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CHAPTER 1

Talking about God



The Lord said, “Go out and stand at the mountain before the Lord. The Lord is passing by.” A very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones before the Lord. But the Lord wasn’t in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the Lord wasn’t in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire. But the Lord wasn’t in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat. He went out and stood at the cave’s entrance. A voice came to him and said, “Why are you here, Elijah?” 1 Kings 19:11–13 (CEB)

“Oh, sure,” you’re probably thinking, “people talked about God and with God all the time in those days, and everyone agreed on what God is like. Nobody doubted or struggled with their faith. It’s so different from today and my experience.” Stay with me here.

The passage from the first book of Kings that begins this chapter has always fascinated me. Here’s the backstory: The prophet Elijah has called on God’s power and witnessed more than his share of dramatic miracles—enough food in famine, fire from heaven, answered prayer in the form of drought-ending rain, raising a child from the dead. At this point in the story, though, Elijah has given up on God. That it could happen to him shows that it can happen to anyone. He runs for his life and hides in a cave, defeated and depressed. What next? God comes to Elijah, not in the stone-breaking wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire. God comes to Elijah in silence, in what the King James Version calls “the still small voice”¹ of God. Just when we, in our disheartened disbelief, think we have God all figured out, God is in what we do not expect. As surprising as it may seem, as one main-line denomination puts it, “God is still speaking.”²

Let’s talk about God, or say—at least—that we want to, if not in public or with our friends, then at home with our kids. Many of us, even those who count ourselves believers, do not talk about God. It’s easier and more comfortable and a lot less dangerous that way. However, let’s take the risk. Let’s agree that we can talk about God without trying to prove the existence of God. Doubts are welcome here. Let’s also name that talking about God in this day and age is complicated by the fact that many of us don’t agree on who or what

God is. What we are trying to articulate for our children may be drastically different from the understanding of God that we grew up with. Our thoughts and beliefs may not be what are commonly accepted in popular culture, or even in our extended families.

Where do we start? It's easy to understand why we personify God, why we make God like us, only bigger, stronger, more powerful. There are consequences, however, to trying to make God more relatable. American teenagers overwhelmingly view God as “a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist” whose job is “to solve our problems and make people feel good,” according to Christian Smith, the principal investigator of the National Study of Youth and Religion.³ The research tells us this is not simply a matter of misunderstanding. This is the God that we, their parents and their churches, have given them. We have failed to introduce them to the God of invitation and imagination, the God of the burning bush and the still small voice, the God of living water and rushing wind, in whom “we live and move and have our being.”⁴

Talking the Talk

The first problem Smith and his collaborator Melinda Denton identify is that most U.S. teenagers are “*incredibly inarticulate* about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives.”⁵ Why? “Religious language is like any other language; to learn how to speak it, one first needs to listen to native speakers using it a lot, and then one needs plenty of practice speaking it oneself.”⁶ In other

words, our kids first need to hear us talk about God, what we believe, and why it matters.

So *how* do we talk about God? The theologian Elizabeth Johnson offers three ground rules from early Christian thought:

1. God is a mystery.
2. No name or image of God should be taken literally.
3. There are many and varied expressions of God.⁷

Above all, Johnson encourages us to speak of “the living God,” not “this invisible, greatly powerful grand old man in the sky.”⁸ God as super-parent who must be obeyed is especially unattractive to young people, she points out, who may be rebelling against parents in general.⁹ (Imagine that.) The living God, an image found throughout the Bible, is creative, active, present, and new. The living God is the one I *want* to talk about, the one I love, the one who is Love.

Metaphor and Mystery

What is God like? *Images of God for Young Children* by Marie-Hélène Delval chooses forty among the hundreds of biblical images in child-friendly (though frequently male-gendered) language and bright, evocative illustrations. Two perennial picture book favorites are Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso’s *In God’s Name*, perfect for kids in preschool and early elementary school, and *Old Turtle* by Douglas Wood, excellent for older elementary ages. In these books, God is revealed in ways that are familiar and surprising, personal and wondrous.

Talking about God

We get stuck when we divide up the world and everything else into what we know and what we believe, the rational and the miraculous, the ordinary and the holy. Christians should know better: Jesus embodies both. As pastor Rob Bell puts it, “When we talk about Jesus being divine and human, what we are saying is that Jesus, in a unique, singular and historic way, shows us what God is like.”¹⁰ If you have trouble talking about God, try talking about Jesus. We’ve had some success with that.

One afternoon at home when Peter was seven, the phone rang and Peter came running upstairs while I was chatting with the caller. He was breathless and impatient, hopping up and down from foot to foot. When I hung up, he asked with great excitement, “Mommy, was that Jesus?!” Puzzled, I told him no, it was a priest calling from another church. What made him think that? He was crestfallen, “The caller ID said ‘Good Shepherd.’” That image of Jesus so real to Peter was one he recognized from both Sunday school and the Bible: the Good Shepherd who calls us each by name, whose voice we know and follow, who lays down his life for the sheep.

Let’s talk about God in metaphor and mystery, in simple concrete ways: as a mother hen, a friend, a gardener, as artist and builder, as light and rock. Let’s talk about what we imagine when we say “God.” Words will fail us here. That’s a *good* thing. It is where we start, but not where we end up. The living God is calling us, moving us forward, inviting us to help bring heaven to earth, “reclaiming the planet an inch at a time” as Sister Joan Chittister says, “until the Garden of Eden grows green again.”