
Six Steps to Heaven

Exodus 3:1-15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 28, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Why do we still come to university? Why do we cram every tiny electronic gadget, every potential fashion statement and every classy-but-casual item of clothing into every last inch of our parents' car and drive an unimaginable distance to fulfill a dream of going to college? Surely it would be a whole lot cheaper, easier, and quicker to stay home and let the computer do all the work for you. Why don't you allow Skype and Amazon and Wikipedia to do the heavy lifting? You could simply cut out those tiresome professors and resident assistants. You'd never have to meet the nerdy student who threatens to drag you down into social oblivion or the super athlete who has the body of a Greek god and makes you feel like the original wimpy kid. Why not skip the exhaustion and humiliation and heartbreak of college and just do it all online? The answer is, because there's more than one kind of knowing.

If knowing were simply a matter of acquiring units of information, and assigning them an appropriate location in your brain, like guests in their respective motel rooms, then there'd be no need for all the song and dance of a modern university. But knowing is more than that. Knowing is about body, mind and spirit, about theory and practice, about memory, will and imagination, about reason and emotion, about developing good habits and reflecting on failures and risking experiments and making collaborations. Knowing is about loving, about fearing, about respecting, about understanding. And those are the things we come to university to explore.

And the Chapel lies at the heart of this campus to say one thing as vividly as architecture can say it: the knowing that makes sense of all these different kinds of knowing is knowing God. And every Sunday, students, faculty and staff of this university and members of the surrounding community come together in this place to seek the unity and integration of all their knowing in knowing God, and inviting God to know them.

But what does it mean to know God? That's our question this morning. It's a great question to ask on your first Sunday at university, because inside the answer lies the best news you'll ever hear. And we're going to look for that answer together today. Our companion in asking the question is Moses. Moses finds his answer at the burning bush. For Moses, it isn't the kind of knowledge you can find in an encyclopedia or a Google search. Moses meets God. That's exactly what you've come here to do today. God burns a hole in Moses' heart, with a fire that never goes out. This is the moment when we discover what God has in store for Israel. It's a crucial passage in the whole Bible.

I'm going to look closely at the six ways Moses comes to know God. I'm calling them six steps to heaven, because heaven is the state of fully knowing and being fully known by God. My prayer is that when you discover what it means to know God it will set you on fire and make you glow yet without consuming you – just as it did for Moses. Hold tight. Here goes. Here are the six steps to heaven.

Here's number 1. *God is beyond.* God's not just the biggest number we can think of: God is beyond our imagination. Moses wanders beyond the wilderness – which is telling us God is beyond space. God tells Moses that his name is "I am who I am" – which means God is beyond comprehension. And God says "This is my name forever" – which means God is beyond time. God isn't just another gadget or piece of technology that we can cast aside like a toy we no longer play with or a device that's been superseded. God isn't just humanity in a loud voice. God is beyond.

A friend of mine was a freshman at college and got talking with another student in their dorm kitchen. The conversation got livelier as it turned out they both had quite a bit to prove. They ended up trading insults. Eventually the other student lost her temper and picked up a loaf of bread and threw it at my friend. It missed him by six feet. With a mocking sneer, my friend said, "I see your aim is as inaccurate as your insults." She instantly responded, "I was aiming at your ego."

The God of beyond is aiming at our ego. We don't get to decide if there is such a thing as God. God gets to decide if there is such a thing as us. God would still be God, even if there were no earth, no galaxies, no universe. God is the name of the mystery beyond all knowing. God is the nature of the wonder beyond all. God is the logic behind the glory of existence. There's no knowing beyond God. God is beyond every beyond.

Here's number 2. *God knows your name.* God may be beyond but God knows exactly who you are. This is the second level of mystery. God is beyond space, time, and comprehension, but God is close enough to us that we are each known by name. The mystery of God lies as much in the precise detail as in the dizzying scale. God calls from the bush, "Moses, Moses." And later, we discover that God has a name, too. I am who I am. Not a regular name like Alice, or Sean. "Hey guys, I'd like to introduce this new friend from outta state, 'I am who I am.'" "Pleased to meet you... Can we call you 'I am' for short?" And God replies, "If you want to. Or you can call me Being, or Existence, or Ancient of Days, if you like nicknames. By the way, you don't need to tell me your name. I already know you. I always did." Already we've encountered the wonder of God. God knows everything – but God knows you. God is always, but God is now. God is beyond, but God is personal, and intimate, and close, and in the mix of your life.

Here's number 3. *God is especially close to those who are suffering.* Look at what God says to Moses from the burning bush. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings." I have seen; I have heard; I know. If you've truly suffered, you'll know that suffering involves pain – sometimes physical, sometimes emotional, sometimes mental, sometimes spiritual, sometimes some combination and sometimes all four. But almost worse than the pain is the sense of waste and loss and invisibility and disappearance. Suffering is so isolating – it's as if no one could understand, could really notice, could really listen so as to bring any comfort or meaning to our grief and distress. To suffer is to feel you're at the bottom of a deep pit and the world seems inexplicably to be carrying on as normal and no one can see your pain or hear your cries or understand your agony or even realize there's anything wrong.

