

"Our Images of God"  
Isaiah 40:18-26  
Colossians 1:15-21  
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Every one of us has a different "image" of God. If I were to ask you to close your eyes and envision "God," to imagine what God looks like or to choose what picture or symbol of God you find most meaningful, your conception would probably be completely different from that of every other person here this morning. For most of us, our FIRST image of God was probably our own father or mother. Like most other children, we were convinced that our daddy was the strongest man in the world or that our mother knew everything there was to know, and so we ascribed these same attributes to God. Others often think of God as a wise old man with a white beard seated upon a throne. Ask a Mormon and he or she will tell you that God is a human being with an actual human body, taking the scriptures LITERALLY when it says we are created in God's image. The Bible provides us with different images, many of which are to be interpreted figuratively, not literally as the Mormons and some strict fundamentalists tend to do.

How we "image" God is most important, for how we envision God will influence the way we ultimately relate and respond to him. A case in point can be found in Jesus' Parable of the Talents. I have always been struck by the justification offered by the servant to his master for burying his talents in the ground rather than wisely investing them like the other two. He says, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Because his image of his Master was that of a ruthless, vengeful tyrant who demanded from his workers more than they were capable of giving, the servant fearfully buried his allotted funds to preserve it rather than take the risk of losing it. You see, the way we "image" God DOES determine how we relate or respond to him.

The Bible provides us with many images of God but there isn't one that is meant to give us a complete picture. These images, symbols, or metaphors are all meant to POINT to him, to highlight a different aspect of his being. For instance, the Old Testament Jews often employed such diverse images of God as Creator, as King, as Judge, and as Shepherd. Only occasionally did they use the image of God as Father, feeling it was much too personal an image to use of God. Yet, none of these images, in and of themselves, describes God in all his divine fullness but each helps us to understand with a little more clarity the nature of this God- a God who is mighty and all-knowing, just and compassionate towards his children. The myriad of images presented in the Bible help convey these different aspects of God's character.

For Jesus HIS favorite divine image seemed to be that of God as "Father." However, what he meant by it was not that God was LITERALLY a father, that is, in the same sense that you or I might be a father to our children. Rather, Jesus was trying to show us that God relates to us IN THE SAME CARING AND COMPASSIONATE WAY a father loves his own son or daughter. Christ's use of "Father" in reference to God was a way of getting at and

understanding the QUALITY of God's relationship to us- not to define in any way the person of God's own self. This bears repeating: God is not literally a parent of any kind but transcends any of the images or metaphors we may use to understand him.

It seems that human beings need SOME image of God in their mind or else it would be very hard to even speak of him. Ancient people made images, not to destroy or degrade religion, but to facilitate in the worship of their gods. Images or idols were constructed to help direct their imagination and concentration in the direction of God, not to serve as a substitute for him. In the same way, WE find such images helpful because they give us something to focus on when we think of the Divine. Otherwise, it becomes very difficult to realize God when God can't be seen. For instance, you will notice that when I lead us in the pastoral prayer, I too address God as "Father." Also, as I have throughout this sermon, I usually employ the masculine pronoun "he" or "him" in reference to God, not because God IS in any way a man or a masculine figure, but to preserve both the distinctive PERSONALNESS and PERSONHOOD of God.

But then again, there are many who can't connect God with the image of a "Father," especially women whose only image of a father is the one who would beat or abuse them sexually when they were children, or who refused to allow them to have any advantages the boys in their family were allowed. For instance, Rose's father was a very stern and demanding German who ruled his family with an iron fist. He made it known to his nine children that he would do everything he could to help put the boys through college but NOT the girls- THEY were expected to find husbands for themselves and assume the traditional role of stay-at-home mom, the one whose primary responsibility was to maintain the home and raise the kids. You can probably understand why it might be so much harder to identify God with Father if this was the only image of Father THEY had ever known.

However, I also believe that one could also use a feminine pronoun like "she" and call God "Mother" and STILL maintain that same kind of intimacy. The fact is that God possesses and exercises both "paternal" AND "maternal" qualities in his relationship to creation. Still, we need to remember that WHATEVER images we use, God is above all such symbols. The Bible tells us that God is eternal, invisible, a spirit without form. In the Old Testament, we read that God intentionally gave his people--the Jews--no visual representation of himself, even refusing to give them his "name." When the Romans conquered Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Rome's general was convinced that they were atheists since they had no statues of their own on display. We are told that as far as God is concerned, we see through a glass darkly, that we know in part and see in part through the images that the scriptures provide us. Thus, such images only serve a very limited, provisional purpose.

