

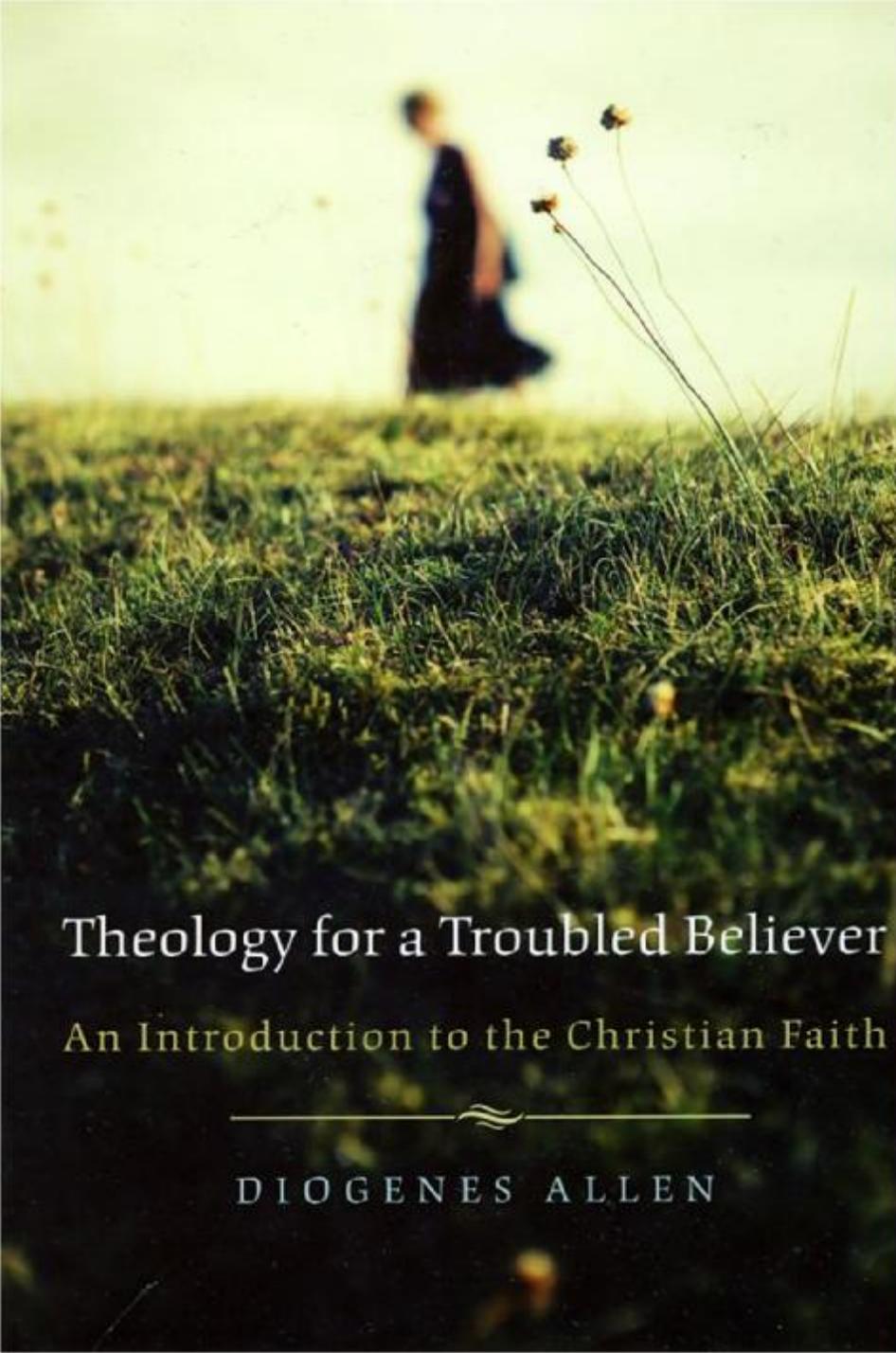
Theology for Troubled Believers: *A Lenten Journey*

1. The Nature of God. *Part 2*

Sunday, March 20, 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

DIOGENES ALLEN

Reference

- **Theology for a Troubled Believer. An Introduction to the Christian Faith.** Diogenes Allen, 2010.
Chapters 3, 4, and 5

"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 Nazianzus (329 to 389 or 390 AD)

Theologian, Preacher, Doctor of the Church, Archbishop of Constantinople

This week:

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

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 soft-focus photograph of a person in a dark dress standing in a field of tall grass. The person is holding a dandelion seed head, and the background is a bright, hazy sky. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

RECAP: The Holy One of Israel

The Holy One of Israel

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.

