



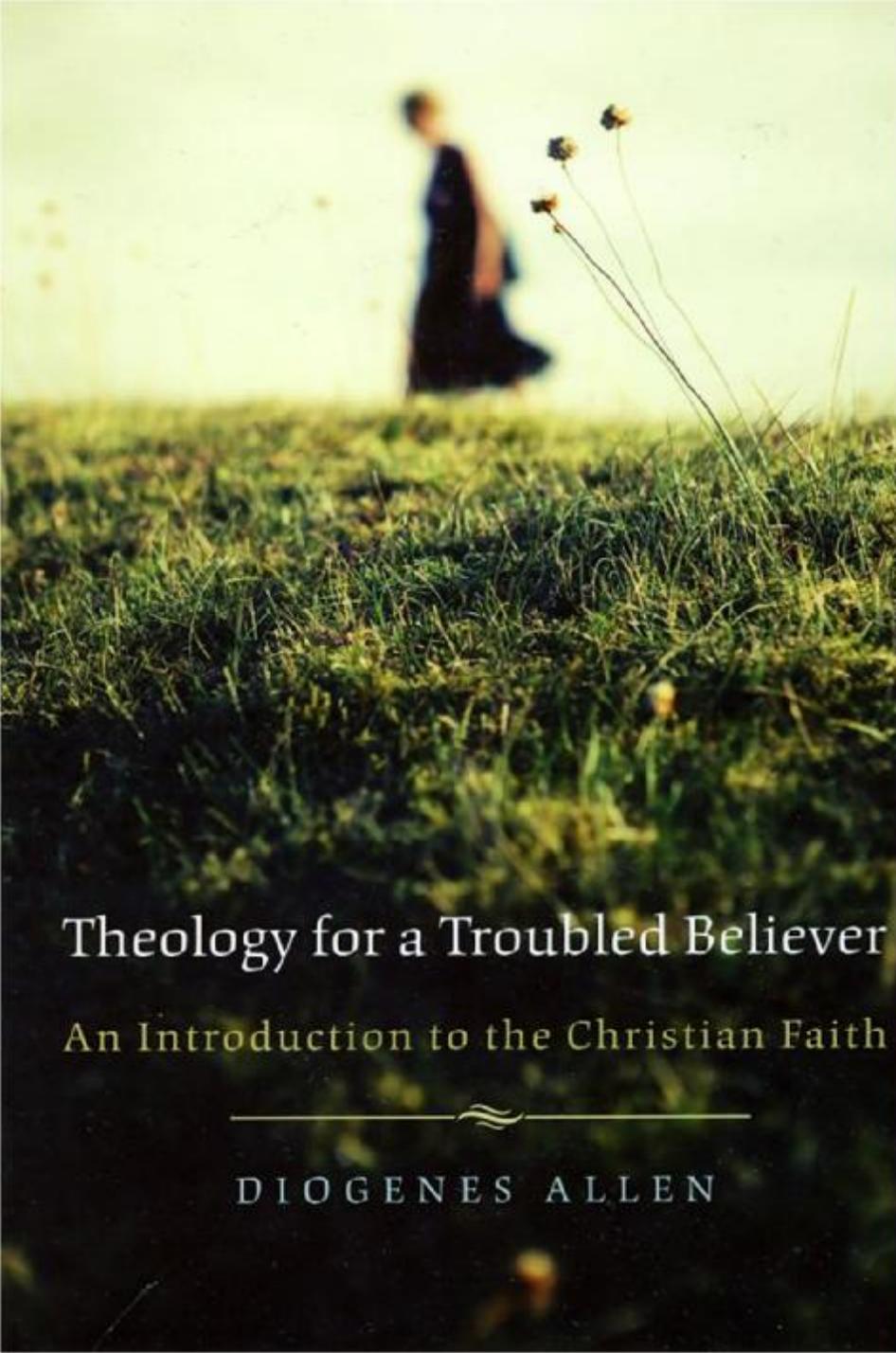
# Theology for Troubled Believers: *A Lenten Journey*

