

I. Advanced Organizer

A. NT Wright is a writer and theologian who served a number of years early in his vocation as a chaplain at Oxford University

1. As he would meet incoming first year students; they'd often tell him with a slightly sheepish look, 'You won't be seeing much of me; you see, I don't believe in god.' He developed a standard response: **"Oh, that's interesting; which god is it you don't believe in?"**
2. This often took students aback. And inevitably many of them would stumble out a few phrases about the god they said they did not believe in: a being who lived up there in the sky, looking down disapprovingly at the world, occasionally "intervening" to do miracles, sending bad people to hell while allowing good people to share his heaven. And again, Wright had a stock response for what he calls this "spy-in-the-sky" theology: **"Well, I'm not surprised you don't believe in that god. I don't believe in that god either."**

B. We're in our second teaching in a new series I'm calling "Reconstructing Faith".

1. The understanding of "deconstruction" when it comes not to the world of buildings, but of ideas, **is a fairly recent one, connected to an era of thought called post-modernism or post-structuralism. Deconstruction looks for the ways that we have built systems of meaning and seeks to identify how those systems are flawed, often by examining the limitations of perspective that these structures of meaning are built upon.** Sometimes discovering the flaws in these structures means taking them apart and considering building different structures of meaning.
2. As I've been pastoring this community in recent years, **I've discovered that many of us inhabiting this space are on some journey of deconstructing and reconstructing our spiritual frameworks;** our hope at Haven is that we're cultivating a safe space to do that work together. Sometimes this deconstructing examination is a purely theoretical, academic exercise. Often it's forced by a circumstance that calls everything we had understood about faith into question.
3. **Kate Bowler thought she had a solid understanding and practice of faith in Jesus.** Raised a mennonite in Canada, she fell in love with Jesus at a young age, her husband not long after, and followed her mind and her passions into academia in the United States. She pursued religious history, zeroing in during her PhD work writing a doctoral dissertation on the Prosperity Gospel movement. Kate spent thousands of hours researching its origins and interviewing its adherents. Her dissertation was published as a book, and she was hired to teach religious history. She had a husband she adored, and after some struggles with getting pregnant, in her early 30s she gave birth to a beautiful boy whom she adored. Life was going well. God was on her side and life was working out.
 - a) **And then came the diagnosis out of nowhere. At age 35: Stage 4 Colon Cancer.** This diagnosis turned everything upside down, not least of which was Kate's understanding of faith. It's not that she had actually believed the prosperity gospel, that God promised her health and wealth if only she'd believe or pray the right way. But that doesn't mean that some seed of that theology wasn't entangled in her own system of belief. In her own words:
 - a) *I would love to report that what I found in the prosperity gospel was something so foreign and terrible to me that I was warned away. But what I discovered was both familiar and painfully sweet: the promise that I could curate my life, minimize my losses, and stand on my successes. And no matter how many times I rolled my eyes at the creed's outrageous certainties, I craved them just the same. I had my own prosperity*

gospel, a flowering weed grown in with all the rest.

Married in my twenties, a baby in my thirties, I won a job at my alma mater straight out of graduate school. I felt breathless with the possibilities. Actually, it's getting harder to remember what it felt like, but I don't think it was anything as simple as pride. It was certainty, plain and simple, that God had a worthy plan for my life in which every setback would also be a step forward. I wanted God to make me good and make me faithful, with just a few shining accolades along the way. Anything would do if hardships were only detours on my long life's journey. I believed God would make a way. I don't believe that anymore.

4. **The last Sunday we were together, I suggested that where this journey of deconstructing faith often begins is with what I call the “Questions in the Dark”**, the kind of questions that came roaring in for Kate and her family when crisis hit. In that teaching, I invited you to consider writing these questions of yours down and submitting them to us. Many of these were submitted anonymously. As we move forward in this series, each week I'm going to be sharing some of these that were anonymous, as well as inviting one or two people each week who are willing to share their questions or stories of deconstruction themselves. These will be around four general themes we'll be considering together over our next four Sundays together.
 5. And the first we'll be considering was the question at the heart of NT Wright's exchange with his students, and it was also connected to what fell apart for Kate Bowler. “Who is God anyway?” What should we understand to be the identity of God?
 6. One anonymous card: *Does God even exist? I get no feedback from God, no sense of his presence. Or maybe I do, and I don't know how to recognize it.*
 7. Invite Izek up to share his own journey of deconstruction around this.
- II. **So where do we start in pondering the identity of God? What direction does our orientation as a Jesus-centered community point us in?** At the heart of the Christian faith is an essential belief that God has communicated with humanity - **God is a God of revelation. But what is the nature of this revelation?** Does God reveal in a way that gives us a super-clear image of who God is? Or do the stories in the arc of revelation testify to something different?
- A. **Scripture has been looked at as a central component** of the revealed faith that Christianity testifies to, but the pictures of revelation of God that they present are far from clear how they should be put together.
1. The creation narrative describes God hovering over water in the darkness and speaking the created world into being. Adam and Eve experience God as a benevolent creator who intimately walks with them through the garden of creation, until that God must expel them from God's presence for disobedience. Abraham knows God as a mysterious being who calls him out and leads him on a journey with promises for his future. Hagar experiences God as the one who *sees her*, though no-one else does. Moses experiences God in a burning bush and in a pillar of fire and in an encounter at the top of a mountain, that leaves his face so radiant, he has to wear a veil to shield others from it. The Hebrew slaves experience God as a deliverer of their people who attends to their cries, but God is also so utterly different than them that God is given an unspeakable name, YHWH, which testifies only to the reality that this deity IS. There are stories of folks like Joshua and David that seem to testify to God as a God of War, vanquishing enemies and fighting for God's people. Samuel experiences God calling him intimately as he lays down to rest. Elijah encounters God in a gentle whisper in the mouth of a cave.