The Holy One of Israel

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.

The Holy One of Israel

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.

The Holy One of Israel

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 also means that most of God's greatness is not apparent to us.
 - Only a small "part" of God's intensity reaches us, as does only a small "part" of the total sun's rays.

The Holy One of Israel

First Revelations About God's Nature

- Introductions to Christian theology often begin with God's creation of the world.
- This approach can make it appear that:
 - the Jewish belief in God began with reflection on the origin of the universe.
 - 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

- In Deuteronomy 26:5-9 we find one of the earliest and most important confessional statements about God's acts as **Savior** and **Redeemer**:
 - **A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.**

The Holy One of Israel

God's Holiness and God's Glory

- 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

God's Holiness and God's Glory

- In this great phrase of worship, we proclaim and affirm the dual nature of God as both **transcendent (holy)** and **immanent**.
- God is both:
 - 1. **transcendent** or **holy**, and
 - 2. **immanent** or **present** in the world.
 - **Glory** = theological 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

God's Holiness and God's Glory

- God is **transcendent** or **holy**:
 - Wholly Other
 - A Being not of this world, belonging to an absolutely different reality
 - A Being whose inmost nature is impenetrable to us, infinitely beyond our comprehension
 - His name (Exodus 3:14) only baffles us:
 - “I Am Who I Am,” or
 - “I Am What I Am” or
 - “I Will Be What I Will Be”
- 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 has made Godself present to us in our world (most especially in Jesus) so that we do have *some* understanding of God.

The Holy One of Israel

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.

A person in a dark dress is walking through a field of tall grass and dandelions. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day. The text "The Maker of Heaven and Earth" is overlaid in a large, bold, purple font.

The Maker of Heaven and Earth

Maker of Heaven and Earth

There Is No Other God

- Sometime around the 8th century B.C., the ancient Jews began to fully appreciate and proclaim that Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, their Savior and Redeemer, was in fact the *one and only* God, sovereign over all peoples:
 - Jeremiah 2:13: compares other deities to **“cracked cisterns that can hold no water”**
 - Isaiah 45:5: **“I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god.”**

Maker of Heaven and Earth

God the Redeemer is the Creator

- The Holy One of Israel, their Savior and Redeemer, was the *one and only* primal reality from which the heavens and earth derived their existence:
 - Isaiah 44:24: “Thus says the Lord, ***your Redeemer***, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth.”

Maker of Heaven and Earth

God the Redeemer is the Creator

- Psalms, written earlier, had suggested such things:
 - Psalm 24:1 **“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, / the world, and those who live in it.”**
 - Psalm 33:6-8a: **“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.”**

Maker of Heaven and Earth

God's Saving Action in Creation

- The revelation that Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, their Savior and Redeemer, was *also* the maker of heaven and earth, allowed the ancient Jews to also see that:
 - Creation is part of *saving history* of God's people.
 - Creation itself is *saving action* by the Holy One, the Savior and Redeemer.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

God's Saving Action in Creation

- Isaiah, writing in the 8th century B.C., connects Yahweh's *saving action* of leading the Israelites out of Egypt with the *saving action* of creation: God's vanquishing of chaos:
- Isaiah 51:9-10:
 - **Was it not you who cut Rahab** [the dragon of Chaos in a Canaanite myth of creation] **in pieces, who pierced the dragon?**
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?