## 1. The Nature of God. *Part 1*

Sunday, March 13, 2011  
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor  
*Presenter: David Monyak*

*St. John in the Wilderness*

- **March 13 and March 20: The Nature of God.**
  - **Topics:** Introduction to Theology. The Holy One of Israel. The Maker of Heaven and Earth. The Limits of Science. What is Meant by “God”?
- **March 27: Suffering**
  - *Topics:* Nature as a Witness and Innocent Suffering. Innocent Suffering and Life Beyond Death. Suffering from Nature and Extreme Human Cruelty.
- **April 3: The Divine Sacrifices.**
  - *Topics:* The Sacrifice in Creation. Incarnation as Sacrifice. The Temptations in the Wilderness. The Sacrifice of the Cross.
- **April 10: The New Life in God.**
  - *Topics:* The Resurrection of Jesus and Eternal Life. Jesus as Lord and Jesus as Servant. Revelation and Faith.
- **April 17: Responding to God.**
  - *Topics:* The Holy Spirit, the Church, and the Sacraments. Sin, Evil, and Hope for the Future.



Theology for a Troubled Believer

An Introduction to the Christian Faith

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DIOGENES ALLEN

# Reference

- **Theology for a Troubled Believer. An Introduction to the Christian Faith.** Diogenes Allen, 2010. Introduction. Chapters 1 and 2

*"Theology for a Troubled Believer* is one of the richest expressions of theology in years. Allen invites the nonspecialist into the worlds of philosophy, literature, and Scripture in ways rarely made so accessible and compelling at the same time. A very wise work."

—**W. Mark Richardson**, Professor of Systematic Theology,  
The General Theological Seminary, New York

"In this powerful book, Allen brings a lifetime of philosophical and theological reflection to the task of explaining how contemporary Christians can fully embrace their faith without compromising their reason and ably addresses the concerns of committed Christians as they strive to make sense of their faith in a complicated and frequently hostile world."

—**William Greenway**, Associate Professor of Philosophical Theology,  
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

## ■ **Theology for a Troubled Believer. An Introduction to the Christian Faith.**

Diogenes Allen, 2010

O All-Transcendent God, what words can hymn your praises? No word does you justice. What mind can probe your secret? No mind can encompass you. You are alone beyond the power of speech, yet all that we speak stems from you. You are alone beyond the power of thought, yet all that we can conceive springs from you. All things proclaim you, those endowed with reason and those bereft of it. All the expectation and pain of the world coalesces in you. All things utter a prayer to you, a silent hymn composed by you. You sustain everything that exists, and all things move together to your orders. You are the goal of all that exists. You are one and you are all, yet you are none of the things that exist - neither a part nor the whole. You can avail yourself of any name; how shall I call you, the only unnameable? All-transcendent God!

St. Gregory of Nazianzen, 329-38

***This week:***

**The Nature of God:  
Introduction to Theology  
The Holy One of Israel**

A person is walking through a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is out of focus, wearing a dark dress. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The text "Introduction to Theology" is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font.

# Introduction to Theology

# Introduction

## Making Sense of the World and Our Lives

- Why do the righteous suffer while sinners and evildoers prosper?
- Why does God let children die of cancer?
- How could the Nazi murder millions of the Jews, God's chosen people, and heaven remain silent?
- What kind of God is so hidden that many biologists tell us the scientific theory of evolution proves He does not exist?
- If God loves us, why can we or our loved ones be cut down in an instant by a ruptured brain aneurysm, a bullet, or tsunami?

# Introduction

## Making Sense of the World and Our Lives

- Theology attempts to supply some of the information, the "pieces of the puzzle" we need to make more sense of the Christian understanding of God and our life in the universe.

# Introduction

## The Limits of Our Knowledge of God

- *Caveat:* we cannot supply all the pieces needed to complete the entire puzzle.
- There is so much that we cannot know about God and the world under God.

