

CHRISTIANITY 101

“The Image of God”

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Genesis 1:26 – 31

26 Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ 29 God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Last week Steve introduced our current sermon series with a challenging and inspiring sermon that named the Bible the “Greatest Book Never Read.” As he talked about the Bible and the ways in which it can be read and understood he also did some work setting up this series in general. We’ve titled the series Christianity 101 with the hope of introducing you to some thoughts on basic tenets of the Christian faith in new and fresh ways. We are confident that some of you might be challenged by what we have to say, but we remain hopeful that you will engage these thoughts, that you will wrestle with them, that you will continue conversation with us and one another as you continue to process these sermons.

This morning I have the daunting task of preaching about God. The task is daunting because I feel like I could easily preach a 6 week or longer series specifically about God, God’s relationship with us, and God’s work in the world. And the task is

daunting because I know that I have to go deeper this morning than simply stating, “God loves us” or “God is Love” but I don’t want to get bogged down in the heavy theological language of God. All week I’ve been creating a list of things that it won’t be helpful to talk about. So, I have been intentional about excluding the following words from this sermon: transcendence, immanence, omnipotence, omniscient, omnipresent, pantheism, panentheism, and supernatural theism – throwing all of these big words at you and trying to keep your focus just wouldn’t be possible, so that’s the last you’ll hear them. Some of these ideas will be discussed, but I’ll keep the language clear and accessible as best I can. Forgive me if I don’t.

Again today I want to spend some time talking about the two different lenses that people use to look at faith and the world. Marcus Borg does a lot of work looking at these two different points of view and Steve introduced them to us last week. For the sake of our time together this morning I will call them a “dogma/doctrine focused” and a “way/journey focused” approach to looking at and understanding the world, especially in relationship to faith. The first is a viewpoint that is focused on the dogma and doctrine of the church as being the most important. People who see the world through this viewpoint are very concerned about laws and obedience. The second is more concerned about relationships. People who see the world through this viewpoint are most concerned about life and faith as journeys and they tend to be concerned about healthy relationships, learning and growing.

Understanding these two different perspectives, especially in relationship to our understanding of God, is helpful as we continue working to figure out what it means to be the church today and what it will take for the church to continue into future generations.

You see there are a lot of people in the world today who would say that they have rejected God, that they don't believe in God, or that they have no use for God. I imagine that most of you could think of a friend, neighbor or relative who you've heard say things like this and who refuses to come to church. My hunch though is that many of these people have not rejected God, rather they have rejected the picture of God that is so often painted by and represented by the church.

For the sake of our time together this morning I want to look at some verses from the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible. While God did not write these words, and while being concerned with their literal factualness can lead us to miss the point, there is great truth in these words and they tell us a great deal about the nature of God.

Genesis 1:26-28 Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

What can we learn about the nature of God in this passage? We learn that God is creative, that God thinks outside of the box, that God creates with a purpose; we learn that we, as human beings, are created in God's image, we learn that we, along with the rest of creation, are good. The scriptural account speaks of a God who is creative, loving, inspired, and relational. But somehow this is not the image of God that is taught and preached in many churches today. It goes back to the issue of the different lenses through which people look at the world and in this case at God.

As we continue our conversation about God this morning there are two questions that are important for us to address, each of which will be answered differently by people who have the dogma/doctrine centered worldview and people who have the way/journey centered worldview. The two questions are 1) Is God “out there” or “in here,” and 2) Is God a God of vengeance or a God of love? And related to these two questions and our understanding of God is another question to ponder. To what extent is God a physical/personal being?

Let’s start with that question first – to what extent is God a personal/physical being? If I asked many of you to describe God I imagine that you would begin to describe God in some of the following ways: a man, probably older, probably white, maybe having white hair, a beard, good muscle definition, etc. Am I on track with that for the most part? When we imagine what God would look like we tend to personify God – to make God out to be like us. I imagine that if I asked if any of you if you had had an experience of God and if I asked you to describe that experience, that very few if any of you would describe meeting a gray haired old man. Likely God would be described in your experience as spirit, emotion, feeling, maybe even a still small voice. I don’t believe that God is a physical tangible being. I don’t believe that God has body parts or hair; I don’t believe that God has a body like ours. Rather I think that God is a spirit or for you Star Wars fans, a force. Let’s address our other two questions for a few minutes though and then we’ll come back to this idea later.

First of all, is God “out there” or “in here?” As we talked about last week, people who see the world through a doctrine/dogma focused worldview, tend to look at scripture in a very literal – factual way. To these persons this Genesis story tells the tale of a being

that is separate and distant from creation. For persons who operate within this worldview God creates as separate from the world and remains separate today. God is “out there” in heaven, distant from and removed from the day to day functioning of the world and of our lives. For persons who live within this worldview the role of prayer then becomes to get God’s attention, to request God’s presence back here in this world, and to try to persuade God to intervene and fix something that is going wrong. For many people they are perfectly happy living with this understanding of God’s relationship to the world.