2. **And then there's Jesus.** Jesus, who Christian faith affirms is the center of the revelation; the clearest revealer of God. But Jesus is one paradox after another. A king announced by angels, born to a poor couple and laid in a feed trough for animals. A carpenter turned rabbi, who speaks in parables and questions, saying things that confuse even his closest friends, and yet there is such power in his words and actions, that people can't help but flock to him. He makes friends with the people that seem least likely to be religious and has the harshest words for the people who see most concerned with the things of God. And rather than triumphing over everyone through worldly strength, the revealer of God becomes completely helpless, innocently suffering the death of a seditious criminal, praying to God to forgive the people because they don't know what they're doing. Even his resurrected self is a puzzle that is hard to comprehend as he appears in random places, seems to walk through walls, is unrecognizable at times to those who knew him best, and yet utterly the same in other ways. And all of these paradoxes lead us to wonder: **What does all this show us about the nature of God's revelation?**

III. One of the most interesting stories we have of personal revelation in the Bible, what's often called conversion, is **a story of a man who has his own radical encounter with Jesus and it leave a strange impact on him.** This comes after the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection in the book of Acts, chapter 9.

A. Meanwhile Saul, still breathing out threats to murder the Lord's disciples, went to the high priest and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he was going along, approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 So he said, "Who are you, Lord?" He replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting! 6 But stand up and enter the city and you will be told what you must do." 7 (Now the men who were traveling with him stood there speechless, because they heard the voice but saw no one.) 8 So Saul got up from the ground, but although his eyes were open, he could see nothing. Leading him by the hand, his companions brought him into Damascus. 9 For three days he could not see, and he neither ate nor drank anything.

1. So this is a fascinating story. A man encounters something utterly divine and it comes through what the author Luke describes as a "flashing light from heaven". That's an interesting image isn't it?
 - a) There's a lot of imagery in the Bible about light and darkness. Light often seems to denote insight, clarity, revelation. Isaiah spoke prophetically of a Messiah who would come, saying **"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."** (Isaiah 9:2)
 - b) John began his account of the life of Jesus speaking of the Word becoming flesh. **"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."** (John 1:4-5)
 - c) And Paul himself, the convert after his encounter with the flash of light would use a phrase in a letter to his eventual mentee Timothy, that I find particularly provocative of the God revealed by Jesus, a God who **"dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see."** (1 Timothy 6:16)
2. What's remarkable about that? **Well we often think that light brings vision, we think that light brings the capacity to see clearly.** But the effect of this divine light on Saul, who became Paul, is actually the opposite. **Rather than bringing clarity, the light of God**

brings blindness. The light is so powerful that it's like sensory overload. It leaves Paul unable to see, clouded in mystery. And even when he eventually gains back his physical sight, he's prayed for by Ananias and scales fall from his eyes, he's left imprinted by his mysterious encounter. He's left having moved from following a God he thought he fully understood, to having encountered a God who "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see."