# Introduction

## The Limits of Our Knowledge of God

- Compare God to the sun:
  - God's presence is like the rays of the sun:
  - Only a few rays are needed for the earth to be brilliantly illumined .
  - Most of the sun's immense energy falls elsewhere.
  - Indeed, the entire energy of the sun would utterly destroy us.

# Introduction

## The Limits of Our Knowledge of God

- Compare God to the sun:
  - God, coming to us in Jesus, lowered God's intensity.
  - Through Jesus, God invites us to share God's life with us, to elevate us into God's realm or kingdom
  - God's invitation is gently toned down to the person of Jesus, so that we are not overwhelmed by God's full intensity.
  - But this reduction of God's intensity means that most of God's greatness is not apparent to us.
  - Only a small part of God reaches us, as does only a small part of the sun's rays

# Introduction

## Sources of Theology

- The main source of Christian theology is the Bible.
- Christian theology also exists because of a kind of intellectual curiosity that in ancient times was unique to ancient Greece:
  - The ancient Egyptians said that the Greeks were like children because they were always asking “Why?”
  - They asked questions persistently and systematically.

# Introduction

## Sources of Theology

- Today, the systematic search for reasons, the *logos* for anything and everything, is something we take for granted.
- It is part of our mental and cultural makeup.
- We share with the ancient Greeks a desire to push back the domain of the unknown, to unveil all mysteries.

# Introduction

## Sources of Theology

- Theology explores various themes in biblical history, such as creation and the incarnation.
- It asks and tries to answer questions about what they mean and imply.
- It often seeks to relate these themes to what other fields of knowledge are uncovering: history, archaeology, cosmology, psychology, or biology.
- For “all truth is Christian Truth” (St. Justin Martyr d. ~150 AD).

# Introduction

## Rubrics

- Theology is usually organized under topics often called “rubrics” rather than as a chronological story
  - from the Latin for “red”: they were once written in red in textbooks.
- *examples*: creation, providence, incarnation, Holy Spirit, Trinity

# Introduction

## Why Study Theology?

- It is possible for all of us to go astray in our behavior, failing to live up to the teachings of Christ.
- We can also go astray in our ideas about God and God's purposes.
  - Some theological understanding of the biblical story is necessary to keep us from going astray even in our behavior.
- A good theological understanding of Christian doctrines can provide essential guidance for both our thoughts and actions.
  - “doctrine” = that which is taught.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- An example of how a good theological understanding of Christian doctrines can provide essential guidance for both our thoughts and actions: the familiar story of the Prodigal or Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32).
- Occurs in a chapter entirely devoted to the theme of being lost.
- Luke 15 gives us three parables about being lost:
  - The parable of the Lost Sheep,
  - The parable of the Lost Coin,
  - The parable of the Lost or Prodigal Son.
- Together they all give an extraordinary account of God's concern for us.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- Prodigal or Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32): A father has two sons.
- The younger one asks for his inheritance and then goes to a far land, where he wastes it in loose living.
- He is reduced to caring for pigs (unclean animals for Jews) and is so hungry that he would gladly eat the fodder fed to the pigs.
- In time he comes to his senses, repents of his treatment of his father, and returns home.
- He plans to confess his fault to his father and beg to be hired as a servant.
- But before he can even speak, his father runs out to welcome him and restores him to a place of honor as a son.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus asks:
- **“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”**
- A flock of a hundred sheep would make a large herd in Jesus' day, but even so, the loss of a single sheep would have been a serious matter.
- Jesus knows that his listeners would immediately agree that a shepherd would leave the rest of his flock in someone's care and go out searching until he found the stray.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- What is remarkable about the parable is that Jesus applies it to God.
- His Father seeks those who are lost and have no ability to return home, just like lost sheep.
- Each of us so matters to God that God will seek and find those who are lost and bewildered.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- In the parable of the Lost Coin our value is stressed even more.
- An old woman has lost one silver coin out of ten, probably her life savings.
- Hence the diligence of her search for the lost coin.
- Hence the greatness of her joy at finding it.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- This direct search by God that Jesus teaches, this going out to seek the sinner, is utterly new.
- Jesus, and only Jesus, first taught us that:
  - God takes the initiative to find the lost,
  - His Father puts himself out to diligently search for us when we go astray,
  - His Spirit is at work in people before they even realize it,
  - Instead of looking with disdain on those who have gone astray, God rejoices when he finds those who are lost.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- The stories of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost or Prodigal Son stress that God takes each of us very seriously, far more seriously than we take ourselves.
- Each of us is so valuable to God that God seeks to find us and to welcome us into his kingdom.
- Jesus had introduced an utterly new idea to the world: **every person is of imperishable, irreplaceable value.**