Therefore, we need to be CAREFUL about our use of divine images. Yes, they help us to focus our thoughts upon God for whom they represent whether it be a picture, such as the face of Christ, or an item such as a crucifix. But when we begin to affix our gaze upon the IMAGE instead of the one for whom the IMAGE POINTS, when the image or idol becomes as important or moreso than God's own SELF, when that which was meant to HELP and FACILITATE our worship becomes the very OBJECT of our worship and veneration, then we have succumbed to

idolatry. Thus a painting, a statue, or even a building can become more important than the Lord for whom the church was constructed, and that is idolatrous.

Our Old Testament scripture lesson points to the dangers of all images and idols. When Isaiah wrote these verses, the great Temple had already been destroyed with many of Judah's residents carried off into exile in Babylon. Forced to live in a pagan country, confronted by idols at every turn, they were unable to worship as they had for so many years in their homeland. In their hunger for some sign of God's presence, they were constantly tempted to find such signs in the shrines and idols worshiped by their captors. Isaiah here warns them of the dangers of not just foreign images and idols, but of images and idols in general. By placing their trust in them, idol worship will inevitably corrupt their understanding of God. God will eventually become a kind of human projection--God recreated in the image of man--bearing all the same qualities and deficiencies inherent within us. God would become little more than a glorified human being, an extension of themselves, like the numerous gods of Rome, who not only possessed human form but demonstrated the same kind of selfish, arrogant, vengeful and proud temperament that humans had. Jehovah, on the other hand, declared himself to be the ONE AND ONLY TRUE GOD, one whose ways were not man's ways, nor whose thoughts, man's thoughts. Once God could be contained within an image or idol, then God was no longer God but a human construction, subject to man's own whims and desires, manipulated for whatever ends he wanted. This is why idolatry was so pernicious to the Hebrews.

St. Paul, in the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans, indicts the ancient world for the manner in which their images and idols eventually led to a devaluation of God, reducing God to their own fallen level: "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (Rom. 1:22,23). It was for THIS reason that God commanded Israel to never make any graven images of him. No places of worship, no representation, no symbol, no sacrament could contain God. His beauty could not be captured in any beauty of humanity- not in architecture, not in art. No creed can define him nor can any denomination possess him. When, with our limited minds, we think we can, then we have become idolaters.

J.B. Phillips, one of the 20th century's most popular Christian writers, authored a bestseller a number of years ago entitled *Your God Is Too Small* in which he described some of the caricatures and childish images we have of God, images that HINDER rather than help our understanding of who God is. For instance, he describes the common image we possess of God as "resident policeman." For many Christians, God is a police officer who will issue you a summons or send you off to jail for the slightest infraction. Every time their conscience gets pricked, they think that it is God condemning them. For such persons, they look upon God as a stern judge and their relationship with him is characterized by little joy or Christian freedom.

Phillips also describes the image of God as "parental hangover," that is, when God takes on the image of their earthly father (or even mother). As I stated to earlier, many Christians will project the same image they hold of their parents onto God, and that includes their faults and limitations as well. If their mother was harsh or demanding, or if their father was abusive or unreliable, then God takes on those same tragic attributes. As they blame their parents for

everything that has gone wrong for them, they also begin to look upon God as the source of all their problems in life. Such images will inevitably be destructive ones in that person's life.

Then there is the image of God as a "grand old man," the white-headed geriatric seated on his gold throne. This is the god of the old hymns and the King James Bible. Such a god may be thought of as wise and all-knowing, but such an image also conveys the image of a god who is "old-fashioned," a god completely out of touch with many of the problems that afflict our age- problems concerning our addictions, divorce, abuse, or even our sexuality.

There is also the image of God as "pure love," that is, as a saccharine, syrupy, sentimental lover who never judges, never becomes critical, but who just "loves"- everything and everyone. This is the image of Christ as the soft and sentimental savior portrayed in the sugary hymns and pretty religious pictures. This Jesus inspires the clownish flower-child seen in the movie "Godspell" or Christ as the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Tab Hunter look-alike in "The Greatest Story Every Told."

There is still the image of God as "Reason" or "Energy" or "Pure Mind"- the god worshiped by the scientist and philosopher; the image of God as "Nature"- the deity worshiped by the artists and poets; the image of God as the "Nation-State" or "Spirit of Democracy" worshiped by many Americans. There is the image of God as "Capitalist" or Christ as "Businessman," as portrayed in Bruce Barton's famous book *The Man Nobody Knows* published back in the 1920's. There is the popular image of God as "Magician," as the one who will magically take care of all life's problems and needs. There is the image of God as "Motivator and Positive Thinker" who promises to improve one's self-esteem, and last, but not least, the image many have of God as "Philanthropist" whose main goal is to make you wealthy, healthy, and successful.

In truth, we have only been limited by our imagination as to the number or kinds of images have attributed to God. Unfortunately, most of them are projections of our own feelings, wishes, and desires rather than images that God provides for us in his Word- the Bible. The result is that we develop an understanding of God based on our own fantasies, a God fashioned in our OWN image than the image of the One who has called us to worship, love, and serve him.

In our New Testament reading from Colossians, Paul says that amid the many images we have of God, both biblical or imagined, there IS one that expressly reveals the true character and personality of God. Where all others just POINT to God, merely intimating the divine, this one image REVEALS God in all his entirety--his heart, his will, his feelings--the one infallible and perfect image of God, Jesus Christ. In other words, if we could somehow take this infinite, immeasurable Spirit we call God and somehow condense him to human scale and proportion, he would be perfectly represented in the nature, actions, and words of Jesus of Nazareth- the fullness of God in human form, a divine heart with a human face.

But by "likeness" or "image," Paul does not mean Christ bears a mere resemblance or similarity to God. Jesus doesn't just POINT to God like all other images. The Greek word he uses is "eikon" which communicates the idea that Christ participates in and with the nature of

God- not merely copying, but VISIBLY MANIFESTING AND PERFECTLY REVEALING GOD IN HUMAN FORM. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul talks about "the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God's own being." By virtue of his unique and personal relationship to God, Jesus tells his followers in the Gospel of John, "The Father and I are one" (10:30), and "Whosoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). The fact is that if one would know the one, true God, he or she must look to Jesus who perfectly represents God in a form which people can see and know and understand.

Ask yourself this morning, what is your OWN image of God? WHATEVER it is, compare it to the person and character of Christ- then you will see just how inadequate and even misleading our images often are. Do you fear God? Then, perhaps, your image of God is that of the "resident policeman," an ominous judge whom you believe is ready to strike you down on your first offense. Then think of Jesus and see the one who welcomed children and forgave sinners, even his enemies when they drove nails into his hands and feet.

Do you constantly experience guilt before God? Then, perhaps, you mistake him for some kind of divine parent who will readily smack your hand and express disapproval towards you. Then think on Jesus who has assured us that he loves us with an everlasting love, one which death or life or things present or things to come or anything else in all of creation can never separate us from.

Do you feel yourself too unworthy to come before him? Do you think of him as much too great, too majestic, too involved in the important matters of life to be bothered by anyone so small and insignificant as yourself? Then think again of Christ, the "image of the invisible God," who consistently sought out the small, marginalized, and abandoned victims of society, making them his own. He assures us that our cause, no matter how small or slight, is HIS cause as well.

Is your image of God that of a huge bundle of love, someone to cuddle with and fill you with warm fuzzys; or perhaps a benign God who expects little or makes no demands on you? Then think once more of his Son and the costly love that he embodied. Look at the holes in his hands, his feet, his side. Gaze at the crown of thorns atop his brow and the blood at his temples. Stare upon his naked form, the crooked mouth, the tear-stained cheeks, and know that he endured such suffering on your behalf, to bear your sins so that YOU would never have to die such a death. After beholding such a scene, how could you or ANYONE ever again think of God as warm or soft or benign? It is the ONLY image of God that will ever win over our hearts and command our love, the only picture that reveals to us what the TRUE nature of God consists of.

Friends, we need to rid ourselves of all other images but this one. Let Christ alone assume the value of divinity for us, the image by which we come to know and serve God. When you think of Christ, know that he embodies and perfectly represents the same God he himself loved, worshiped, served, and called HIS "Heavenly Father." For in and through the person of Jesus, you will discover the one TRUE God, the God of Abraham, Moses, and David, a God who ALONE has the will and power to save you, change you, and meet your deepest needs. Amen and amen.