There is nothing inherently wrong with viewing the world this way. Many people have had a meaningful relationship with God and been devout Christians living within this worldview. But for many people, especially young people today who have a broader view of the world and the universe than has even before been available, it is increasingly easy to reject these notions of a God who created and then left us alone and hasn’t shown much interest in things since. This is the God that many people would say they reject – a God who is distant and removed from the world and that has to be persuaded and coerced to intervene.

So, is God “out there” or “in here?” Persons who have a journey/way centered view of the world answer this question quite differently than their dogma/doctrine centered counterparts. Persons with this view of the world see God as intricately connected to everything that is happening. They read and hear the Genesis stories of creation as God’s work in a relational context – creating and evaluating that creation at each point. For persons who operate in this worldview God is present in all things. God is at work, continuing to perfect creation, in all things. Prayer then is not about trying to wake God from some cosmic slumber and coercing God to intervene. Rather, in the

journey/way worldview prayer is about opening ourselves up to and connecting with God's presence that is all around us. This way of understanding the world and God's work in the world is new to many people – the idea that God is in everything – is tough for some people to comprehend. For others it opens doors in profound ways and lets them connect to God in ways they never knew possible.

And now to our second question – is God a God of vengeance or a God of love? Again, persons who operate within these two different worldviews will answer this question in different ways. Persons who understand the world through the doctrine/dogma viewpoint are more likely to see God as a God of vengeance. God is “out there” watching us, judging us, ready to condemn us for our sins. When they read the Genesis account of creation they jump past all of the language about God viewing creation as good and they tend to emphasize the fall and human sinfulness. From this perspective God is judgmental, vengeful, and out to get us for our sins.

Again, some people have lived their entire lives with this understanding of God and have still managed to find great meaning in the Christian tradition. Unfortunately, this portrayal of God is also increasingly easy for people to reject as they don't see a need or a use for an angry vengeful being in our increasingly angry and violent world.

So again we ask the question, is God a god of vengeance or a God of love? If we understand God as not simply being “out there” but also being “in here” in each human life and in the world that God created it changes the way we might begin to understand God's interaction with the world. For people who see God and the world from the journey/way perspective, God is a more relational being – a God who is invested in the well being of the world, a God who wants the best for creation and is constantly at work

in creation calling us to be our best selves. From this point of view God is a God of love, of encouragement, of hope. All too often though, people aren't exposed to the possibilities of God understood in such a way because they are constantly told about and threatened by the God who will judge and condemn them.

I want to share briefly a story that was really eye opening for me regarding the work of God in the world. I first read this story in an essay my freshman year of college. I have not been able to track the story down since, but I continue to be inspired by it. The gist of it is this.

There was a young man by the name of Tom who got into an argument with his girlfriend one evening. He lashed out at her yelling and screaming and then in anger he hopped on his motorcycle and sped away, failing to put on his helmet. It was a cool autumn evening and a damp mist hung in the air. As Tom sped away on the motorcycle he was consumed by his anger – angry at his girlfriend for the things that had started the argument and angry at himself for the way he had treated her. Tom had owned a motorcycle for years and was a skilled rider, but on this particular evening he wasn't focused, he was distracted and tense and angry and he wasn't paying attention to the slick road moving under his bike's wheels. As he approached a turn in the road, traveling much too quickly, Tom lost control of his motorcycle slid off of the road and suffered serious head trauma as a result of the crash.

So where is God in this story? Some who would argue that God lives entirely "out there" would say that God was watching from a distance, but couldn't and wouldn't do anything. Others who would say that God is a God of vengeance would say that God caused the wreck as punishment for Tom's anger and rage. Both of these ways of

understanding this crash are focused in the dogma/doctrine way of understanding God's work in the world. The way/journey worldview provides another alternative for understanding God's action in this story.

As Tom and his girlfriend fought, God was there as a loving friend, attempting to coax them both to take a deep breath and to not take out their anger on one another. As Tom got onto his motorcycle God was there as a loving persuader trying to get Tom to put on his helmet as he usually did. As Tom sped away and drove over the dangerously slick roads God was present as a loving friend and a caring persuader trying to coax Tom to slow down, to be attentive to the road, to focus on what he was doing. After the wreck, God was present with Tom in the ditch, comforting him and caring for him as a loving friend.

God was present through each piece of this story as a loving friend and a caring persuader. This is how we can see God at work in each and every aspect of our daily lives, when we understand that God is there as a loving persuader and a caring friend. When we understand God in such a way, our viewpoint of the world can shift more towards a journey/way viewpoint – God is present with us always and life is about being in relationship with God as we journey.

Let's go back for just a minute now to the point that I made earlier about God not being a physical being. We are told by the Genesis accounts of creation that we are created in the image of God, but we often like to imagine and create God in our image – as one having fingers and toes and a beard of white flowing hair. But if we understand God to be a loving persuader and a caring friend rather than a big scary guy out there who

is judging us and who is going to get us, then it means something quite profound that we are created in the image of God.

As God's children created in the image of God, we are not to be judgmental, we are not to be condemning, and we are not to be absent from the needs of the world. We are to be present in the needs and the hurts of the world, we are to be in relationship with one another, we are to serve as loving persuaders and caring friends sharing the very essence of God's love with one another and with all of creation.