

The Third Command: The Disappearing God

Exodus 3:1-15 (The Burning Bush story)

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This past week I went to a Presbytery meeting. Looking for a seat, I noticed a table full of women wearing T-shirts that read, “West Hill United Church.” These women, of course, belonged to Rev. Gretta Vosper’s congregation.

You probably know that Gretta Vosper doesn’t really believe in God. She calls herself a “soft atheist.” Her position is not unlike that of the previous pastor here at Lawrence Park Community Church, Rev. Ken Gallanger, who styled himself a “post-theist.”

Anyway, some people in the United Church would like to see Gretta go away, and so the women from her church were at the Presbytery meeting to show Gretta some support. I said “Hi!” to those ladies and sat down with them.

But what do we make of the Gretta Vosper situation? Can you have church without God?

Now, the interesting thing about Gretta, in view of today’s message on the third commandment, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” is that Gretta is keeping this commandment perfectly, since she doesn’t want to mention the name of God in church at all, anymore.

In this Gretta also reminded me of a related theme in the Old Testament. You see, if you read the Old Testament carefully, what you will find is that God slowly disappears.

Many Jewish scholars have commented on this. It works like this.

In the beginning, according to the creation story, God created Adam and Eve. God walked with them, and talked with them daily—until they were expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating the forbidden fruit. After that, God became scarcer.

Over time, then, like a brother or sister who moves to the other end of the country, humanity began to lose touch with God. Noah met God, but only infrequently, and only then because God wanted to save him from the flood he was sending. God met Abraham a few times, but just a few—and even then, sometimes God came in the form of an angel, so that Abraham wasn’t sure who, exactly, he was talking to. God was becoming scarcer yet.

Later, as in today’s passage, God met Moses. But God seems to have been pretty reticent about it. We just read the story of the burning bush—fire and smoke, sounds, but no body or image that Moses could see. And when Moses asks God for a name, God won’t give Moses a straight answer. God says, rather, “Me? I am who I am.” Later, at Mount Sinai, Moses asks God

if he can please see God's face. God refuses, and only shows Moses his back. God was becoming very scarce.

And that was fine with the Israelites because they didn't want to see God at all. They tell Moses, "You, speak with us, and we will listen; but don't let God speak with us, lest we die." So God agrees, and says, "I shall hide my face from them." After that, we read that God makes himself known to the Israelites only through a column of cloud—a puff of smoke scarce.

After that, in the Old Testament, no one really meets God, in the flesh so to speak, again. No one. God only speaks to humans, including the prophets, through dreams and visions. Isaiah even says, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself." God has vanished.

In the New Testament, things are both the same, and different. Angels come with messages from God to people such as Mary and Joseph and later, perhaps to the Apostle Paul—at least according to the Christmas stories. Some people have occasional dreams and visions. Ultimately, however, God comes to people now in the flesh and blood body of a human person, Jesus. "If you know me, you know my father," says Jesus. But this kind of encounter is very abstract and distant compared to what Adam and Eve, or even Moses had. God has vanished into human flesh.

Richard Elliott Friedman wrote about this interesting phenomenon in his important book, entitled, *The Disappearance of God: a Divine Mystery*.

This disappearance of God is linked, Friedman thinks, to a divine strategy for making humans self-reliant. Friedman believes that the Bible portrays God as a divinity who wants humans to mature to have the same care, the same compassion, the same delight in creation and each other and life that God has. But along the way, God refuses to be a crutch whose name can be called upon to make everything good, anytime. God wants us to grow up—so God withdraws, becomes scarce, and finally disappears.

It's like this. When I was a young father, living in Sarnia, Ontario, my son William—we called him Billy back then—wanted a bike. He was four years old, maybe five. Of course, we bought him one.

That should have solved all of Billy's problems, but it didn't. Billy didn't know how to balance himself, or how to stop, or even how to steer. So when he got on the bike for the first time, he asked me to hold it steady. I did.

I walked behind him, one hand on his shoulder, and another on the saddle. We made slow progress, but eventually Billy figured out the steering and the brakes. But he still couldn't balance. So I walked behind him some more, holding only onto the seat. Billy peddled a bit faster, and I trotted behind, still holding on. Finally, without his even being aware of it, I let go and Billy managed to stay up for a few feet, all by himself, before he fell down. Billy skinned his knee, and so he was quite cross at me for letting go. But the next day we tried again, and this time, when I let go, he wobbled quite nicely and rode his bike a whole block before he noticed I wasn't holding on and came crashing down again. But after that progress was swift. Before the

end of the day he was asking permission to ride his bike around the block all alone. He had become a self-reliant bicycle rider. He didn't need me anymore.

And that is how it is in the Bible's stories and myths, says Friedman. God hangs on for a while, offers the human race support, and helps steer his people in the right direction morally. But eventually, by the end of the Old Testament, God has let go, and is letting the Jewish people figure the rest out on their own. God has disappeared as a living presence. Even God's temple, where God is supposed to have lived, has been destroyed by the end of the Old Testament. Finally, in one of the last books of the Old Testament to be written, the book of Esther, God is not even mentioned once.

Now—when Billy was riding on his own, it wasn't as if I had really disappeared. And of course, even if God isn't showing up personally in the later parts of the Bible, it isn't as if God has died, as a famous cover of *Time Magazine* once suggested. When Billy was riding on his own, I was at home worrying about whether or not he was obeying all the rules of the road; and by the time Israel isn't meeting God in person anymore, I suppose God was still hoping that the people of Israel would keep the ten commandments, love mercy, and do justice. But both Billy and Israel had to make the authority figure's project their own project. Both Billy and Israel needed to take personal responsibility for getting life right—or not.

Taking the name of God in vain, according to this reading, would be inviting God—no, probably pleading with God—not to ever take his hand off our seats. It would be calling on the name of God for all your daily needs—a better job, healing for Aunt Minnie's gall bladder, a nice vacation, and maybe a date with that new girl . . . Taking the name of God in vain is turning God, especially through prayer, into a purveyor of blessings for you and your friends, rather than looking after business yourself.

But what God wants is for us to become fully human. As his image bearers, God wants us to be as creative, as loving, as responsible, and as happy to live loudly and joyfully as God herself was on that first creation day God stepped out into the void and said, "Let there be light!"

So, what about Gretta Vosper? Well, I don't agree with her that there is no God. I believe that just as I never truly disappeared when William was riding his bike around town with his friends, God has not fully disappeared from human history either. I believe that God still takes a keen interest in her human experiment—though to explain how and why she might do so is a big topic left for another day.

At the same time, perhaps by way of exaggeration, Gretta is also on to something that has Biblical roots—the disappearance of God. Ultimately, as humans, we need to get along without God as God is popularly conceived, God as a crutch, as a bestower of material blessings to us in the West but apparently not to the people of Sub-Saharan Africa or the Indian subcontinent. We have to get over God as a crutch, as a *deus ex machina* or emergency safety lever that we pull when we have an unexpected problem.

No—that's not the sort of God any of us need. We need, rather, a parent God who both gives us the room, and encourages us to live fully, happily, and with a sense of adventure on our own, for the sake of planet and neighbours. Sort of like how I wanted my sons to grow up.