Think for a moment about real suffering you've experienced – perhaps something you're in the middle of right now. Listen to these words of the living God, right this moment. "I have seen...; I have heard...; I know..." Isn't that half the battle? Isn't that the moment when we cry? Sure, sometimes we cry out in pain, but the time we truly weep is when someone shows us that they really understand, that they realize precisely why this is so poignant or so painful, when they put their finger on what we're too frightened or angry or hurt or bewildered to express. I have seen; I have heard; I know. That's what God's saying to you, today. And liberation has already begun, because in the midst of our suffering it feels like no one can see, no one can hear, no one really understands. But it isn't just about us. To know God is to realize that God is most explicitly to be found among the wretched of the earth, amongst those for whom every day is a day of being invisible, inaudible, unknown. If you're looking for God, the Bible is pretty clear about where to go looking. "I have observed the misery of my people," God says. If you don't feel God close, go looking where God promises to be close – with those who are not seen and those who are not heard. When it comes to meeting God, if all else fails, try following the instructions on the side of the tin.

Here's number 4. *God comes down.* Listen carefully to what God says to Moses again. I have seen; I have heard; I know. But there's a fourth thing God says. "I have come down to deliver them." God is beyond; God is close; God sees, hears and knows. But then, putting all these three together, God *comes down*. In other words, we get to see God's face and hear God's voice and know God just as God sees, hears and knows us. And the word we have for God coming down is Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of everything humanity knows about God and everything God knows about humanity. I said earlier that a university is knowledge turned into relationship. Well, Jesus is the knowledge of God made flesh: wisdom turned into relationship. Jesus is God come down to deliver us: but in delivering us, to see us, to hear us, to know us, and to be seen and heard and known in return. Jesus is God loving everyone but loving each one as if they were the only one. That's intimate and beyond at the same time. When you find that, you know you've found God.

Here's number 5. *God has something for you to do.* After God has told Moses about all the good things that lie in store for the Israelites, God says to Moses, "I will send you to Pharaoh." You were made for a reason. It's something specific, and it's something only you can do. Going to Pharaoh was different for Moses because Moses had been raised by Pharaoh's daughter. In the Bible you sometimes get angels sent to bring messages at important moments. But the truth is, every one of us is an angel, because the word angel means messenger, and each one of us has a message that only we can bring, a task that only we can perform, an insight that only we can see. You are an angel. And, when you find your message, just watch your wings unfurl. Fly. Fly to bring your message, fly to speak, to listen, to do what God has sent you to do.

You may be sick; wait, and wonder if your sickness may be part of the message. You may be bewildered; wait, and see if out of your wilderness may come God's redemption. You may be sad; wait, and wonder whether out of your tears may spring the water of life. God may take away your friends, may send you to a distant shore, may put you in danger, may withhold something you've always wanted. God did a lot of those things to Moses. But God had something only Moses could do. And it's just the same for you. Don't hide and say, "I'm nothing special." Neither was Moses, till God got a hold of him. Let me tell you a secret. God's still writing the Bible. *And you're in it.* God has something special for you to do, that only you can do. That's what you're here for.

And here's the sixth step to heaven. *God is with you.* Moses' knees go all a-trembly, and his stutter kicks in, and he says, "I don't think I'm up to this." And God replies, "I will be with you." And in this simple promise God sums up everything that's gone before. God is being, existence, beyond. "I will be." That's God's name. But God is intimate and close. "I will be with." Enjoy that little word "with" for a moment. God doesn't take away your freedom, your creativity, your expression. God is with. But when you're oppressed, when you fail, when you're in danger, *because* God is with you, God sees, God hears, God knows. God is *with* because God has come down. Jesus is God being with us. God gives you a job to do that only you can do, and when you say, "But that's too much," God says, "I will be with you." One kind thing that a lot of students do is to walk around campus with the name of their university written in huge letters across their chest. It's really helpful and thoughtful in case members of the university or visitors ever forget which campus they're on. But I wonder if Christians might choose another word. Maybe we should write that little word "with" over our chest and walk around wearing it: because that's our identity – that tells us what world we're living in, in case we ever forget. That's our grasp of eternity. Being with God.

That's what Moses discovers at the burning bush. Six steps to heaven. Six steps to knowing God. I'm now going to tell you the best news in all the world. What is the most important thing about knowing someone? The most important thing you can know about someone is what's in their heart. Heaven is knowing what's in God's heart. And d'you know what's in God's heart – at the very heart of God's heart? You are.