

Seeing the Face of God

Exodus 33:13-23
Matthew 22:15-22

Crossroads Christian Church
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One day, a mother discovered her four-year-old daughter busily drawing away with her crayons. "What are you drawing, sweetie?" she asked. "God," the daughter replied with all the assurance of a young child. The mother said thoughtfully, "But no one knows what God looks like." The daughter responded, "They will when I'm done!"

Have you ever tried to draw a picture of God? What do you think that God looks like? Sometimes when a child takes crayons and tries to draw God, we get some funny results, but we also get some ideas that show real depth and perception. Perhaps a child sees God as an old man with a beard that flows across the sky. Or another child might see God as a loving mother, a doctor, or even another child, just like them—for didn't Jesus say that we should come into God's reign like a little child? Some picture God as red, or yellow, black or white, just like the children of the world. Our pictures of God, whether we draw them on paper or just hold them in the deepest parts of our mind, lie beneath our theology. Is God a distant judge, a cosmic force, a loving parent, a stern father, the Almighty Smiter, a wise grandparent? What does God look like?

The Bible gives us some fascinating clues to how we see, and how we understand God. Remember the great cosmic God who said let there be light, who formed order out of chaos on a universal scale? Only a chapter later, God looks much more human, and is strolling in a garden, enjoying the cool of the evening. Sometimes, God became visible in the form of angels, like those who brought Abraham and Sarah a birth announcement. A mysterious presence that could have been God was visible only in shadow, wrestling with Jacob alongside Jabbok Brook as Jacob was wrestling with his conscience and his fears.

Moses first became aware of God's presence in a burning bush. He went from there to go back to Egypt, to lead the people out. Then we hear about the people being led through the wilderness by a pillar of flame by night, a cloud of smoke by day.

Moses went up on the mountain called Sinai, and a bright cloud, filled with lightning, covered the mountain, and in that cloud was God. There Moses received the Ten Commandments, including one that said not to make any graven images of God—no cheap, pale imitations of the deity to confuse people into thinking that God was this, or God was that. God is bigger than any this or that. Moses covered his face when he came down off the mountain, the story tells us, so the people couldn't see the glow in his face from having been in the presence of God, fade slowly away.

Then we have today's story, a strange little story about Moses and his desire to see the God who had befriended him. The story is introduced by a fascinating verse, "In this way the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, like two people talking to each other." (Exod. 33:11), or as the NRSV puts it, "as one speaks to a friend." But after it says that, it tells a story of how Moses wanted to see God's face, more than just about anything. Moses wanted to see his lifelong companion, the God who had led him and the people by a stern grace from slavery into the wilderness. But the Glory of God is too great for humans to behold; Moses had years of being close to God, but had never seen his boss. The Glory of God was like a blinding light, a killing laser beam of purity and power. So when Moses asked to see God, he was told that he couldn't bear to see God's face and live; but he could see God's back as God passed by. So Moses hid in a crevice as the great light passed by, and received a glimpse of God's back. We sing about this when we sing "He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock" or "Rock of ages, cleft in me."

In other parts of the Old Testament, other prophets get glimpses of God's presence. One of my favorites is the Call of Isaiah. Isaiah visits the temple and has a vision of God sitting high on a throne, surrounded by angels, amid the smoke and the light. "Woe is me!" Isaiah shouted. How could an unclean person even survive seeing the glory, the holiness, the purity, the awful beauty of God?

Then, centuries later, God came to us in Jesus, the one that Matthew described as Emmanuel—God with us. In Jesus, we see the human face of God, and we see God's love revealed to us.

Here, in the ordinary face of a Jewish carpenter, we are reminded of something we may have forgotten. God created us all in God's image. When we fell away in sin, that image was distorted, like the images in the crazy warped mirrors in a fun house. In Jesus, we see the image of God clear and sharp. That isn't to say, of course, that Jesus' nose looks like God's nose, or that God has a beard, or anything like that. But Jesus showed us in himself God's real nature—in what he did, in what he said, in the guiding principles he followed, and most of all in the unconditional love that shone through as he related to everybody. This "everybody" included the poor, the outcast, the crippled, the marginalized, the tax collectors and prostitutes, the lepers and the sinners, as well as the respectable, the pious, the moral, and the good. It included the prodigal son and his uptight brother. It included pensive Mary and hard-working Martha. It included the lepers that Jesus healed. It included Peter, James, and John, and it included Judas. It included Mary, his mother, and it included the soldiers who nailed him to the cross.

So, in Jesus, we see the face of God, because in him we see God's perfect love at work. In Jesus, we find the secret of successful life—to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind; and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

What does that have to do with our second reading, the one where Jesus is in a debate with the religious leaders, and they are trying to trap him? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, they ask? Talk about a loaded question. If he says yes, Jesus looks like a collaborator with a hated enemy, and loses popularity with the crowd. If he says no, he can be arrested as a rebel or a traitor. So Jesus asks for a coin. They hand him one. The denarius was the coin of the day for everyday commerce in the Roman Empire. It bore the graven image of the emperor. This same emperor fancied himself a god. The very possession of one of these coins by a Jew would be considered a sin against the second commandment, don't make graven images. Yet it was the only money recognized by Rome. This left the Jews in a dilemma that was only partly resolved by the temple system of money exchange. The moneychangers that Jesus drove out of the temple precincts were people who exchanged secular "dirty" money for

the temple shekel that was considered clean and could be used for offerings. No doubt, devout Jews were uncomfortable with this magic trick of making the unclean clean, and so what Jesus did is to let their own consciences condemn them.

“Whose image is this,” he asked. It is the image of the emperor, a god of the Roman empire, the god of money. The money is made in Caesar’s image, and Caesar wants our money. What does God want? What belongs to God? God wants what is made in God’s image—you, you, and you. God wants us to give of ourselves, wholly and lovingly, to help make God’s reign come here on earth.

Once there was a poor boy in Appalachia, who lived in a tarpaper shack, who had no income, who foraged for food. One day a preacher came by and asked the boy if he wanted to be saved. Yes, the boy answered. So the preacher told the boy how to find salvation in Jesus Christ, prayed with the boy, and invited the boy to come to church and confess his faith in Jesus Christ. The boy did so the next Sunday. He walked down the aisle and proudly made the Good Confession and received the Lord. A few minutes later, the deacons began to take up the offering. The boy watched as others put checks, bills, and coins in the place. What did he have? His pockets had nothing in them but lint. When the deacon walked by him, the boy asked, “Sir, would you please set the offering plate down on the floor?” The deacon glanced at the preacher, and the preacher gave a slight nod. The deacon obliged. The boy stood up from the pew and stepped into the offering plate. He had seen the face of God in Jesus Christ, and he gave back to God what God most wanted—himself. Funny—that’s what God wants of all of us. And funny—when we give ourselves to God, we take on something of the image of God, so that others can see God through us. As I quoted the Assembly speaker last week, “Jesus Christ looks good on you.” Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon