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When God Feels Like a Stranger

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

One of the most powerful aspects of the Christian faith is the Incarnation – our core belief that God became one of us, literally wearing our skin, in the life of Jesus Christ. This is a profoundly intimate assertion. We believe that the all-powerful, all-knowing Source of all creativity and power and love in the universe didn't remain aloof, uninvolved, and distant from us, but rather came right among us, really pitched tent with us.

In other words, God cares! God cares about our lives and the state of human society in general.

Yet I regularly hear folks say something along the following lines: "It's hard for me to believe God could care about my little issues, when the needs of the world are so vast," or "I can pray for others, but it's hard for me to ask for what I need." There is often a disconnect between the intimate relationship with God we claim in our official doctrine and our lived reality.

In a recent sermon, I encouraged everyone to try praying out loud and alone from time to time, to experience the power of hearing our own voice naming the real concerns on our hearts. Praying like that is powerful. It's like how we sometimes need to hear our own voice explaining something to someone else in order really to believe it ourselves.

That kind of praying can feel more intimate, more like real relationship, and it might call into question those basic doubts we've just explored – how can God care about me? Does God really know me? Do I really know God, at least enough to be that real with God? Does God just feel too much like a stranger?

One of my favorite Scripture verses is: "Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, that we might find mercy and grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). This is the loving invitation of a parent to one's child, to someone in deep relationship, to someone who has a claim on the parent's good graces. It is the posture of someone who behaves *as if they have a right* to make a request.

As much as I love our ancient, traditional branch of God's great Church, I worry sometimes that we in the Anglican tradition spend far too much time in our heads, and not enough time relating to God through our hearts.

Our worship and Christian discipleship are meant to span both head and heart, along with every other aspect of the human experience. I think this is what our Lord was getting at when he used those visceral images in so many of the "I am" statements in John's Gospel: "I am the bread of life" (6:35), "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "I am the door" (10:7), "I am the good shepherd" (10:11), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6), and "I am the true vine," with us, as his followers, being the branches (15:1).

Perhaps one of the most vulnerable, most loving ways we could approach God in Christ would be to pray, "Show me who You are, even as I share with You who I really am." After all, isn't that how just about every other relationship in our lives works? Isn't that worth a try as you say your prayers each day?