

God is unknowable. And so it's little wonder that the first disciples had such a hard time recognizing the Risen Christ. Mary Magdalene confuses him for a gardener until he calls her by name, Thomas refuses to believe until he himself can touch Jesus' pierced body, and today the disciples walking the road to Emmaus, in their grief, don't recognize their conversation partner.

God is unknowable. Unknowable by the eye, by the ear, by our senses, God is unknowable by the intellect, our sentence-making minds – and humans have been grappling with this, and pushing back on this truth, since the beginning.

Of all the Bible's key figures, Moses has the most pages dedicated to his interactions with God, and Moses, too, struggled with God's unknowability; even Moses wanted to know even more about God.

God first came to Moses through the burning bush. God and Moses go on to have quite the exchange, yet despite this fairly lengthy and pretty direct encounter with God, Moses still needs more, he wants to know *God's name*.

In the Hebrew Bible names aren't simply labels, names hold within them something of the fuller identity or character of the one being named, they reveal meaning, and purpose, and something of the truth of the name holder. Moses wants to know more about God than all he's received through encounter, his mind is reaching for more, he needs to know *God's name*.

God reveals his name in a way that's doesn't translate so well into English: God says to Moses e'hyeh asher e'hyeh, "I AM WHO I AM" or it could be "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE" we can't really know.

e'hyeh asher e'hyeh: in Hebrew, it's a name that sounds like living breath. The very name of God says: my name is unlike any other name, I cannot be an object of your thought, I cannot be known.¹

Later, in the story with Moses, at Mt. Sinai, God is within the power and the drama of thunder and lightning, and there is thick cloud, and fire. Moses goes up the mountain and enters the thick cloud, and it's from here, from within the thick cloud, within the unknowability, that Moses receives from God the Law of the Covenant, including the Ten Commandments.

And still, after all this, Moses still wants more. So he asks God to see God's glory. But God says, oh, I can't do that, I can't let that happen, it's not possible for anyone to see me and live.²

Even Moses wanted more of God than he got, and he got a lot – yet God remained and will always remain essentially unknowable to all of us in this life.

...

Because God is unknowable, just like the Israelites who grew tired of waiting for Moses, looking up and seeing only that big, thick cloud, and struggling to trust the truth of an unknowable God, just like them we make idols for ourselves, something our minds *can* hold and can know.

Frustrated by the unknowability of God and impatient for “proof,” many of us opt instead to make an idol ultimate, a ‘real world’ thing that we *can* understand and we *can* engage with.

¹ YHWH

² Paraphrase Exodus 33:20

Idols like charismatic or bombastic leaders, idols like the nation-state, idols like the economy, or material wealth, or possessions, we make idols of institutions, we make an idol of the self (... and these are just a few examples).

The 'knowability' of our idols satisfies the human mind and easily takes the place of an unknowable God. Idols become what we live for. We can come to trust these idols with our whole heart, mind, and soul, we can be fiercely loyal to them, make sacrifices of our own lives for them, it's easy, because we know them, we know what they are ... and God remains elusive and unknowable.

Given the tendencies and the limits of the human mind, God gave us, through Moses, the 10 Commandments, a set of rules to follow, mostly things not to do, because living faithfully isn't easy. The 2nd commandment, right after *I am the Lord your God*, the 2nd Commandment says *you shall not make for yourself an idol, putting anything in the place of God ...* but we humans do, throughout Scripture and still today.

And it's not just the 2nd Commandment we struggle to keep, but also the 3rd.

The 3rd Commandment says *you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God*. In other words, no one can know God, and so no one can claim to know God's will, or can claim God's favor.

And, for sure, no one should be using God's name to legitimize the wielding of human power; and no one should be using God's name for the theatre of performative religion; and no one should be invoking God's blessing on human acts of domination or control or destruction or killing.

God is unknowable, and we face exactly the same temptations as our ancestors in the faith who really wanted to know more, to be assured, or to completely believe. Needing to know more to have faith certainly seems to be a very human temptation.

We can't ever truly, fully know God, but through Jesus we have a Way to follow. The mind might not be satisfied, but Jesus' Way gives the whole self all it needs to know. Jesus' way is ordained by God, is of God, it leads to God and by his Way we come in to our "knowing." Choosing to follow his Way, giving our lives to live Jesus' Way, we're called in, to know God without relying on our senses, what we see or what we hear or what we can actually touch, and without relying on our minds, on any particularly convincing idea about God.

Jesus' Way is discipleship, and it's a spiritual path, and that's an entirely different way of knowing. Discipleship develops the heart, develops our instinct for God, discipleship is a Way of love. But it's not an easy Way, not in a loud and demanding, aggressive culture, surrounded as we are by the allure of idols and by confident systems of power that arrogantly claim God and insist they offer us safety and protection, peace through strength.

Discipleship is the fundamental humility of standing before and accepting the absolute unknowability God.

Discipleship is quietly intentional, and ongoing, it takes practice and discipline, commitment and courage; it's a life, *a whole life*, of prayer, and of care, it's radical compassion and uncompromising, self-giving love.

Discipleship is constant and consistent attentiveness to God and to neighbor ... and it's through lives lived this way that God becomes knowable ... by the heart.

God is not an idea, God is the source of all. Christians "know" God by drawing close to Jesus, by living as his disciples, by living in this world that God created in the Way that God intended: in relationship, in Communion, by love ... and with God, the frustratingly unknowable God, with God alone at the very center of it all. And this is a sure knowing we receive on this Way and then radiate out as love into each and every relationship and encounter we have.

And it begins in a shared meal, over blessed and broken bread, our oneness revealed, Jesus' presence revealed, each and every time we gather, each and every time we eat this bread.

When the eyes of our faith are opened, we can clearly "see" by our hearts God's presence among us, despite that thick cloud of unknowability - and that's all the proof we could ever need that the Risen Christ is with us still, and will be, till the end of the age.