best or more important...but rather simply follow where God leads, by doing what you feel most inclined to do, going where you feel you must go, pursuing that to which you feel most drawn.

If we live in this way, God gives us his greatest in our least and never fails." (paraphrased)

From the beginning of time, the Mystery we call God beckons us into the deep, into the far horizon, because the destiny of every human being exceeds even our wildest imaginations...

Soon, we shall celebrate God's calling of us into the depths through the unforeseeable mystery of God coming near, oh so near, to us, as a child is born in a barn, to a young girl and her bewildered spouse, for in that birth, the great beyond stoops, and hugs each of us close.

A woman who is a Methodist bishop told me this story a few years ago about when, as a youngster in Texas, she follows her mother home one night, carrying water from the well that is far from home.

It happens during that long walk home, late at night.

The luminous glow from the Milky Way is the only light.

Her mom walks quickly up ahead, and soon the girl is alone.

She's frightened.

She feels utterly alone.

Then she begins to get angry.

Angry at mom for leaving her.

Angry at God for allowing it.

She starts to ask: "Where is God?"

She starts to ask if there even is a God, or is she, in the end, truly alone in the world?

Then, in the midst of all this worry and trembling, as she walks, lost, lonely and scared, it seems that the sky above her gently reaches down and with something like arms, embraces her, and with something like a voice, whispers to her:

"You are not alone."

The deep calls us out of ourselves and the deep becomes one of us, so that we, and the deep, may be one.

God calls us out of ourselves and God becomes one of us, so that we, and God, may be one.

This is the heart of our faith.

This is the miracle of Christmas.

+amen