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- Since this teaching of Jesus took hold in Western civilization, every ethical theory by Western philosophers assumes the absolute value of every human being.
- Our legal systems, our understanding of human rights, the slow and gradual rise of democracy, and the emancipation of women and slaves, all rest on this idea.
- They are all inspired by the theology we learn from simple parables of a Lost Sheep, a Lost Coin, a Lost Son.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- Every person must be taken with ultimate seriousness:
- This encapsulates the core theology of the gospel: each and every person so matters to God that God the Son became a human being to seek us.

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, every effort to establish our worth on a nonreligious basis have failed.
- Our indefeasible value makes sense only by reference to God, who so loves us that he sent his Son into the world as a humble human being to seek us, teach us, and to die on our behalf (John 3:16).

# Introduction

## Example: Parables of Being Lost

- Each of us is of irreplaceable value *only* because of God's love for each of us.
- *Only to God* does every person matter profoundly and unforgettably.
- Other than God's love and concern for us, we have *no other intrinsic worth to justify our value*.

A photograph of a person walking through a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is out of focus, wearing a dark dress. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The text "THE NATURE OF GOD" is overlaid in a bold, purple, sans-serif font.

# THE NATURE OF GOD

A photograph of a person in a dark dress walking through a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is out of focus, and the background is a bright, hazy sky. The text "The Holy One of Israel" is overlaid in a bold, purple font.

# The Holy One of Israel

# The Holy One of Israel

## First Revelations About God's Nature

- An introduction to Christian theology on the nature of God usually begins with the doctrine of creation, following the order of the Bible.
- But the present biblical order does not follow the actual chronology of the religion of the people of Israel.
- Israel first believed in a God, called Yahweh, who had made them a people and was their personal God.
- They were **henotheist**, not yet **monotheist**: they themselves had only one God, but they recognized the reality of the gods of other people.
- Only sometime in the eighth century did the view prevail among Israelites that Yahweh was not just their God, but also the God of all peoples, the one and only God.

# The Holy One of Israel

## First Revelations About God's Nature

- To begin an introduction to Christian theology with creation makes it appear that the Jewish faith begins from speculation about the natural world.
- It would make it appear that belief in God began with reflection on the origin of the universe, that the Jewish religion is fundamentally a religion based on the natural world.

# The Holy One of Israel

## First Revelations About God's Nature

- But the first insights the Hebrews had on the nature of God – the first revelations of Godself to God's people – were that:
  - God was their **redeemer**, their **savior**
  - God was **Holy**
- These ideas came *first*. They must serve as the foundations of our ideas about the nature of God.

# The Holy One of Israel

## God as Redeemer and Savior

- The idea of God as **redeemer** and **savior**, God's deep concern for God's people, oppressed in Egypt, is the great theological message of the story of the Exodus and the covenant God made with God's people through Moses.