3. **Peter Rollins is a philosopher and theologian** that I've been reading a lot in the last couple of weeks, and have found his work super helpful. I'm gonna lean on it a lot in this teaching. Rollins suggests that this phenomenon of see with Paul is often the nature of our encounter with the divine reality that we name as God:
 - a) *"...revelation ought not to be thought of either as that which makes God known or as that which leaves God unknown, but rather as the overpowering light that renders God known as unknown."*
 - b) *"In the same way that the sun blinds the one who looks directly at its light, so God's incoming blinds our intellect."*
4. The mystics have long understood this paradox. One of the classic Christian mystical texts I remember reading as an undergrad is called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which highlights for the worshipper the mysterious nature of God, and how one might yet experience this God, even in mystery. The late-fifth century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius taught that the more we attend to the source of our faith the more we realize how little we know. Even the language of mysticism testifies to the paradox of blinding revelation. As Rollins points out, *"the word mystic itself is derived from the Greek verb **muo**, which refers to the closing of one's lips or eyes. It is also connected with the Greek word **mystikos**, which relates to the idea of having been initiated into the light. The result is a word that casts up the idea of closing one's eyes so as to be able to see."*
5. In the wake of Kate Bowler's diagnosis, person after person tried to help her find some logical way of understanding what was happening to her. "Everything happens for a reason" a neighbor told her husband while bringing over a casserole, trying to be helpful. "I'd love to know what it is," was her husband's wry response. The truth is this event defied logical explanation, it defied confident theology. But that didn't mean that God fell apart for Kate; merely her understanding of God did.
 - a) *"In those first few days after my diagnosis, when I was in the hospital, I couldn't see my son, I couldn't get out of bed, and I couldn't say for certain that I would survive the year. But I felt as though I'd uncovered something like a secret about faith. Even in lucid moments, I found my feelings so difficult to explain. I kept saying the same thing: "I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back." At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus. When they sat beside me, my hand in their hands, my own suffering began to feel like it had revealed to me the suffering of others, a world of those who, like me, are stumbling in the debris of dreams they thought they were entitled to and plans they didn't realize they had made. That feeling stayed with me for months. In fact, I had grown so accustomed to that floating feeling that I started to panic at the prospect of losing it. So I began to ask friends, theologians, historians, pastors I knew, and nuns I liked, What am I going to do when it's gone? And they knew exactly what I meant because they had either felt it themselves or read about it in great works of Christian theology. St. Augustine called it*

“the sweetness.” Thomas Aquinas called it something mystical like “the prophetic light.” But all said yes, it will go. The feelings will go. The sense of God’s presence will go. There will be no lasting proof that God exists. There will be no formula for how to get it back. But they offered me this small bit of certainty, and I clung to it. When the feelings recede like the tides, they said, they will leave an imprint. I would somehow be marked by the presence of an unbidden God.”

6. **Saul, who became Paul, had his own mystical experience on the road to Damascus.**

He was one who believed he had a firm grasp on his understanding of God. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees, he had given his life to devotedly studying the torah, to weighing what one rabbi said against another, to memorizing scripture and trying to embody it to the T, to following every formula he’d been handed precisely for honoring the God of his ancestors Abraham, Issac, and Jacob. He was confident in his capacity to honor God correctly, he was completely clear, so clear that without a moment’s hesitation he approved as his Jewish brothers and sisters threw stones at a man who had the audacity to claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and that he’d returned from the dead. Saul was inspired by that display, finding a new mission: to hunt down the rest of those heretics and have them all destroyed. But when he encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, when he experienced there what the Bible often describes as the glory of God, he went from clarity of vision to blindness. It was not a blindness born of darkness, a blindness from lack of revelation, it was a blindness born of too much light. A blindness that came from perceiving that God is more than the eyes could ever behold.

7. **Over a thousand years ago, St. Anselm of Canterbury wrote that God is “something greater than can be thought.”** He was saying paradoxically that **the only way we can begin to conceive of God is to recognize that God is beyond what we can conceive.**

IV. **But if God is so mysterious and blinding, so utterly inconceivable, how can we even begin to represent God or speak of God in a meaningful way?** As we consider this question, it’s important to remember that **Jesus-centered faith has two ways of thinking about images for the divine: there are ikons and there are idols.**

A. **First, let’s talk about idols.**

1. Idols appear in the Hebrew Bible, and it’s clear early on that God does not approve. Most famously of course is the incident at Sinai when Moses is up on the mountain meeting with God, and the people are getting impatient, and so they have Aaron fashion them a golden calf. Now the problem is not initially that they want something to look at to remind them that God is present. **The problem is that they begin to substitute that image for God, and begin to worship it as if it actually were a physical manifestation of their God.**
2. In the same way, we humans still have a tendency to make idols, they’re just not as easy to see and touch as some of our ancestors. Peter Rollins calls these *conceptual* idols instead of *aesthetic* ones. **(2 Categories of Idols: aesthetic and conceptual)** *“The only significant difference between the aesthetic idol and the conceptual idol lies in the fact that the former reduces God to a physical object while the latter reduces God to an intellectual object.”*
3. This is the concept we explored a year ago in our “Smashing Idols” series. If you missed that, I highly recommend you go on our website and listen to some or all of those teachings. There we explored how various social constructs such as androcentrism (the belief that maleness is normal), heteronormativity, whiteness all distort our view of God, leaving us to wrongly believe that God is male, or straight, or white. But as Anselm and Rollins remind us, conceptual idols can go beyond these things as well. In fact any

conception of God that would claim that it is a totally clear picture of God is actually an idol.

