

Who is God?

A sermon for the first Sunday of Lent.

If you ask a three-year old child: How big are you? The child will reach high and say, "So big!" And then you can ask, "How big is God?" He will reach even higher and say, "Soooooo big!"

About 50 years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a book titled, *Your God is Too Small*. It was a big hit because it challenged the ways people try to bring God down to size, our size.

How big is the universe? Astrophysicists say the universe is about 93 billion light years wide. And that is just what we can see. What we cannot see may go on forever.

Scripture says the Lord created the universe in the twinkling of an eye. We, then, in our way of thinking in the West, start to speculate: **What are God's limits?** Could God light a match under water? Hard to imagine that! Could God create hills without valleys? No doubt he could, but we would not be able to see them. Could God create a stone so big that he could not lift it? Then there is that famous question about what happens when an irresistible force meets an unmovable object? The answer: They get married!

But if you take Logic 101, you learn about contradictory hypotheses. If there is an irresistible force, then there is not an unmovable object. That is a contradiction in terms. We fall into the trap of thinking that God is bound and must be bound by logic.

To be sure, God created logic. Yet he is far above it, beyond it, and that is not something that limits him. In the Hebrew way of thinking you simply say the Lord is God and God is the Lord, and it is **not a matter of speculation** and asking what kind of theory we set up.

You can see this in a remarkable way if you go to the Book of Job where in the last part, as you remember the story of Job and how he was in so much trouble, and then there is a controversy in the last chapters of the book and the Lord says to Job (38:4): "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, who determined its measurements? – surely you know!" 93 trillion light years, something like that. And the Lord also says (38:17): "Have the gates of death also been revealed to you? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?" (38:33). It goes on like that for two chapters. Then at the 40th chapter Job answers the Lord and says: "'I am of small account; what shall I answer thee?'" (40:4).

And then the curious thing is that the Lord answers Job, and he does not say I am infinite and you are finite, and you, Job, are just nothing, and you better know that. Rather, the Lord says: "Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" (40:8). And finally right at the end, before the closing section about how it's all resolved **Job answers: "I repent"** (Isa 42:6). Not, "I submit," or "I am smaller," but: "I repent."

In the Old Testament and the New an image that is used again and again is the potter making clay pots. In Jeremiah 18:6 as well as in Isaiah 29:16: "You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay; that the thing made should say of its maker, 'He did not make me'?" Isaiah 45:9: "Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! Does the clay say to him who fashions it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'?" Isaiah 64:8: "Yet, O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand."

This is picked up then by Paul in Romans 9:19-21 and becomes quite curious. Someone approaches Paul, asking about God: "Why does he [God] still find fault for who can resist his will?" And the answer is: "Who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?"

And then in those marvelous verses in Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Here we have a vision of God which is not based on some kind of logic, or theory, or speculation, but rather on **what God has done**. And so it ends up that there are three things that they draw from this. **First** of all, the Lord is **Lord of history**. That is where they start, and you remember Exodus 20:1: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." I gave you freedom and a land. That is who the Lord is.

Therefore, he is Lord of **what happened before**, he is Lord of **what happens now**, and he is Lord of **what will happen in the future**. He is the Lord of history.

Note Isaiah 10:5 where the Lord says: "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury!" In Isaiah 45:1 Cyrus, the Persian emperor, is called the Lord's anointed one. Cyrus does not know it, but he is the Messiah, the anointed one. In Jeremiah 27:6 it says of Nebuchadnezzar, the tyrannical king of Babylon, that he is "Nebuchadnezzar, my servant." And then in Daniel, the last of the great major prophets, it says the Lord "removes kings and he sets up kings" (Daniel 2:21). He is the Lord of history. Remember also Psalm 2:3-4 where it says though the nations rage and plot against the Lord, nevertheless: "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision." He is the Lord of history.

Even the chosen people tremble before the Day of the Lord. Amos 5:18-19: "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! ... It is as if a man fled from a lion and a bear met him." Beware, watch out, for the day of the Lord is a terror. It is something that you can't control. You do not have God in your grasp. The heavens and the earth are his doing, and he will do what he is going to do.

He is Lord of history, and therefore, in the **second** place, he is **Lord of creation**. He is the one who made all things. As it says in Isaiah 40:12: The Lord is he "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance."

Also, Isaiah 45: "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe," and then in verse 12: "I made the earth and created and created man upon it, it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host." And Isaiah 66:1-2: "'Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house which you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made and all these things are mine,' says the Lord." The Lord is the creator and that is not a speculative thing.

It is striking in Genesis 1 that it says the Lord separated the light from the darkness. He separated the upper waters from the lower waters and he separated the waters from the dry land. They didn't even want to bother about the question: Did he create it out of nothing? He did it. He is the one who is Lord, and he is in charge.

That God created out of nothing does not come until much later, in book of Second Maccabees 7:28, which is dated usually about 125 BC, and is written in Greek, which means that you are now in the Greek kind of thinking, not the Old Testament kind of thinking in which they did not worry about speculation.

Second Maccabees 7:28: "I beg you, child, to look at the sky and earth and see all that is in them; then you will know that God made them out of nothing." He is the creator, and he created all things.

And finally then, he is Lord of history, Lord of creation, and **third, he is the one who brings salvation.** Isaiah 65:17: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind." In this way they know the Lord is different. It is something entirely new that he is going to do, to bring it all right again.

What they did not know, and they could not know is, of course, that the Lord will do this through sending his own Son, coming himself and dying on the cross, and rising again. This is totally unknown to them.

But it is remarkable when you think of I Corinthians 1:28, where Paul writes: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Paul, in his reflection at the end of Romans 11, ponders how does God work this out with the Jewish people who have been the ones with the covenant and the promises, and then through Jesus Christ, and finally ends up in what we can almost say is a doxology (Rom 11:34): "For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?" Paul is quoting Isaiah 40 and then he goes on in 11:35: "Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" – That verse is from Job 41:11. Paul picks up these verses because of the magnificent gift that God has given us in salvation in Jesus Christ.

Thus, to sum it all up, a great boy's name is Michael, which in Hebrew means one who is like God. And yet who is like God? The answer, of course, is there is nothing, and no one that can be truly like him. And so in Isaiah 44:6: "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.'" And Isaiah 45:5: "'I am the Lord, and there is no other.'" The Lord is God, God is the Lord, and that is it.

In the New Testament we see this in a very striking way where three times the formula is used: "**He is Lord of lords and King of kings,**" – in I Timothy 6:15 and in Revelation 17:14 and 19:16. God is Lord and the Lord is God. We thank God that he is **our Lord and our God.** Amen.