# The Holy One of Israel

## Transcendence and Immanence of God

- Every Sunday we reenact the cry of the seraphs before the throne of God, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts; Heaven and earth are full of thy glory,”
  - Taken from Isaiah's vision of God in 742 BC, **“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”** in Isaiah 6

# The Holy One of Israel

## Transcendence and Immanence of God

- In this great phrase of worship, we proclaim and affirm the dual nature of God as both **transcendent (holy)** and **immanent (present in the world)**.
- God is both:
  - 1. **transcendent** or **holy**, and
  - 2. **immanent** or **present** in the world.
    - **Glory** = term for God's presence in the world
    - When we pray “for the Glory of God” = we are praying for *God's presence to be with us*.

# The Holy One of Israel

## Transcendence and Immanence of God

- God is **transcendent**:
  - Wholly Other
  - A Being not of this world, belonging to an absolutely different reality
  - Whose inmost nature is impenetrable to us
  - Infinitely beyond our comprehension
  - His name (Exodus 3:14):
    - “**I Am Who I Am,**” or
    - “**I Am What I Am**” or
    - “**I Will Be What I Will Be**”
  - only baffles us
- Yet we do know something of God, for God is also **immanent, present** in the world

# The Holy One of Israel

## Transcendence and Immanence of God

- Go back to the analogy of God as a sun.
- The **transcendence** or **holiness** of God is like the immense energy of a infinite sun.
- Most of that energy falls elsewhere, profoundly hidden to us, beyond our comprehension.
- Its inner being, its interior is impenetrable to us.
- Just a small portion of that energy could consume, utterly destroy us.
- Only a few rays of that sun are needed to brilliantly illumine the earth.
- Those few rays are the **immanence** or **presence** – the **Glory** – of God in this world.

# The Holy One of Israel

## Transcendence and Immanence of God

- When we cry every Sunday along with the seraphs before the throne of God, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts; Heaven and earth are full of thy glory,"
- We proclaim two theological truths about God:
  - 1. God is **transcendent** or **holy**.
    - So holy our human word for it cannot express the superlative degree of it, so we vainly repeat the word three times to make up for the inadequacy of our language
  - 2. God is **immanent** or **present** throughout the world.
    - Indeed, "heaven and earth are *full* of thy **glory**"; they are full of God's presence.
    - God makes Godself present to us in our world so that we do have *some* understanding of God.

# The Holy One of Israel

## The Holiness of God

- When we stand in the sunbeam, we sense something of the nature of the sun:
  - The intensity and brilliance of its light may impress us.
  - Its heat may impress us.
  - It can change how we feel, make us hot, or fill us with the gentle optimism and sense of well-being of a sunny day.
- When we sense the **Holiness** of God through the **Glor**y of God, what might we sense about God, what might it tell us about God, how might it change us?
- We can look to the Bible for stories of those who sensed the holiness of God.

# The Holy One of Israel

## Moses and the Holiness of God

- Exodus 3:1-6: Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

# The Holy One of Israel

## The Ark and the Holiness of God

- 1 Chronicles 13 (cf. 2 Sam. 6):
- The ark was being carried on a cart from its place of storage, driven by Uzzah and his brother.
- When the oxen stumble and the ark was tilting off the cart, Uzzah put his hand on the ark to steady it.
- Immediately he was struck dead
  - as if the holiness of God was an powerful, incomprehensible force, beneficial but also dangerous

# The Holy One of Israel

## Isaiah and the Holiness of God

- **Isaiah 6:1-9a: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet [nakedness], and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots [meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain] on the threshold shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" And he said, "Go and say to the people: . . ."**

# The Holy One of Israel

## Peter and the Holiness of God

- Luke 5:8-10:
- When Peter, following Jesus' advice, makes an enormous catch of fish, he becomes aware of the holiness of Jesus. (Luke [as in 4:14] stresses that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit.)
- Peter then says, **“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”** (Luke 5:8)
- Jesus answers **“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people”**

# The Holy One of Israel

## Aspects of Holiness

- Experiencing God's holiness can be:
  - an awe-inspiring experience of a phenomenon that both repels and attracts,
  - *a mysterium tremendum et fascinans.*
  - The Holy God is separate, wholly Other, incomprehensible, transcendent.
  - It can be beneficial, but is also potentially dangerous, even lethal.

