

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2006

Reflection: "All consciousness separates; but in dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal [person] dwelling in the darkness of primordial night." - C. G. Jung

Readings: Numbers 21: 4 - 9
John 2: 13 - 22

Hymns: # 469 Morning Has Broken
335 Though I May Speak
544 Day is Done

Anthem: *Immortal, Invisible* Eric H. Thiman

Looking for the Imago Dei
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Sometimes, it's awfully hard to understand the God of the Old Testament. I know that God was and is always the same, at least I think so. Can God change? Has God changed over time? I don't think so; I 'm not sure why I don't think so; I just don't.

Yet, in the Old Testament, God sure seems to have a lot of wrath and weird ways of getting peoples' attention. This morning's reading is no exception.

"The people spoke out against God and Moses, 'Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.'" Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died."

It was a representation of God's power, a dead serpent held high upon a stick that cured them of their fiery inflammations. All they had to do was to look upon this image or representation of God and they were healed.

I can think of a lot of other alternatives to sending poisonous snakes, were I trying to stop people from talking ill of me. Then again, why would I care about such things if I were God? Unless, unless vengeance and resentments were part of my make-up, and an "I'll show them" attitude part of my approach to resolution.

So what *is* the lesson? The lesson to the people of Israel, in the midst of the Paran and their 40 year journey through the desert is that unless you raise your eyes up to God you have no hope. Unless you have faith in God, you may as well be dead.

The passage is used as a prophetic pointer to the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. John's gospel easily forms a parallel with the early text of Numbers:

“And just as Moses lifted up a serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him many have eternal life.”

John, who is clearly separated from the other three Synoptics, whose writings include events not recorded in any of the other three gospels, and who is most likely written based on a collection sources outside of those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke – speaks in the language of light and darkness: the light being God and the darkness sin. Those in the darkness who do not know God are as those bitten by serpents, infected by the poison of creatures whose bellies never leave the surface of the earth. Those who enter the light are born again from above, from where the light originates, from whence Jesus had come, and in whom the light was embodied.

Trying to create an image of God, whether in form or beyond form, is a recurrent theme of all the writings of the bible authors; and their perceptions, styles, and sources vary greatly from one writer to the next, just as we do in any number or ways.

Today, were we either to raise a serpent upon a stick or create a faith tradition around someone executed by the State, at best we would be considered on the fringe. And yet, often, when we try to seek the deeper meaning of the Scriptures that is exactly where we end up – on the fringe, at least according to some.

Fringe, as defined by dictionary.com:

1. A decorative border or edging of hanging threads, cords, or strips, often attached to a separate band.
2. Something that resembles such a border or edging.
3. A marginal, peripheral, or secondary part: “They like to hang out on the geographical fringes, the seedy outposts” (James Atlas).
4. Those members of a group or political party holding extreme views: *the lunatic fringe*.
5. Any of the light or dark bands produced by the diffraction or interference of light.
6. A fringe benefit.

The Syrophenecian woman seeking crumbs from Jesus for her child to eat; John the Baptist; the disciples, the Gerasene Demoniac; the paralyzed man; the lepers; the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and many others – people on the fringe – caught in the light and dark bands produced by the diffraction and interference of social and political movements – those to whom Jesus came with words and acts of healing, yet always returning them as healed back to their world. They were healed in some way and the world remained the same. Or did it?

With each simple act of being present to the moment, I think we change, receiving and distributing bits of changes waiting to take form – in the process. Healing is never, I think, about the one.

It was March, more than two decades ago. I was traveling a lot in those days, frequently in the Eastern corridor between New York, Florida, and Puerto Rico. In the process, I amassed huge amounts of frequent flyer miles, enough to almost always be upgraded to first class. They were different, easier air travel times, in many ways.

I was sitting next to someone who was some kind of an official for the NCAA. He was about my age at the time, a little younger, healthy, clean cut, and very personable. I thought to myself, hmmm, maybe a prospect for a husband!

As the flight progressed, we moved into the easy conversation of those in a comfortable setting. Somehow we ended up on religion. He was born again, from one of the Carolinas, and God became the topic; families and raising children signs – images of God involved in one's life – and gradually I felt two things happening: the slow push to the edge for me as a gay man, yet undisclosed, being buffeted by his "Kingdom of God" speak, and, secondly, that rising tide of anxiety and preparation for the unpredictable reaction – that meant I was going to say something and take a stand for myself.

I told him that I could appreciate all he was saying and happy he had found such a relationship with God, but that his design of faith excluded gay people like me – or something to that effect. I didn't believe God would do that.

I remember a subtle smugness on his part and what I later came to know as proof-texting of the bible: quoting specific lines of Scripture to prove he was right. He went on about the need for righteousness and being saved and ready for the Second Coming so that he and I, were I to change my ways, would not be left behind.

Of course, we remained civil; after all we were seated in first class. However, something came to me that is just as clear to me today as it was in the cabin of that plane long ago. I said to him, "The way I see it, as you and those who

believe as you do were taken away to their glory, the God I understand would expect me to stay and tend to those left behind.”

