

Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32
Ps. 25:1-8, Philip. 2:1-13
Matt. 21:23-32

Sermon
By
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This may sound like an odd question, but how do you picture God? Perhaps it is as an old man with a long flowing beard standing in the clouds watching over his creation, or as a wise and noble ruler seated on a throne granting favors or handing out judgments, or perhaps as a mighty warrior casting lightning bolts down upon earth towards those who have gone astray? Of course many other images may come to mind depending on your background, race, or gender. If you take a look around the church, the windows of St. John in the Wilderness give no hints. In fact, the early Israelites believed that it would be instant death to look upon the face of God. You might recall, in the Book of Exodus (33:22), God cautioned Moses, saying: “you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.” So, God hid Moses’ face with his hand as he passed by. In acknowledgment of the verse in John’s gospel (1:18), “No one has ever seen God,” early Christians avoided portraying God at all for the first 12 hundred years of the Christian era. Still today, Muslims do not allow images of Allah. But, as such thinking changed among Christians during the Renaissance period of the 15th and 16th centuries, images of God began to appear in art, such as Michael Angelo’s famous painting in the Sistine Chapel, in which God is stretching out his finger from the heavens above to create Adam and breathe life into him.

Today, many images of God can be found in art, plays, and movies. Some of you may remember the movie “Oh, God” in which George Burns, pushing 100, portrayed God, or the film “Bruce Almighty,” with Morgan Freeman in the starring

role. And then more recently, there was the movie “Dogma,” featuring Alanis

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Morissette. Each of these movies expands our image of God and perhaps helps God seem more approachable - as a cigar smoking old comedian, a handsome, deep-spoken black actor, or even a young female contemporary musician.

Although we read in the Book of Genesis that human kind was created in the image of God, I’m not sure any of us, either singularly or collectively, presents a likeness of God that we could all agree to accept as a full and accurate representation. After all, Adam fell from God’s grace and likeness pretty early on, and we mortals have not managed to climb back up on the pedestal he fell from. But the good news is that we can begin to piece together a reliable picture or image of God, maybe not in a painting, a sculpture, or even a movie, but rather . . . by observing God in action!

Even before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Israelites saw God as one who judged them unfairly, based on the misdeeds of their ancestors. To clarify their view of God, the prophet Ezekiel declared to his people: “What do you mean by repeating the proverb... ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge?’ “As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.” Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Israelites began to get a alternative picture of God - a fair, merciful, and loving God, who emphatically stated: “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, ... Turn, then, and live.” And live they did, even in exile in

Babylon, and then as God eventually enabled them to return to their homeland in Judah!

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In a prayer for deliverance, the writer of Psalm 25 verbalized an image of God very different from that of a vengeful or vindictive god, stating: “Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting. Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.” The psalmist saw in God one he could reliably turn to for compassion, love, and the forgiveness he humbly sought for his own actions, not those of his ancestors. But more than providing deliverance, the psalmist asked God to “Show me your ways ... and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me.” Could it be that the psalmist desired to emulate God, to live into God’s image? That was indeed a bold ambition! But how often have we, who are created in the image of God, actually achieved such likeness?

Since the fall of Adam, such moments of fulfillment have been fleeting at best. The image of a loving God who takes no pleasure in the death of anyone seems fleeting as well. So corrupted and fragmented did human kind’s picture of God become, that God finally decided to reveal that image in the flesh, in the form of Jesus, Christ incarnate! While those of his time were fortunate enough to see, know, and experience Christ on earth, there has been no surviving image or likeness of him to pass on through the ages following his death, resurrection and ascension. As strange as it may sound, I am grateful for this absence! I have never seen an image of Christ Jesus that fully captures my understanding and image of him. What image could? So, like God the Father, our image of God the Son is

shaped by descriptions of the life and actions of Jesus that have been passed down through scripture and the teachings of the church.

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What does this image reveal to us? Ultimately, we must answer this question for ourselves. But as those who are born into the body of Christ through baptism, the church does give us some guidance. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul unfolds a picture of Christ who, though one with God, did not exploit this position or status; who took on the form and role of a slave or servant; and who, as fully human, became obedient even to death on the cross. Through the life and actions of Christ, God revealed his own true nature - that of love, obedience, and service. But how do we even begin to portray this image?

Simply to have a picture or image of God in Christ would never be enough. Even the smartest of our smart phones do not have enough pixels to record Christ's true image. But as followers of Christ, we can begin to portray that image through our actions and love of one another. Paul instructed the church of Philippi: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." That is, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

John Wesley once said, "Christianity is a social religion, to turn it into a solitary affair is to destroy it." I believe by this he meant that Christianity is a movement to fulfill the image of Christ, which is love incarnate, love in action. It goes beyond the salvation of one person, one soul. The breadth of Jesus' love surprised even his own people. He showed love not only for the Hebrews, but for the gentile

world as well, including the leper, the tax collector, the widow, the prostitute, the sinner, the sick, the refugee and alien, all who may have had a clearer image and understanding of Christ than the Scribes and Pharisees.

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During Jesus' last visit to the temple in Jerusalem just before his arrest, the chief priests and elders tried to entrap Jesus, asking by what authority he did the things he did, and taught what he taught. Their image of who Jesus was seemed clouded by flawed expectations of the messiah. Seeing the trap, Jesus laid a trap of his own. He asked them, if a man had two sons and asked them both to go into the vineyard and work, and the first one said that he would not, but did, and the second said that he would, but then did not, which one did the will of his father? They answered, the first son. Likewise, Jesus said, those who have sinned and responded to John's call for repentance will go into the kingdom before you, who have called yourselves righteous, but have not accepted John's authority and the call to repent.

So, when we profess Christ as Lord and are baptized into the church, but do nothing to fulfill our baptismal covenant, are we not like the second son in Jesus' parable, who said he would work in his father's vineyard, but did not? Have we not made Christianity a solitary religion merely for the sake of our own salvation, an easy ticket into heaven? Have we not diminished the image of Christ as love incarnate? But, to profess Christ Jesus as Lord and then go and be Christ to others through our life and actions, is that not to do the will of our father - to love as Christ loved? Is it not to be the image of God in Christ!

Yes, I for one am glad there is no existing painting, sculpture, picture, video, or youtube of God, or of God incarnate! Such a picture would only limit our perception of God and God's love through Christ Jesus. But without such an image, our perception is left wide open, open to the farthest reaches of our

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imaginations! I recently heard someone point out that we are remembered not by what we say or how we look, but rather by what we do for others. So take a look at the world around you. You do not have to look too hard or too far - in spite of the all the bad news you may see or read in the news - to find hundreds, if not thousands of images of the love of God in Christ acted out each day through folks like you and me.

As a way of celebrating the 150th anniversary of the last parish I served - the Cathedral Church of St. Matthew in Laramie, Wyoming - I challenged the congregation to carry out, look for, and share 150 acts of kindness over the remainder of that year. I should not have been too surprised when they far exceeded that amount! As the members shared these acts of kindness Sunday after Sunday, the picture of Christ became more and more clear to us all. It could be seen in the actions of all the parishioners, their families, and their friends. We marked each act of kindness with a folded paper crane and hung these in the nave of the cathedral. At Christmas, we strung all of these cranes as a garland for the Christmas Tree that decorated the church. Then on Christmas Eve, as we gathered to celebrate the greatest act of God's love, the gift of God himself to the world in the form of Jesus our Lord, our eyes were opened wide to see just what that gift looked like - God's love in hundreds and hundreds of acts of kindness and love!

Now, let us go and build upon that image in the world, so that not only we, but others may be able to see, as never before, the true nature of God, the image of God's love incarnate!