# The Holy One of Israel

## Aspects of Holiness

- There is also a deep ethical dimension to the experience of God's holiness:
  - The awareness of God's holiness caused Isaiah and Peter to both become aware of their sinfulness.
  - The Holy God is a being of such infinitely pure love and goodness and justice, a being so utterly devoid of evil, that sensing God's holiness makes obvious our own sinfulness, the impurity and selfishness of our souls, places where love shines dully at best, where evil is allowed a room (or a mansion).

# The Holy One of Israel

## Aspects of Holiness

- But coupled with this sense of our uncleanness, our impurity and sinfulness, we also see:
  - an awareness of God's love and graciousness, and forgiveness,
  - an invitation to carry out in some small way the will of the Holy God, a being of infinite, incomprehensible love, goodness, and justice.

# The Holy One of Israel

## Aspects of Holiness

- We saw this in vision of Isaiah:
- Isaiah 6:6-9: **Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" And he said, "Go and say to the people: . . ."**
- and Isaiah is called to give relief to the poor, the widows, orphans, and more generally for justice in government, commerce, and social relations.

# The Holy One of Israel

## Aspects of Holiness

- Isaiah's overwhelming sense of moral uncleanness before God is answered by:
  - a gracious cleansing,
  - followed by a new capacity to hear God's word,
  - a spontaneous response of willing obedience,
  - a commission to speak God's word to the Israelite nation,
  - a call to give relief to the poor, the widows, orphans, and more generally for justice in government, commerce, and social relations.
- Similarly, after Peter confesses he is too sinful to be in the presence of Jesus, Jesus answers **"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people"** (Luke 5:10b)

# The Holy One of Israel

## Summary: Experiences of God's Holiness

- Aspects of the experience of God's Holiness found in Scripture:
  - An experience of awe, deeply attractive yet fearsome, even dangerous.
  - A perception of God's infinite goodness and purity that overwhelms one with an awareness of one's own sinfulness and impurity.
  - A sense of God's mercy and forgiveness.
  - A sense of God's power and righteousness that manifests in one's empowerment and commission to go forth and seek justice for God's people.

# The Holy One of Israel

## Justice and the Holy God

- Now we have seen that part of the experience of the **Holiness** of God is feeling of willing obedience to do the will of the Holy God, a being of infinite, incomprehensible love, goodness, and justice. We are invited like Isaiah to seek **justice**.
- In Luke 10, a lawyer asks Jesus, “**And who is my neighbor?**”
- Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), expanding the Jewish restricted view of neighbor as a fellow Jew to include anyone who is in deep distress.
- *Question:* if someone today passes by a man who has been robbed and left as a naked, battered piece of flesh, have they violate the injured man's rights? Have they committed an act of injustice?

# The Holy One of Israel

## Justice and the Holy God

- In our secular world, we would not take such a person to court for committing a terrible injustice.
- But theology tells us the New Testament view of **justice** is deeper than our secular society's.
- It is unjust to allow what is of absolute value to be wretched, mangled, twisted, neglected, unnoticed, unwanted, resented, hated.
  - Therefore, the **Holy God** *obliges us* to respond to those who are in distress
- That is exactly what Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:31-36:
  - Jesus made the basis of the separation of the sheep and goats (the righteous and unrighteous at the last judgment) those who gave drink to the thirsty, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited prisoners — and those who did not do so
  - The “sheep” are *not* called merciful, but **righteous** or **just**
  - According to Jesus, they have performed acts of **justice**

A person is standing in a field of tall grass with several dandelions in the foreground. The person is out of focus, and the background is a bright, hazy sky. The text is overlaid on this image.

***Next Time (March 20):***

**The Nature of God:  
The Maker of Heaven and Earth.  
The Limits of Science.  
What is Meant by “God”?**