

To Meet Jesus Again

Luke 9:28-36

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How do you picture God? If Margee were here, she would remind us that God is pure Love, with no bodily form at all. But I think that most of us ... because we are human ... tend to picture God in human terms. It is something we can relate to. We need a concrete image on which we can hang our understanding of Godly love and power. We need a God whose arms can lift us up and embrace us. We need a God with a heart.

I use those images when I offer prayers for us. “Hold us close,” I pray. “Whisper to us. Walk with us.” These images speak powerfully. They remind us that we are not alone, that God is with us.

But I wonder if our human images for God are too limited. For example, how many of us carry around a picture of God – perhaps one we received as children – that is not so very different from Santa Claus? Think about it: Is God an old white man with a big white beard, who lives “up there” somewhere, who rewards those who are good and gives out punishments or coal to those who misbehave? Be honest now: is that the image of God that you received as a child? An image you carry with you today?

Or do you have a different sort of human image for God? Do you carry in your heart a picture of God who might be a loving mother? The Bible contains some of those images? Or, maybe you see God as someone from the global South, someone with darker skin than ours? Jesus was from the Middle East. We are ALL made in God’s image, after all!

But perhaps your image of God is not human at all. I have a friend who finds that she encounters God in water. Think of the difference it would make to experience God in something as elemental, as fundamental to life, as water: God in the cup of water, given to a thirsty child; God in the ocean, in the babbling brook; God in the raging storm. THAT God.

God appears in the Hebrew scriptures as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, as a voice, as infinite silence. These are not comfortable human forms. They may seem a little foreign, perhaps. Yet these images invite us into the power and mystery of Almighty God.

The New Testament reveals God to us in a different way – in Jesus of Nazareth – a homeless, itinerant preacher, who calls out earthly power in church and state, who tells stories that confound his listeners or heal their souls, who sacrifices everything – everything! – out of pure love. Jesus’ life and death and resurrection reveal God to us, regardless of how his body looked.

We all come to times of great joy or great trial in our lives, when we especially need God. Will our images of God sustain us then? Our internal pictures of God tell us what to look for in those moments. Will the images we carry help us to recognize God in deep silence, or in a casserole dish delivered by a member of this church, or in the beautiful lakes and mountains that surround us, or in an opportunity to serve someone else in need? Are our images for God big enough to encompass all the ways that God may choose to come to us?

I think it does make a difference how we picture God, and I want to be a little challenging here. For, if our image of God looks like US, then we have made God in our own image, rather than the other way around. If we picture God as white and maybe about our age, then we have created an image that is relatable – and that is good – but also an image that is too small, too domesticated to express the infinite mystery of God. And if we see God solely in human terms, and then God comes to us as silence, or as the storm, how will we know that it is God who bids us to step into the mystery?

In today's scripture, Jesus takes Peter and James and John up a mountain to pray. And while Jesus is praying, the disciples get sleepy – like they always do at key moments. But Jesus is not weary. His face changes, and his clothes become as bright as a flash of lightning. And suddenly, the disciples are roused from their lethargy to recognize Moses and Elijah there, talking with Jesus in his glory. The Bible doesn't tell us how they know it is Moses and Elijah who have appeared. The disciples just know.

Peter – brash Peter – says, “This is so great! Master let us set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!” (Meaning, let's just stay up here on this mountain with all this shining light!)

But suddenly, a cloud overshadows them, and the disciples are terrified as they enter the cloud. And God speaks: “This is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him!”

Then, the cloud vanishes, and the disciples are left with Jesus alone, no more shining clothes, no more Moses or Elijah, no more visible glory. Just Jesus, who leads them back down the mountain to heal a sick child. Away from the holy mystery on the mountain and back to the sacred work of caring for God's children who are most in need.

This infinite God, this Shining Light, this Holy Mystery reveals Godself to us in tiny glimpses, in parables, in healing touch, in loaves and fishes. God reveals Godself to us in Jesus, because we can understand a human life touched and filled by God so much better than we can grasp pure holiness.

So, I would ask us all to interrogate our own images for God. Are they relatable enough to help us feel God's presence and comfort in our lives? That is good. But do they also leave room for storm and silence, for fire and cloud? For a call to service? Will we recognize God as readily in the overshadowing cloud as in the bright light? Can we open our hearts to God who is entirely different from us, and yet who knows us and loves us all?

In a few moments, we will all share in Holy Communion, the meal that invites us to meet Jesus once again, to feel his presence in bread and cup. These tiny pieces of bread, these tiny sips of grape juice, received together with one another, are an invitation to step into mystery, into holiness with him. This meal is a gift to us from that same God who created heaven and earth, who has loved us from before all time.

May we be ready to receive God's loving presence not only in human terms. May we also be awake to God's majesty, open to wonder, and ready for the holy mystery that surrounds us all.

Amen