Maker of Heaven and Earth

God's Saving Action in Creation

- The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) is felt by scholars to have been compiled in final form in the 6th century B.C., when the Jews were in captivity in Babylon; some seven hundred years after their successful escape from captivity in Egypt.
- The Torah incorporates Creation within the story of the *saving work* of Yahweh, leading to the call of Abraham, ending with Israel's entry into promised land:
 - First words of the Torah: **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”** (Gen. 1:1 RSV)
- This “pushing back” of the beginning of God's *saving history* was only possible because the ancient Jews regarded Creation itself as a *saving work* of Yahweh's.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

God's Saving Action in Creation

■ *A SIDE NOTE:*

- Theologians today emphasize we should regard God's creation as a continuous, on-going action, God actively keeping all of the universe in being and in order, moment by moment.
 - In other words: God is continuously saving the universe, moment by moment, from chaos and nothingness.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

God's Saving Action in Creation

- The climax of the Genesis 1 creation story is the creation of human beings, male and female, in the divine image, in which they are given dominion over / care of all creatures (Genesis 1:26-30).
- In the Genesis 2 creation story, Adam and Eve are made partners with God in taking care of the garden of Eden so it does not turn into a wilderness (= a form of chaos or disorder).

Maker of Heaven and Earth

A Universe with a Beginning

- The connection of creation to history is also evident and made fundamental in those first words of Genesis: **“In the beginning.”**
 - The world is put under the category of an *event*.
- In ancient Greek thought (and in modern science and philosophy until only the last 50 years) the world was something that just “is”, without a beginning.
- But Genesis 1:1 boldly says that the world had a *beginning*.
- Only God “is”; all else has come to be by His word.
 - Creation continues to be habitable, rather than falling into chaos, only because of God’s will and command, only because of God’s word.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

A Universe with a Beginning

- This notion of a universe with a beginning was ridiculed across the Roman Empire:
 - “If God created the world and created it out of nothing, why did God create it at the time God did and not sooner or later? What was God doing before it was created?”
- In book 11 of his *Confessions*, Augustine (354-430 AD) answered that the universe was not made “in time”, but “with time.”
 - That is: time is part of creation. Time as we know it does not exist outside of creation.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

A Universe with Direction and Purpose

- Augustine's views on time enabled him and those who came after him to break with the theory of time as the circular motion of an everlasting universe undergoing cycles of endless repetition.
- "In the beginning," opened the way to develop a view of history as having a direction and purpose.
 - This was utterly novel in the ancient Near Eastern and Greek cultures.
- Creation was an *initial event* related to the call of Israel and the incarnation of the Word of God.
- The cosmos had a direction and purpose; events were moving toward the goal of the kingdom of God.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

A Beginning and a Direction

- It was not until the 20th Century that science confirmed:
 - The universe has a beginning, and a direction (is evolving and changing): The Big Bang.
 - Time is woven with space as a part of the fabric of creation, “space-time” in the Special and General Theories of Relativity.

A photograph of a person 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 Limits of Science" is overlaid in a bold, purple font.

The Limits of Science

The Limits of Science

Science versus Theology

- The biblical understanding of creation presents us with a religion in which God is concerned primarily with *human redemption*.
- Its affirmation that the universe is created is *not* the result of a scientific attempt to explain the existence and order of the universe, the origin of life, or human life.

The Limits of Science

Science versus Theology

- Science seeks to understand natural processes, the relations between the members of the universe.
 - Its claims are based solely on how well laws, theories, and hypotheses explain those processes.
 - The existence of the processes of nature is taken as a given.
- The question of the *ultimate source* of nature's processes and nature's very existence is *beyond the scope* of science.

The Limits of Science

Science versus Theology

- Analogy (from C.S. Lewis):
 - The universe is like an on-going dramatic play with many characters and actions taking place.
 - Science is concerned with understanding the play's characters, their relationships, the reasons for their actions.
 - Theology is concerned with the ultimate source of the dramatic play: with the author of the play, the playwright.

The Limits of Science

Science versus Theology

- Unlike the creation story in Genesis, myths about pagan gods were stories explaining natural processes – the characters and actions in the play:
 - Their god or gods emerge out of water, or an abyss, or from ice and snow, or from time and heaven, and then produce still other gods, who in turn make new parts of the world from preexisting material.
- Pagan myths therefore compete with science in explaining natural processes – in explaining the characters and their actions in the play.

