

Exodus 33:25-31

Acts 2:1-21

"What Does God Look Like?"

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It is a question that everyone asks as a child, and it's also a question that every parent hears at some time or another. *What does God look like?*

The truth is... we don't really know. Scripture tells us this, in fact. For instance, in John's gospel we are reminded of this twice in the span of the first six chapters. John 1:18 reads, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Later on, John 6:46 reads, "Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father." In our Old Testament you probably recognized a similar message. Moses simply asks to see God, but God declines. "You cannot see my face," God says. "I will cover you with my hand as I pass by you, and then I will take away my hand so that you will see my back, but not my face." That's a curious passage in and of itself, but the overriding point seems to be that there's just something about God that isn't supposed to be seen. However, that doesn't mean we aren't going to try.

In one of his sermons, Peter Gomes tells the story of a little girl in Sunday School. “She was busily drawing with all her crayons and all her might, when the teacher asked her what she was drawing. ‘I am drawing a picture of God,’ she said. Her teacher replied, ‘But, my dear, nobody knows what God looks like,’ to which the little girl replied, without stopping, ‘They will when I am finished.’”¹ I wonder what that little girl was drawing. I want to know if she was drawing a person, or a scribble, or maybe the sun, the moon, and the stars. I wonder what she thought God looked like. As I was preparing for this sermon, I watched several videos on Youtube that featured children trying to explain what God looks like. There were a stunning variety of responses. Some described God as “dressed in a robe”. Others said that God has “white hair and a white beard”. By far the most popular adjective the children used to describe God were “big” and “shiny”. Most of them described God in male terms as well, which might stem from the fact that one of the names for God in scripture is “Father”. When we are young, and we ask questions like, “What does God look

¹ Peter Gomes, *Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 103.

like?", most of us end up with something close to big, male, and shiny.

That's fine for a child's understanding of God, I think, but as we grow older and mature, we have to move on from big, male, and shiny. Images of God in popular culture often reflect those attributes, and there's evidence that many adults still cling to the big and male and shiny God from their youth. The thing that is most interesting about this, is that when we read scripture - particularly the Old Testament - we read the stories of people who far too often tried to render a physical image of God. The Israelites as well as the people who surrounded them wanted a tangible God. They wanted a statue, or a carving, or some kind of physical thing that they could look at and say, "There's God!" Scripture calls these things "false idols", and if you read the Old Testament carefully you'll see that more often than not, these false idols were large enough to be visually impressive (so they were big); they were usually made out of gold or some other precious metal (so they were shiny); and they usually reflected the male-dominated culture of that time period (so they were male). It seems like we've been thinking of God as big, male, and shiny for a long time, doesn't it?

Maybe there's a message for *us* in the stories of false idols we find in the Old Testament. Moses, the prophet whom God would not allow to see him, also received the Ten Commandments, one of which reads, "You shall have no other Gods before me." That means no idols, no graven images, no likeness, no golden calves, no huge statues even when you know the idol is simply an idol, a representation, a symbol. The reason idols are prohibited by God is that there's a subtle shift that takes place in the relationship between humanity and God when humanity makes an image of God. As soon as we represent God too tangibly, we limit God. As soon as we define God too precisely, according to our ideals, it puts us in control of God. That is why the Bible is so uncomfortable with artistic attempts to describe God—or scientific attempts, or intellectual attempts, or theological attempts, for that matter. That's also why - at least in most Presbyterian churches - you will see no visual representations of God, or even Jesus. A pastor colleague of mine once told me a story of overhearing a conversation at a jewelry store counter. A shopper was looking at necklaces with crosses on them. When the jeweler asked which one the shopper wanted to buy, she replied, "Can I get the one with the little man on

it?" In a nutshell, that's the danger of defining God or even Jesus too tangibly, too physically. We might become so accustomed to a certain, controllable image that God becomes our "little man" instead of the Almighty who is not to be seen.

Rather than describe God in physical terms, the Bible describes God in terms of relationships. Scripture tells stories about God loving, and judging, and caring for, and protecting, and leading, and guiding, and redeeming, and inspiring, and saving human beings. That's never been quite enough for us, though. We always struggle with our need to objectify God.

But even in our struggle, there are times when the small notions of God that we carry with us are torn down, times when we are reminded of how awesome and indefinable God is. It happens when we see the beauty of a sunrise or the magnificence of a sunset. It happens when we look out at the vast, limitless ocean. It happens when we see a sky so full of stars that we gasp in wonder. These things remind us of reality larger than our own, of a world that was here before we were born and will be here after we are gone; a reminder that the sun has been rising and gorgeously setting for millions of years, that the ocean simply does as the

ocean does, that there are more stars and planets and galaxies than we can count or imagine, and they were all brought into being with a single word from God.

We are reminded of God when we love others deeply and passionately, in our loving encounter a mystery that cannot easily be managed or explained. So much of love is a mystery to us. Is it any wonder that scripture itself tells us simply that "God is love"?²

We are reminded of God when we witness the creation of a new life in the birth of a baby, or when we encounter the end of life in the death of someone we know. If you have been privileged enough to be a parent holding a newborn miracle, or sit beside the bedside of a dear one as breathing stops and life ends, you know about mystery and the limits of our ability to understand. The world is full of God, and the moments of our lives that remind us of God the most... also remind us of a reality beyond our ability to comprehend.

Can we see God? The answer is 'no.' God is not seeable, or manageable, or completely understandable. God, just by being God, is more than we can see. God is almighty, and transcendent, and

² 1 John 4:8.

mysterious. But you know, in a delightful way, God has arranged for us to see a bit, maybe just the back of God, to borrow the language of our Old Testament reading. We hear beautiful music, and see incredible art, and stare in wonder at nature's displays, and bask in the miracle of a new birth, and take comfort in the touch of a caring hand.

Our Pentecost text this morning describes God in mysterious and unmanageable terms. Here God is noise, and flame, and wind. If ever there was a reminder in the life of the church that God is not to be solidified or managed or controlled according to our wishes and desires, it was Pentecost. In Pentecost, God reminded us that we are at God's mercy. You are my people, God tells us, and if you are going to be my people, then you are going to be blown by the wind, you are going to be ignited like flame, you are going to be set loose upon the world with my power and not your own, the power that let loose suns and moons and stars and oceans, the power that draws us together in wonder, and love, and praise. And if you ever think you've got that all figured out, if you ever think you know what that looks like, well... you've forgotten the message of Pentecost. Now I don't know that I would say that to a child who

asks what God looks like. The next time A.J. or Alex comes to me and asks me, "Daddy, what does God look like?", I don't think I'll say, "Son, to answer that question would be to forget the message of Pentecost!" I don't think I'd be getting Father of the Year nominations after that.

Instead, I think I'll just be honest. I'll say that we don't really know what God looks like, but that's okay because we don't need to. I'll say that God is like the wind - we can't see it but we can certainly feel it, and we can see the things that it moves. I'll say that we see some part of God in things like sunsets, and starry skies, and roaring oceans. I'll say that we feel God in times that we are happy, and times when we are sad, and times when we say, "I love you." I'll say that God is breath, and God is wind. God is flame, and God is Spirit. And after that, I think I'll bring him to church. And I'll show him all of you, you who have been called by God into a life of love, and service, and sacrifice, a life that that is much bigger than any one of you by yourself.

And I'll say, "Look... Look... God is here."

Thanks be to God. Amen.