Imago Dei – Latin for the Image of God. It is the inherent value we have as being made in the likeness, that is, part of whatever God is. It has to do with our souls, our spirit, our inner person - the nonmaterial part of who we are – our personhood. The person I was and am knows what it is like to be left out and behind. The God I know would never do that and would never expect me to do that.

None of us really knows what it was like in that desert and whether or not the serpents appeared as written. In fact, if I were just to rely on these texts, I would be in the easy place of literalists, rather than living in the pulsating bands of light and darkness – stepping across their rigid and sharp boundaries into one place of the other.

Conservative, Roman Catholic, and gay columnist Andrew Sullivan says it like this:

What we now know about the thousands of different texts in the New Testament, the thousands of discrepancies, the layer upon layer of historical re-writing, the more the contrast between what Jesus may have said and what his church came to teach emerges.

What did Jesus say or not say; what is – what is not the image or representation of God; how do we remain faithful without promulgating a myth, either from the center or the fringe, the light, the darkness, or what is in between?

These are not new questions, but because they are difficult questions that can upset the comfortable first class cabin arrangements of luxury and privilege, we don't often challenge the contradiction or non-sequiturs that disrupt widely held, accepted world views. When we do, we are coddled, pushed, patronized, or exiled to the edge, the fringe – punished with the poisonous venom of society in smug or not so smug ways.

Certainly this is what happened to Jesus, caught in the rigid tension of State and Religion. His image of God was one that went through and beyond the humanly formed institutions, threatening them to the core, in such ways that to allow Jesus to live was not an option in order to maintain their world view and power in the ways to which they were accustomed. Jesus was, simply, collateral damage to them.

It might be seen as heretical by some to say that the Bible is not God. God is God. In the Scriptures are stories about the ways in which God involved Godself in this world through the lives of those who sought her, him, it, or however you

choose to name your Higher Power, for no name matters – other than perhaps – I Am. These are writings originally from the personhood of the authors, shaded over time by other forces or layers, as Sullivan calls them.

Honestly, I do not know in verbal or written ways why we are so drawn to God. I can come up with some expressions that make sense and point to the truth of my attraction, but why we seek the imago dei with such intensity is beyond me. Part of it has to do, I am sure, with our primal sense of being part of the I Am, along with the need for some form of theological certainty – capturing God, in a sense; taking God hostage so that at least we are sure we are ok. But why we need these things is part of God's design not humans'. I believe there is more than what we read each week; much more. The mystery is a place, too. And more often than not – I and God are there.

I really do think that God is doing something new thing in our world. Part of that, I believe, is the revelation of these inconsistencies in our thinking and thought over the centuries that have accumulated into a time of fractious, incompatible images of God that are backed up and enforced by membership rules, political parties, weaponry, imposition of our beliefs (of which there is really no one belief to be ours), and a certainty that borders on idolatry if not a self-incarnation of ourselves as God.

.We are not God, but we are of God – all of us. Our images together form a mosaic, at best, of what God may look like – if the physical aspect of sight could ever even see such a presence beyond the limitation of physical and ontological glimpses. The imago dei is about, I think, the personhood of God, the soul, that which we have to learn better to listen to and share with each other without fear of reprisal or ridicule, so that we can help one another to filter out the voices that are more our own than the leadings of the Spirit.

Who is God? What is the image of God? What God is it that half a million immigrants saw in their march in LA yesterday? Who is the God and what is the image of that God that is threatening a convert to Christianity in Afghanistan with his life? What is the image of God in our lawmakers, teachers, ministers, children, friends, homeless friends, rich friends, lonely, disenfranchised, persecuted...?

Who is the God that emerges in one set of footprints, instead of two? It is the God whose image/representation is deeply inside each of us, in different ways – but the same.

Do we have to see the same image to know that we share the same appreciation for our common human/spiritual composition? Will the world really spiral out of control if we were to let God work in us in a variety of ways be known, supporting the Power of the Spirit in each other – rather than the positions we take? Such

are the questions that make myths, traditions, and other constructs easier to follow than explore into the inevitable ambiguity that follows such forays....

Somehow, the image of God that makes the most sense to me is the one that Jesus followed to his death. The God that he knew best inside and for whom he was willing to risk everything. That is a powerful and mighty God he served. That is the God I seek.

As we enter into the weeks ahead, remembering this time in the life of Jesus, it might be best to suspend as much as we can of the rote tradition that so easily flows out of our memory and onto our tongues, struggling instead with the banding of light and darkness and the images – representations in form and otherwise of God all around us.

Look at one another – do you see God? Do you need Scripture to sense the presence of God? If so, maybe looking at Scripture a little differently will help to free the images we have of God better into this world of our time. If we can unleash the power of God in each one of us, rather than arguing about what text proves which point – maybe the teachings of Jesus, the two greatest commandments of all leading the way, will herald a time when this planet will come together in its different ways into an image of God that knows peace and love – and abundance of these things in all ways.

Living into a world that no longer needs executions to protect itself from the imago dei in all its forms. O what a world that would be...

Amen.