4. So here is a real head scratcher. For Rollins, **to be a Christian is actually also to be an atheist**, because it means we are regularly rejecting conceptions of God. We are recognizing that our concepts of God are not complete and if we say they are, we're worshipping idols that must be rejected. He describes this kind of atheism as an *"atheism which is born, not from a lack or a rejection of faith, but rather from the heart of faith: an atheism that rejects our understanding of God precisely because it recognizes that God is bigger, better and different than we could ever imagine."*
5. **This doesn't mean that we cannot describe God in any way, but it does mean that even as we seek to describe God we recognize that our words are provisional, they're incomplete.** We can talk about God, but when we do so, we should imagine an asterisk at the end of each sentence instead of a period. From this point of view our doubts and questions, rather than being threats to our faith, are actually helpful tools in our growth, for they reveal where our thoughts about God fall short.
6. And because any true statement about God only reveals a portion of who God is, we need a wide array of words and images and ways of thought to testify to the divine. We don't need idols to stand in God's place, but we do need ikons to help us encounter the God we cannot conceive.

B. **The word "icon" comes to us from the greek word for "image". Eikon is the word used in the Greek translation of Genesis.** "And then God said, let us make mankind in our ikon. In the ikon of God, he created him. Male and female he created them." It's also the word that Paul draws upon to describe how Jesus helps reveal God. "He is the icon of the invisible God" he says.

1. **The icon is more than a physical representation, it is a space for encounter.** Icons are not intended to be replicas of the divine, they are only intended to be images that reflect the divine. They are aides in contemplation. They bring us into relationship with that which we can't conceive. But we must remember that they themselves are not the full picture. They are merely reflections as in a glass darkly that helps us see the reflection of glory, for we could not ever conceive of it in its fulness.
2. **Peter Rollins compares this to how we relate to the flesh of another person.** If we reduce someone to their flesh, we objectify them. But there's another way we can connect with someone, particularly someone we love. Their body, their face particularly, becomes the means for which we encounter them. We know it is not all of who they are, but it helps reveal who they are. Rollins puts it this way, *"...the face is the place where the beloved is both revealed and hidden."*
3. So what does Jesus the icon tell us of God? I don't want to end with a clear simple answer, because I don't want to end by creating another idol. **But I will testify to a few things I find provocative and helpful about the God that seems to be revealed in the Jesus-centered faith.**
 - a) First, is the idea we've already been meditating upon that this **God is beyond us**. This God is of another dimension. This God is other. The Biblical word often used for this idea is holy.
 - b) But secondly, the story of our faith testifies to a divine being that is invested in us. (**God is invested in us**.) God seems to care about creation, particularly humanity. A God that is not indifferent. A God that wants to be connected to the human race. It's the story of a God who calls a people to God's self, who builds a relationship of covenant: a kind of

allegiance of care and connection, and this God does this with the promise that through this work, all people would be blessed. It's a story of a God whose heart is moved by suffering, and who intervenes to liberate the oppressed.

- c) Finally, in Jesus, God seems to reveal that **God's primary orientation towards us is love**. A love so deep that it cannot bear to allow humanity to suffer apart from itself. A love that expresses itself through the choice to suffer with and on behalf of the beloved. A love that has extended itself for the whole world. As Jesus himself says, "No one has greater love than this—that one lays down his life for his friends."

- C. It is not all of who God is, but for me, these are three helpful ikons to meditate on: God as wholly other, beyond my capacity to conceive, veiled in glory and holiness. God, invested in humanity - invested in humanity on a large scale, and on a small scale. Because God, as revealed in Jesus is invested in demonstrating self-giving love to every human being.
- D. We're not going to figure God out. To confidently answer the question of who God is not our endeavor. Our call, as the Body of Christ, is to follow Christ into the work of iconography. We are invited to participate as ikons in reflecting this mysterious God in the world we inhabit, just as Kate Bowler experienced God reflected to her, in her moment of crisis. None of us will do it perfectly, and none of us need to. But I pray our endeavors to do so lead us ever closer in our pursuit of the one we cannot name, but long to connect with. I pray we experience this last idea of Peter Rollins: "while we do not grasp God, faith is born amidst the feeling that God grasps us." Amen.

Praying the prayer of St. Anselm:

O Lord my God.
Teach my heart this day
where and how to find you.
You have made me and re-made me,
and you have bestowed on me
all the good things I possess,
and still I do not know you.
I have not yet done
that for which I was made.
Teach me to seek you,
for I cannot seek you
unless you teach me,
or find you
unless you show yourself to me.
Let me seek you in my desire;
let me desire you in my seeking.
Let me find you by loving you;
let me love you when I find you. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. Have you ever experienced challenges to the way you have thought about God? What were they? How did they affect your experience of faith?

2. What concepts of God have been helpful icons for you? What have become idols?
3. How have your questions, doubts, or rejections of ideas about God helped you understand God better?