The Limits of Science

Science versus Theology

- The advance of science undermined the pagan gods (historically already driven out by early Christianity)
- However some atheists and historians seem to assume that the Christian God was also put forward to account for natural processes in the same way as were the pagan gods.
- Since science has removed the role played by the pagan gods in antiquity, they also assume that science has replaced God as well.

The Limits of Science

Science versus Theology

- Modern science however does not replace the biblical God, because the biblical God, unlike pagan gods, does not perform the natural processes and functions that members of the universe perform.
- Rather, God's never-ceasing creative power is what keeps *in being* all the various members of the universe.

The Limits of Science

God of the Gaps

- A more recent perversion of biblical religion that seems to create a conflict between science and theology is the “**God of the gaps.**”
- In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, some thinkers and scientists (such as Isaac Newton 1642-1727), used God as a member of the universe to “fill gaps” within natural explanations.
 - For example, some energy was apparently lost in every collision of particles.
 - This troubled Newton because it meant that the universe was running down.
 - So Newton claimed that God injected more energy into the universe to keep it stable.

The Limits of Science

God of the Gaps

- As science advanced, God got removed from various alleged gaps within natural processes, lead to the erroneous impression that there is an inherent incompatibility between science and religion.
 - As science advanced, the “evidence” for God seemed to be in retreat.

The Limits of Science

God of the Gaps

- But there is no conflict:
 - God is Holy, transcendent, *not* a member of the universe with the job of filling “gaps” in workings of natural processes.
 - Biblical religion does not affirm God’s reality because its writers were trying to explain the working of the natural world.
 - Biblical faith is a *response* to God’s initiative, not the result of an *investigation* of nature.

The Limits of Science

Hints of a Creator

- This does not mean that the universe bears *no* marks of its dependence on God.
 - It would be strange indeed if nature and our human nature were created but gave *no* indication whatsoever that they are created.

The Limits of Science

Hints of a Creator

- Perhaps there are some “gaps” in natural explanations that God has indeed filled:
 - Some for example have suggested that our universe is simply not old enough for life as we know it to have arisen by chance.
- We may also be seeing hints of the Creator at the “boundaries” of science, places where science’s reach has perhaps ended, leaving a mystery.

The Limits of Science

Hints of a Creator

- Hints of the Creator at the possible “boundaries” of science:
 - **The Big Bang**, the apparent beginning of space-time 13.7 billion years ago.
 - **The Anthropic Principle**. The laws of the universe we can observe seems incredibly fine-tuned – as if designed – to produce life.
- The only “natural” hypothesis to explain away these mysteries is to speculate that we really are not at a boundary of science, that our universe is part of a bigger unobservable, undetectable “multiverse.”

The Limits of Science

Hints of a Creator

- Ultimately however, science is inherently limited in that it will *never* be able to explain the brute facts of the existence and order of the universe (or multiverse):
 - Science can try to understand nature's order. That is, it can try to determine the "laws of nature" (or the "meta-laws of the multiverse.")
 - But it can say nothing about why nature has the particular laws it does, and not other possible laws.
 - Science can *never* explain nature's brute existence. Why is there a universe at all, and why this particular one? Why is there something rather than nothing, and why this particular something?

The Limits of Science

Hints of a Creator

- Christianity offers a rationally coherent answer to the questions raised by the brute facts of nature's existence and order:
 - a transcendent, intelligent God, beyond the universe itself, existing in an alien, incomprehensible reality.
 - a “**necessary being**” = a being that fully accounts for its own being and existence, so that the question of “where did it come from” is incoherent and meaningless.

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 "What is Meant by 'God'" is overlaid in a bold, purple font.

What is Meant by “God”

What is Meant by “God”

Misconceptions About God

- There are widespread misconceptions that treat God as part of, or a member of the universe.
- In the Christian understanding of God:
 - God is *not* a member of the universe, but God is the creator of the universe.
 - As creator, God transcends the universe.
 - “Universe” = all that there is except God.

What is Meant by “God”

Misconceptions About God

- There are several “traditional proofs” of God’s existence that try to use the causal principles that hold between members of the universe to prove the existence of God:
 - The Cosmological Argument
 - The Teleological Argument
- These arguments fail because God, the transcendent cause of the universe, is not a member of the universe.

What is Meant by “God”

Misconceptions About God

- Whoever rejects God because the “traditional proofs” of God’s existence fail is like someone fishing in the ocean.
- Such people fail to catch God in their nets:
 - not because their nets are too small,
 - nor because their nets are torn,
 - but because God is not in the ocean.
- At every moment of time God is the creator and sustainer of the “ocean.” God continuously generates everything that exists.

What is Meant by “God”

Picturing God

- When we try to picture God, what comes to mind?
 - A blank? If so, that is as it should be.
 - We cannot picture God, and should not try to do so.
 - God is not available to the senses; for God generates the existence of all things, continually, including all that can be sensed.
- Hence the absurdity of statement by the first Russian astronaut who circled the earth: “I did not see God.”

What is Meant by “God”

Conceiving God with Our Minds

- Can we conceive of God with our minds?
 - Yes.
 - We can understand *some* very important things about God, such as God being creator of the universe.
- But ultimately, God is *beyond* our minds:
 - God’s own being, in contrast to what God does, cannot fully be grasped by the human mind.

What is Meant by “God”

A Necessary Being

- God – source of all that exists or might exist – has *no* source.
 - Nothing can cause God to be.
 - Nothing can cause God to cease to be.
- God has no need for the existence of anything else to be full and complete in God.
- God is a “**necessary being**” = *not dependent* on anything else *to be*.
 - This is in marked contrast to every created being, who are *contingent* = *dependent* on something else for their being.

What is Meant by “God”

Wholly Other

- God’s nature is thus fundamentally and essentially *different* from the nature of the created beings in the universe.
 - God is “wholly other,” above the power of our creaturely intellects to comprehend God’s essential being.
 - In other words: God is “hidden” in God’s essential nature.

What is Meant by “God”

In Light Inaccessible

- As the old Welsh hymn puts it: “Immortal, Invisible, God only wise, / in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes, . . . O help us to see 'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee” (Walter C. Smith).
- To try to fully comprehend God by our minds is like trying to look at the sun:
 - We can see things of this world because of the sun’s light rays, but we cannot look at the sun itself because the splendor of the light is so great that it dazzles us.
 - So too our minds are overwhelmed by the being of God.

What is Meant by “God”

Our Incomplete Comprehension of God

- Although our minds cannot fully comprehend God, we do know some very important things about God:
 - God has revealed God’s self to us through God’s creation and in God’s call of Israel and the sending of God’s Son, Jesus.
 - What God is in Godself cannot contradict what God has chosen to reveal of Godself and God’s purposes.

What is Meant by “God”

Creation as an Act of Pure Love

- The hiddenness of God should not cause us anxiety.
- It is a mark of the unsurpassable greatness of God that God is hidden in God’s essential nature from us.
- That a being of unsurpassable greatness, utterly full of life and lacking in nothing, should desire to create other creatures, is an act of utter love – because there is *nothing* this being needs for itself.
- And that God desires to have us as God’s beloved companions, to share in God’s eternal life and being, should fill us with wonder and unceasing thanksgiving.

What is Meant by “God”

The Journey Into God

- God’s unsurpassable greatness also explains:
 - Why when God makes Godself available to us, God must reduce God’s intensity so as not to overwhelm us utterly;
 - The craving of people who know God’s goodness to some degree to desire more and more to have God’s presence in their lives, to persistently seek to enter into the life of God more deeply.
- Because of God’s utter fullness and infinitude of being, our journey into God is never ending, an entering more and more into a glorious never-ending joy.

A person is standing in a field of tall grass and dandelions. The person is out of focus, wearing a light-colored shirt. The background is a bright, hazy sky. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the image, containing text.

Next Time (March 27):

Suffering:

Nature as a Witness and Innocent Suffering. Innocent Suffering and Life Beyond Death. Suffering from Nature and Extreme Human Cruelty.